
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. 5
Author: Miya Kazuki
Illustrator: You Shiina


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Cast of Characters



Rozemyne

The protagonist.
After growing a little, she now looks like an eight-year-old, but she still hasn't changed on the inside. She will do anything she can to read books in the Royal Academy, which she is attending as a second-year.

Ehrenfest's Archduke Candidates



Wilfried

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

Charlotte

Sylvester's daughter, Rozemyne's little sister, and a first-year at the Royal Academy.

Rozemyne's Guardians



Ferdinand

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

Sylvester

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

Florencia

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

Karstedt

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

Elvira

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

Bonifatius

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

Summary of Part Three:

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

Rozemyne's Retainers



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



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



Brunhilde
A fourth-year apprentice archattendant.



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



Philine
A second-year apprentice layscholar.



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



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



Leonore
A fifth-year apprentice archknight.



Judithe
A third-year apprentice medknight.



Damuel
A layknight. Stayed in Ehrenfest.

Ottilie
Hartmut's mother and an archattendant.

Rozemyne's Personnel

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

Ehrenfest Students

- Ignaz……A third-year apprentice archscholar serving Wilfried.
- Traugott……A fourth-year apprentice archknight. Rihyarda's grandson.
- Matthias……A fourth-year apprentice medknight in the former Veronica faction.
- Laurenz……A third-year apprentice medknight in the former Veronica faction.
- Roderick……A second-year apprentice medscholar in the former Veronica faction.

Royal Academy

- Hirschur……Ehrenfest's dorm supervisor. Previously taught Ferdiand.
- Rauffen……Dunkelfelger's dorm supervisor.
- Solange……The Royal Academy's librarian.

Other Students

- **Lestilaut** — A fifth-year archduke candidate from Dunkelfelger the Second.
- **Hannelore** — A second-year archduke candidate from Dunkelfelger the Second.
- **Adolphine** — A sixth-year archduke candidate from Drewanchel the Third.
- **Ortwin** — A second-year archduke candidate from Drewanchel the Third.
- **Detlinde** — A fifth-year archduke candidate from Ahrensbach the Sixth. Georgine's daughter.
- **Rudiger** — A sixth-year archduke candidate from Frenbeltag the Fifteenth.

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.
- **Aurelia** — Lamprecht's bride.
- **Grausam** — Giebe Gerlach. Matthias's father.
- **Sidonius** — Giebe Wiltord. Laurenz's father.
- **Freuden** — Giebe Wildtord's son. Laurenz's older brother.
- **Bettina** — Freuden's Bride.
- **Henrik** — Damuel's older brother and a layscholar.
- **Veronica** — Sylvester's mother. Currently detained.

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.

Nobles Elsewhere

- **Sigiswald** — The Sovereignty's first prince.
- **Anastasius** — The Sovereignty's second prince.
- **Eglantine** — A member of the Klassenberg archducal family.
- **Georgine** — Ahrensbach's first wife. Sylvester's older sister.

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.
- **Theo** — A leherl of the Gilberta Company.
- **Gustav** — Guildmaster of the Merchant's Guild.
- **Freida** — Gustav's granddaughter and a coinvestor in the Italian restaurant.

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.
- **Leise** — A chef working for Gustav.

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Prologue

Once the Archduke Conference was over, the nobles and giebes in the castle were all informed of the decisions that had been made. One of the more important outcomes was that two brides from Ahrensbach were being wed into the duchy.

“Aah! They permitted Freuden’s marriage!”

The exclamation came from Viscount Sidonius Wiltord, who had just heard from the archduke that his eldest son, Freuden, was being permitted to marry. Considering that the marriage had already been refused once before, this was marvelous news—so marvelous that his voice cracked as he spoke it aloud, and the letter shook in his trembling hands. He knew exactly who to thank for this gift.

“I must inform Lord Grausam at once,” he said to nobody in particular.

An ordonnanz soon began its journey from Wiltord to Gerlach. Both provinces were in the south of Ehrenfest, and their giebes were considered the very center of the former Veronica faction. The white bird shot through the wall of Gerlach’s summer estate just as he was eating dinner with his family, attracting the attention of all those gathered.

Gerlach’s youngest son, Matthias, was the first to react. He turned at once, his dark-purple hair swaying as he dropped his fork and immediately readied his schtappe. It was a response that now came to him naturally as a medknight due to enter his fourth year at the Royal Academy. His blue eyes carefully followed the ordonnanz; only under the most urgent circumstances would one send such correspondence after sixth bell.

The white bird circled the dining room leisurely before settling down on Viscount Gerlach’s arm. “Lord Grausam, this is Sidonius,” it said. “Aub Ehrenfest has sent word to me. It seems that, due to a discussion with Ahrensbach during the Archduke Conference, my son Freuden has been permitted to marry Lady Bettina. I shall tell you the details myself the next time we meet in person.”

Matthias continued to stare at the ordonnanz. He knew there was no reason to doubt what he was hearing—it was an update from Giebe Wiltord, a man who was very much not their enemy—but he struggled to believe his ears even as the bird spoke its message a third time.

“Lord Freuden and Lady Bettina’s marriage was rejected years ago,” Matthias muttered. “To think it would be permitted now, when the aub knows that reversing his decision will cause unrest in the duchy... Is this truly happening?”

The mana shortage was being felt all across Yurgenschmidt, and Matthias knew from his intelligence gathering in the Royal Academy that Ahrensbach was especially devastated. It made no sense that its aub would willingly relinquish a mednoble to another duchy. Sending an archnoble or a member of the archducal family had the potential of securing a stronger relationship with a duchy that could support them in turn, but mednoble marriages offered nowhere near as much influence.

Grausam scoffed at his son’s confusion. “Did you not hear the message?” he said. “This was decided during the Archduke Conference.”

“I am wondering why Ahrensbach would take such an interest in a mednoble marriage. I cannot imagine they would push for something so minor without some ulterior motive.”

“Aub Ahrensbach must truly care for these two young people. A betrothal dissolved by the decision of an aub brings no happiness to anyone. You should understand that better than most,” Grausam replied, his gray eyes boring into his son. It was an evasive answer, and Matthias quickly concluded that no amount of prodding would get him the information that he wanted.

“Greater duchies certainly are magnanimous,” Matthias said, withdrawing from the topic of conversation. Grausam returned a satisfied nod, while Matthias’s mother gave a pleased smile of agreement.

“This marriage would have been doomed if not for Ahrensbach’s support,” she said. “Today is a blessed day.”

“Father, shall we go to Wiltord to celebrate?” Matthias’s older brother Janrik asked. “I would like to hear more about this whole situation.”

“Indeed. If we are fortunate enough, they might assist with your marriage as well,” Grausam replied.

Matthias’s mother nodded her agreement. “Let us go as a family. Now, what gift should we bring for Freuden?”

There was nothing unusual about such a spontaneous trip—the approval of a once rejected marriage was cause for celebration, and Gerlach was on good terms with Wiltord—but Matthias felt a profound sense of unease nonetheless. He found it strange to see everyone celebrating Ahrensbach, seemingly unconcerned that it had supported an attack on the Ehrenfest archducal family. Perhaps this blind support stemmed from Ahrensbach’s status as a greater duchy and the misplaced assumption that all greater duchies were deserving of such worship. Either way, it was much too different from how things were in the Royal Academy, where the Ehrenfest students all worked together to spread trends and boost the duchy’s rank.

Gerlach borders Ahrensbach, so supporting them has thus far proven beneficial to us, but I cannot see this continuing to be the case.

Wilfried and Rozemyne’s engagement had just been announced at the feast to celebrate spring. Ehrenfest would surely begin to centralize around them and continue to grow and develop while spreading Rozemyne’s trends and inventions to other duchies. The future was clear to Matthias, and yet, for some reason, his family was proactively attempting to maintain diplomacy with Ahrensbach. Why?

No matter how I look at this, supporting Ahrensbach is a losing bet.

Matthias’s mind raced with all that he had learned at the Royal Academy. One needed only look at Bindewald, an Ahrensbach province bordering the duchy barrier, to see that Ahrensbach was still devastated from the mana shortage. There also seemed to be a dispute of sorts over who would become the next aub: the archduke’s youngest daughter Detlinde or his granddaughter Letizia, whom he had adopted. Matthias had heard that Detlinde was at an advantage, both due to her age and because Ehrenfest, where her mother Georgine was from, was rising through the ranks. He was largely unsure about the details, though.

Father must assume Lady Detlinde is going to be their next aub. That was the only way Matthias could understand continuing to support Ahrensbach as Ehrenfest rose through the ranks. He crossed his arms and fell into deep thought, shaking his head as he mulled things over. *Does Father plan to become a bridge between Ehrenfest and Ahrensbach...? No, I can't imagine him doing anything like that.*

Despite how much Matthias dwelled on the situation, he had not reached a satisfying conclusion even by the time they were due to leave for their impromptu visit. Wiltord and Gerlach would at times perform knight training exercises together, and this trip was being used as an excuse to do just that. As an apprentice knight, Matthias was required to participate.

"Hey, Matthias. Been a while."

Upon his arrival at the Wiltord summer mansion, Matthias was first approached by Laurenz, the giebe's second son. He was also an apprentice knight, so Matthias had spent more time with him than he had with other noble children.

"Laurenz. Congratulations on your brother's marriage."

"Yep. The whole family's excited about it."

Matthias and Laurenz celebrated their reunion while the giebes exchanged greetings. They were genuinely happy to see one another since meeting with friends was a rare occurrence while spending time in one's home duchy.

"How about you two hurry on to training? It really is shameful how far you are trailing behind Lord Cornelius and Lady Angelica," Grausam said, making his displeasure more than apparent. He had attended the Interduchy Tournament with his wife for Janrik's graduation, so he had watched the ditter games and seen this skill gap firsthand.

All this because he's proud we Gerlachs have archnoble-level mana...

Long ago, when Gabriele of Ahrensbach first married into Ehrenfest, the Giebe Gerlach of the time married one of her retainers. It was for this reason that Matthias's house had a great enough mana capacity to rival some archnobles, despite them only being mednobles. They would rank up to

archnoble status if the eldest son of the house displayed such an impressive mana capacity for three consecutive generations, which was why Grausam was especially sensitive about any perceivable gaps between them and the archnobles.

"That would be due to the excellence of Lady Rozemyne's mana compression method," Matthias replied. "It is not just Lord Cornelius and Lady Angelica either—the other guard knights of the archducal family are increasing their mana capacities equally as fast."

"That method was devised by a lowly commoner—and while she was serving as an apprentice blue shrine maiden, of all things. We need only discover it for ourselves."

So he said, but if the method truly was that easy to figure out, the archduke would not have started charging money for lessons or controlling who could attend them. Matthias had no way of learning the Rozemyne Compression Method solely because he belonged to a different faction. Just how many children in the Royal Academy were bemoaning being in a similar situation? He could remember the agonized cries of the other students of the former Veronica faction all too well.

You belittle her as a former commoner, Father, but do you know a compression method more effective than hers? Of course not. No matter how hard I work, the chasm between our mana capacities will guarantee my defeat every time.

Defiance toward his father blossomed within Matthias as the frustrations he had swallowed down in the Royal Academy were suddenly unleashed. "If you are so dismissive of a *lowly commoner's* method, you must have a better one of your own, no?" he said. "You wouldn't insult it while lacking one yourself, surely."

Grausam fell into thought for a moment. "I will need permission, since this is not something that I devised myself... but I will ask our lady whether I may teach you," he replied. It was an answer that caught Matthias entirely off guard—and who was this "lady" he was referring to?

As Matthias blinked in confusion, Viscount Wiltord voiced his agreement.

“That would be wise. You have been working quite hard for her sake, Lord Grausam, have you not? I see more muscle on you now, even.”

“I need a fit body so that I might respond to any of our lady’s needs or demands without hesitation,” Grausam replied.

Father certainly does put his all into whatever he sets his mind on... Matthias thought as he glanced down at his father’s abs and saw that he was indeed more muscular than he had used to be.

“In any case, Matthias—you need to participate in this training. There is no point in knowing the compression method if you aren’t training to match it,” Grausam said.

Wiltord nodded. “Laurenz. Join him,” he said. “We don’t want you shaming yourself at the Interduchy Tournament.”

And so, both Matthias and Laurenz were shooed out of the parlor. Matthias glanced over at Laurenz as they made their way to the training grounds. Laurenz looked so much more like a knight than he did, being taller and fitter despite being one year younger. Matthias clenched his fists and tried tensing his arms, but even then his muscles paled in comparison. He didn’t seem to get any more buff no matter how hard he trained, and it frustrated him that he looked more like a spindly scholar than anything.

“Hey.” Laurenz suddenly pulled Matthias from his sad musing, his orange eyes shining with excitement. “Do you really think Lord Grausam is going to teach us that compression method he spoke about?”

Matthias wasn’t the only one agonizing over the mana disparity that was resulting from Rozemyne’s mana compression method; Laurenz and all the other students of the former Veronica faction felt the same way.

“I understand your excitement, Laurenz, but... who do you think their ‘lady’ is?”

“Probably Lady Georgine. Not that I have any proof...”

Matthias likewise wanted to avoid jumping to conclusions—after all, their fathers had never actually referred to this person by name, and they always sent their letters to nobles in old Werkestock of Ahrensbach, who may not have

even been connected to Georgine. She was Matthias and Laurenz's first guess because their families had rejoiced over "our lady arriving" back when she had visited with her retinue three years ago, but they lacked the evidence to prove anything.

It must be Lady Georgine, right?

Matthias thought back to the woman he had seen so many years ago, but the memory was fuzzy at best. He had been younger then, and she had visited only to attend a tea party that his father had not allowed him to attend. He recalled the deep red of her lips visible behind a thin veil, her elegant attitude fit for a queen as she received greetings... and the off-putting servile ingratiation with which his parents had treated her. He had reconciled to his parents' behavior only after hearing that they had served Georgine before she was married into Ahrensbach.

Georgine had to be quite skilled to have become first wife of a greater duchy after being married off as a mere third wife. It was possible that she had taught Matthias's parents the compression method before then, much like Rozemyne had taught her retainers.

That said, would she teach Ehrenfest nobles her method now that she's the first wife of Ahrensbach?

The mana shortage in Ahrensbach truly was critical. Surely it was a much wiser decision for her to teach her method to her own duchy's nobles, rather than Ehrenfest nobles like Matthias and Laurenz. Not a single reasonable explanation came to mind, and that was the main reason why Matthias was not entirely convinced they were referring to Georgine.

"I suppose there's no point dwelling on it forever," Matthias said. "I'm more curious about why they're giving more training to knights when we're already so busy with the sudden Starbinding."

Laurenz clapped his hands together in apparent realization. "Oh yeah. Father was talking about doing more joint training with Gerlach too."

Upon hearing those words, Matthias felt a sudden wave of uneasiness; why were the giebes having their knights attend more joint training sessions now, of all times? *This feels just like when Father was summoned after the attack on the*

archducal family...

Matthias doubted that his father would ever attack the archducal family—there were eyewitnesses who claimed to have seen him in the grand hall—but his suspicions somehow still remained. The queasy feeling from back then resurfaced.

“Laurenz, do you know the details of the ceremony?”

“Nope. Just the basics. It’s going to be held at the border gate instead of the castle. Sounds like the archducal families of both duchies will be showing up.”

“You mean... Ahrensbach’s archducal family is going too?”

“Yeah, since Aub Ahrensbach’s niece is marrying Lord Lamprecht at the same time.”

This was the first Matthias was hearing of that. He had wondered why a greater duchy would involve themselves in the marriage of a mednoble, but now it all made perfect sense—it had been to strengthen their push for one of their own to marry Lamprecht, who served Ehrenfest’s archducal family and was the son of its knight commander. Ahrensbach was sinking its claws as deep into Ehrenfest as it could.

“This isn’t good...” Matthias muttered. “Should we warn the aub?”

“You can try, but we’re kids; I doubt he’ll take us seriously. Plus, think about what might happen to us after. I can’t imagine our fathers would ever forgive us...” Laurenz replied. He sounded deflated, but Matthias struggled to tell whether his warning was truly out of concern for their safety.

“I know how you feel. But if we follow after our parents without understanding their intentions, we’ll end up walking down the same road as Roderick,” Matthias cautioned, remembering the boy who had suffered the consequences of mindlessly obeying his father. He may not have been able to change his own faction by will, but he could at least express his intent through actions. He wanted to choose whose sake to work for—to decide for himself who he saw as his lord or lady.

“Just as Janrik said, Lady Rozemyne isn’t being established as the next aub despite being best suited for the position,” Matthias continued. “This

engagement has locked her into being the first wife. Still, I think she'll remain at the absolute center of Ehrenfest—that the duchy will continue to revolve around her. And with that in mind, I can't overlook our fathers working against the archducal family. You know... maybe Lady Rozemyne will believe us."

"If you can get a meeting with her, that is. Sounds like even Leisegang nobles are having a hard time there," Laurenz replied. Matthias had never considered that her guard would be so tight that not even nobles of the same faction could meet with her.

"If this were the Royal Academy, we could at least contact her indirectly through her retainers, but..." Matthias trailed off. There were few enough opportunities for apprentice knights to speak with guard knights during training sessions, and now that they had returned to Ehrenfest, there were practically none at all.

"You sure are a worrywart, Matthias. We can't say for sure if something's going to happen. Besides, what are the chances they'd try to attack a place with two aubs?" Laurenz said, ever the optimist. "Not like stressing about it now will change anything."

Matthias glared at Laurenz, his arms crossed. "If our fathers really are planning something then we need to act. Otherwise, it'll be too late."



Matthias was certain that his father had at least some involvement in the Ivory Tower incident; the man had exchanged countless letters with Ahrensbach around that time and seemed aware of what had happened even before winter socializing. That was why Matthias could not discard the possibility that his father had likewise been involved with the attack that had put Rozemyne to sleep for two years.

“It’s important to expect and prepare for the absolute worst,” Matthias said. “Do you disagree?”

“Matthias, you... Man, you really are like Lord Grausam,” Laurenz chuckled. “You think ahead and form all sorts of plots just like he does. Like father, like son, huh?”

Matthias responded only with a frown. At least on that particular day, it was a comparison he did not welcome.

Apprentices and the Temple

Thank goodness that's over... You complained WAY too much, Sylvester!

The objection-filled private discussion about the Archduke Conference and the upcoming Starbind Ceremony had finally come to a close. I returned to my room and immediately began reading the letter that Hannelore had sent me. She mentioned that the Ehrenfest book had been light, easy to hold, and—since it was written in modern vernacular—an exceedingly smooth read. Her heart had apparently throbbed when she read the knight love stories and saw the illustrations. She even asked me to lend her any other romance stories I might have.

You can count on me! I'll ask Mother to pump out even more!

Ferdinand had rejected my romance novel, so my intention was to encourage Elvira and the fiction-loving women in her faction to continue their passionate endeavors.

Next, Hannelore can borrow Royal Academy Stories*. It has a lot of romance in it. Eheheh...*

After reading the letter, I looked at the book Hannelore was letting me borrow. It was covered with rich decorations and so extremely thick that I struggled enough just lifting the cover. There was no way I was going to be able to hold it, so I found myself wishing I had a slanted book stand like the ones in the temple's book room.

Inside the book were ancient tales from Dunkelfelger written in archaic, hard-to-decipher text. The first few were written in a more narrative fashion like stories based on the bible, but as I continued turning the pages, it began feeling more like a history textbook. If this was factually accurate then the duchy had existed since what was pretty much the birth of the country.

They might have rewritten events to prop themselves up, though. I'll need to cross-reference with a bunch of works from other duchies to be sure.

Dunkelfelger was a duchy founded on the principles of the warrior spirit, so many of its stories were about knights who persevered no matter how many times they lost. They fought, and fought, and fought until they eventually won in the end. It was exciting to read tales that reflected the cultures of the duchies they came from. The book was packed with things I didn't know, which meant there was plenty for me to transcribe.

"Philine, Hartmut... I imagine you are going to be busier in the coming season as you travel between the temple and the castle, but please do assist with transcribing this book," I said.

"Does this mean the aub is allowing apprentices to accompany you to the temple?" Hartmut asked, his voice tinged with excitement.

"Indeed. After discussing it with Sylvester, it has been decided that your permissions in the Noble's Quarter shall now extend to the temple. That said, the only rooms in the temple for noble retainers are the two rooms for guard knights, and only adult guard knights may stay in them. The rest will need to commute."

"Understood," Hartmut replied, agreeing at once. There was an unmistakable sparkle in his orange eyes.

I turned to look at my female retainers, concerned that they might be uneasy about the idea. "Having permission to enter the temple and actually going there are separate matters," I said. "If your family is opposed to you entering the temple or you feel uncomfortable about going there, you may continue staying behind."

"No, that's okay. I want to try the temple food Angelica was talking about," Judithe replied, actually sounding excited. She didn't seem too opposed to the temple, which was somewhat of a surprise considering how poorly it was seen by noble society. Perhaps it was because, like Brigitte, she hadn't been raised in the Noble's Quarter.

Philine asked whether she would be able to see her little brother Konrad in the orphanage. I would need to contact Wilma beforehand, but it seemed safe enough. Meanwhile, Leonore was agonizing over the situation as an archnoble. Cornelius recommended that she try visiting the temple before making a

decision, so she settled on doing that. I certainly thought it was a better idea than refusing to go based on prejudice alone.

"It seems that all of my apprentice scholars and apprentice guard knights will be accompanying me on this first trip, but what of my apprentice attendants?" I asked.

Lieseleta exchanged a glance with Brunhilde. "I would like to prioritize the embroidery," she said. "Once the outfits are made, I would appreciate the chance to see the home in which you were raised, Lady Rozemyne, but..."

"Fear not, Lieseleta. The temple is not going anywhere. You may prioritize Schwartz's and Weiss's outfits," I replied. Ferdinand was being very picky about the quality of the clothes anyway, so I greatly appreciated a young noblewoman with deft hands taking care of the embroidery for me. She gave a refined chuckle as she reached for the sewing box.

"In that case, I will remain in the castle and embroider as well. I assume we are not needed there, since you have your temple attendants," Brunhilde said. She then went on to point out that her and Lieseleta's presence would only deprive my temple attendants of work—a valid point that I admittedly hadn't considered. "I will focus on my castle work, but please do call me for any meetings on dyeing or the like. Incidentally... I received word from my father the other day. Groschel has finished preparing to import the printing industry. He said that he will soon be contacting Lady Elvira."

I inhaled sharply. "That is much sooner than I expected. I had assumed they would need more time, since such preparations require dealing with commoners." Maybe the other provinces would finish just as quickly.

Brunhilde responded with a polite giggle just as I began considering whether I should rethink my printing plans. "Our house shares blood with Lady Elvira and received much advice from Giebe Haldenzel, which enabled us to finish so quickly."

"I see. In that case, once Wilfried has performed the final checks, we can go to Groschel with the Gutenbergs. I am excited to see what kind of place it is."

"Please take me with you," Brunhilde said. I nodded my approval. We would want a guide, anyway.

Once I had finished directing my retainers in the castle, an ordonnanz arrived from Ferdinand stating that we would be returning to the temple tomorrow after breakfast. I brought my retainers to him when the time came, which earned me a strange look.

“This is quite the crowd,” Ferdinand remarked. “Do you truly need so many people?”

“Think of this as a guided tour for the apprentices,” I replied. “I plan to show them the temple and explain their respective workloads. When there are no meetings, the scholars can work in shifts, and only two guard knights need to accompany us. But in any case, will you not be glad to have extra helpers?”

Naturally, I intended to bring them all with me when it came time to help Ferdinand with his work. He nodded with a quiet interjection and gazed across my apprentice guard knights. His lips then curved into a slight grin of amusement.

I returned to the temple via highbeast with Hugo and Rosina. It was strange to be surrounded by my retainers’ highbeasts as well. Fran and Monika watched with widened eyes as we all landed by the temple. I also saw several stiff expressions among my retainers at the sight of the gray priests and shrine maidens who were here to welcome us.

“Fran, Monika, these are my retainers,” I said. “They are henceforth going to be visiting the temple on a more regular basis. Everyone, this is Fran, my head attendant within the temple, and this is Monika. They are not of the castle, but please consider them your equals as those who serve me.”

“Thanks to Fran, I can focus on guard duty in the temple. The gray priests Lord Ferdinand trained are really good,” Angelica noted, puffing out her chest as she praised Fran for letting her escape the tedium of paperwork. Some chuckles leaked out and the tension in the air quickly faded.

“Now then, I shall go to my chambers to get changed. Damuel, Angelica, use that time to take everyone to the rooms for guard knights.”

“Understood!”

I entrusted the two of them with guiding my retainers before following

Monika and Fran to the High Bishop's chambers, where I then explained the circumstances to Zahm. "My apologies," I said to him. "I imagine you might find it quite nerve-racking to have nobles walking around the temple."

"You need not worry about us, Lady Rozemyne," he replied. "As you are the archduke's adopted daughter, we have known for quite some time that this day would come."

"After a brief rest, at third bell, we will be leaving to help the High Priest. I intend for my retainers to experience life in the temple for themselves. Damuel and Eckhart can manage, so I am sure the others can as well."

Fran gave a bemused smile, no doubt thinking about how my retainers were being thrown into work so soon after arriving. "Will Lady Angelica be guarding the door as always?" he asked.

"Yes. It is important for them to see how things will usually be."

Zahm and Fran left for the kitchen to prepare tea, while Monika stayed behind to help me get changed. "Monika, if any of the visiting nobles say anything nasty to you, or you feel that you're in even the slightest bit of danger, please do tell me right away," I said. "I do not want any of you to be hurt while I am unaware."

"As you wish. I will report even the smallest detail," she replied with a relieved smile. As expected, she had been nervous about so many unfamiliar nobles visiting the temple.

Once I was changed, I called everyone over. Refreshments had already been prepared, so I took a demonstrative bite of Nicola's sweets and sipped the tea that Fran had poured for me.

"It's been too long since I had temple sweets. I don't even get to eat these at home," Cornelius noted as he happily reached for some. He was of a higher status than any of my other retainers, so it was only after he started eating that everyone else followed suit.

"Wow. These are so tasty..." Judithe murmured. "Have Angelica and Damuel been eating sweets this good this whole time? Lady Rozemyne, I want to do as much guard duty here in the temple as possible."

“You may take up guard duty here, but only on days when you do not have apprentice training,” I replied. She was practically tearing up with disappointment, but Damuel and Angelica more than sufficed. I was much happier having the apprentices prioritize their training with Bonifatius.

After tea, Damuel explained what guard duty in the temple entailed. I asked Monika to show the two apprentice scholars how my work desk was arranged and whatnot, then looked over the letters and boards that had piled up in my absence.

“I suppose we should send immediate responses to these letters from the guildmaster and the Plantin and Gilberta Companies,” I observed. The guildmaster’s letter contained questions about the waschen and the dyeing competition; the Plantin Company’s said that Johann had finished the safety pin, and that they wanted to know the Gutenbergs’ next destination as soon as it was decided upon; and the Gilberta Company’s reported that my summer hairpin and the hairpin for Ella were now both finished. “Fran, I will meet with the guildmaster, the Plantin Company, and the Gilberta Company three days from now. Please send out letters of invitation.”

“As you wish.”

Come third bell, I brought my temple attendants and noble retainers to the High Priest’s room. Angelica took her usual position at the door the very instant we arrived, as if worried that someone might attempt to steal her spot. My apprentice guard knights gasped at the state of the room before staring in shock at Eckhart and Damuel, who were casually doing paperwork.

“For as long as I am in the temple, I assist the High Priest with his work every single day,” I explained to my noble retainers. “I am delighted to have you all working with me.”

“Seeing as you have this many lackeys to handle the busywork, Rozemyne, I suppose I can teach you new jobs to do,” Ferdinand said. And with that, I evolved from a mere calculator that obeyed instructions to the head of the temple budget. I truly was working my way up in the world.

“Lady Rozemyne... Do you really do this every single day?” Judithe asked.

“I do. Now, come on. Your hands have stopped.”

“I see. Guard duty in the temple isn’t easy at all...” she muttered, but her sad whispers were drowned out as fourth bell started to chime.

My retainers took turns eating lunch, as per usual. Philine and Judithe were both moved by the deliciousness of temple food, and while Cornelius was already used to eating delicious meals at home, he was enjoying the opportunity to try new things. Leonore, however, was looking somewhat down.

“Leonore, did the food not suit your tastes?” I asked. “You seem to be frowning.”

“Oh, it was quite delicious. I was simply thinking that we might have a hard time welcoming you or Lady Elvira to our homes when you have grown accustomed to eating such amazing meals every day.”

After lunch, I gave Zahm several work-related instructions and then started leading my retainers to the orphanage. Philine was walking with an extremely anxious look on her face.

“Don’t worry. Konrad’s fine.”

Damuel tried to reassure Philine, since he always accompanied me to the orphanage, but she responded only with a weak smile. I needed to make sure she saw her little brother as soon as possible.

Fran and Monika opened the door to the orphanage to reveal the gray shrine maidens and pre-baptism children kneeling in wait. “You may all return to work,” I said. “Konrad, do come here.”

The gray shrine maidens stood up and returned to their work, clearly conscious of all my noble retainers. Konrad cried “Sister!” and started running toward Philine, having been urged forward by Dirk, but quickly slowed down to a walk after noticing all the eyes fixed on him.

“Konrad, I’m so glad to see you safe. How’s life in the temple?” Philine asked with an overjoyed smile as she pulled her younger brother into a hug.

“I’m fine. Everyone’s nice, the food’s good, and Dirk’s here too. Lady Rozemyne told me you were living in the castle now. Do you feel lonely?” he asked.

“I’m fine too, since I have friends who work with me. I do miss you though, Konrad. I wish we could see each other more often...”

I gave a relieved sigh, pleased to see that Philine and Konrad were on good terms. I assumed they would want some time alone, so I decided to show everyone else the game corner of the dining hall. There were copies of all the books the Plantin Company had printed thus far, the karuta and playing cards, and several toys for babies.

“The orphanage has this many books and toys?!” Cornelius exclaimed with wide eyes.

“Indeed. Aub Ehrenfest was similarly stunned when he visited,” I said. Of course, Sylvester had been disguised as a blue priest at the time. “We use the orphanage to test toys and then start selling whichever ones are best received. The fact that all of the children here can read and do math is something that I am very proud of. They are learning all the skills expected of an attendant before they even turn ten.”

“I had heard about this, but seeing it with my own eyes is something else,” Hartmut said, no less surprised than Cornelius was. Leonore looked around the dining hall and nodded to herself, noting that it was cleaner than she had expected after hearing all the rumors.

I gave a proud chortle. “The entire temple is clean because everyone works to keep it that way, and the children are all respectful thanks to their polite upbringing.”

“All that we have now is thanks to Lady Rozemyne’s blessings,” Wilma said with an angelic smile. “We are all endlessly grateful for all that she has done,” she said. Her glowing words of praise prompted an immediate response from Hartmut, who eagerly leaned forward.

“You there. I would like to hear more about what Lady Rozemyne has done here,” he said, his intensity causing Wilma to take a step back. She was deathly afraid of men, so I stepped between them to protect her.

“Hartmut, I will not allow you to do anything untoward to Wilma,” I declared, defensively holding out both arms.

“Untoward...?” Hartmut repeated, his expression deflating in an instant.

The sight of our exchange made Wilma giggle. “Lord Hartmut, if I were to elaborate on Lady Rozemyne’s splendor, we would most certainly be here for the rest of the day. There is no time for such talk now, but perhaps we can speak later.”

“Thank you. I would love to hear about Lady Rozemyne’s saintly deeds in the orphanage.”

“Wilma! Why would you even suggest that?!” I cried. The very thought of her talking about my saint legends took me by surprise, as did the idea that Hartmut would be making frequent and eager trips to the orphanage. It was as though she shared his fervor on some deep level.

How could this happen? I thought I was protecting her. What changed...?

There were a few lingering concerns, but it seemed that my retainers all came away with good impressions of the temple. That was good.

A Discussion with the Lower City

My meeting with the guildmaster and the Plantin and Gilberta Companies was scheduled for the afternoon three days after my retainers first arrived at the temple. I was a bit tense about having scholars attend a meeting with people from the lower city, but Hartmut seemed excited as we made our way to the orphanage director's chambers.

"Lady Rozemyne, what will you be discussing with the lower city merchants?" he asked.

"My main interest is how the lower city has been faring since the entwickeln," I replied. "Aside from that, I intend to discuss accommodation for the merchants coming from other duchies with the guildmaster, explain where the Gutenbergs will be going next to the Plantin Company, and receive my ordered products from the Gilberta Company."

Hartmut noted all this down, while Philine watched and copied him. It wasn't long before we arrived at my chambers, which were already prepared for our guests thanks to Monika and Nicola. Angelica was standing outside the door, while Damuel and Cornelius were guarding the inside. Leonore and Judithe were absent, since they had training today.

Hartmut, Philine, and Cornelius looked around curiously when we reached the second floor. "Lady Rozemyne, I do not believe this furniture suits someone of your status," Hartmut noted with a small wrinkle of his nose.

I nodded. His observation was accurate. The previous orphanage director had apparently been of mednoble birth, which meant this furniture was suited for a mednoble. At no point had it ever been appropriate for my status; back when I was a commoner, it was much too expensive, and now that I was the archduke's adopted daughter, it was much too cheap.

"This room and its furniture comes from a time when I did not know my father's status, and yes, it certainly does not suit my status now that I have been adopted by the archduke," I explained. "However, it only sees use when I

meet with commoners, so there is surely no need to expend resources on replacing it."

"I believe it would be an effective way to further establish how superior you are to them," Hartmut replied, but I wasn't about to waste precious resources on furniture I used so rarely. There was no way he could make me care about this.

"Hartmut, the commoners we are due to meet are all aware of my status, and just as nobles view the richest merchants as no different from the poorest farmers, commoners see the richest archnobles and the poorest laynobles as nobles all the same. Changing the furniture will not change their perception in the least, assuming they notice it at all. If we had the money to replace barely used furniture, I would rather spend it on something more important."

"Something more important... Such as?" Hartmut asked, seemingly so fixated on providing me with chambers befitting my status that no examples came to mind.

"Books, naturally. Or perhaps creating new printing presses, developing new bookcases, or saving for the eventual creation of my own personal library. There are endless productive uses for money, are there not? New furniture is very low on the priority list."

"Lady Rozemyne, as nobles, it is crucial that we prepare environments appropriate to our status," Cornelius said, backing up Hartmut with a bemused smile.

"In other words, create an environment fit for myself. Understood. I shall save money to the best of my ability and strive to purchase book after book so that I may one day create a library suitable for the adopted daughter of an archduke."

"We are not talking about libraries."

"Oh, but we were talking about productive uses of money, were we not?"

No matter how desperately Cornelius tried to explain his viewpoint to me, I could not imagine a bigger waste of money than replacing the furniture. Still, considering that my noble retainers had already found something to take issue with, I was starting to get a little nervous about whether this meeting would go

well.

Just as I quashed all the remaining complaints about my furniture situation, Fran came upstairs with some tea. “Your guests should be arriving soon,” he informed me, and hardly a moment later, Angelica announced that they had indeed arrived. She opened the door and Gil brought them all upstairs, having waited for them at the front gate. I could see Gustav, Freida, and their attendants, as well as Benno, Mark, Lutz, Otto, Tuuli, and Theo.

“Blessed be the waves of Flutrane the Goddess of Water who guided us toward this serendipitous meeting.”

Gustav gave the appropriate greeting as the representative of the group, speaking even more politely than usual due to the number of nobles they were meeting with for the very first time. My retainers responded in turn, and then I gestured to the provided seats. Of the commoners, only Gustav, Benno, and Otto sat down as the representatives of their respective stores.

“Klassenberg and the Sovereignty were selected as our business partners during the Archduke Conference, as planned,” I said. “We have verification paper for the Merchant’s Guild to use in identifying the merchants arriving from these specific areas.”

I signaled to Hartmut, who handed over the other halves of the verification sheets we had given to Klassenberg and the Sovereignty. The paper for Klassenberg was red and the paper for the Sovereignty was black, making it clear which was which. This was all thanks to the colored ink that Heidi had developed.

“This paper has a quality wherein smaller pieces are attracted to larger pieces, as seen here,” I explained, showing the merchants how to cut the edges of the verification paper and use it for its intended purpose. “Please remember to check that the pieces of paper the visiting merchants bring are drawn to your own pieces. We instructed that they give each merchant a sheet larger than this board so that the sheet can be broken into no more than eight pieces, which should hopefully control the number of visitors we receive. If you are approached by anyone whose paper is too small then you may refuse to do business with them. We will handle the matter if necessary.”

“So the paper is a magical device that even commoners can use? This will be most helpful,” Gustav said, carefully accepting the sheets before passing them to one of his attendants.

“How is the lower city? Does it remain clean enough that we may hold our heads high when merchants of other cities arrive?” I asked. We had beautified the city with the entwickeln and the wide-range waschen, but if the commoners who lived there weren’t careful, it would all end up filthy again in no time.

Gustav nodded with a smile. “I was watching from the top window of the Merchant’s Guild on that fateful day, and the sight was truly shocking enough to deprive me of speech. Lights suddenly shone in the sky, and an instant later, torrents of water crashed against my doors and windows. I reflexively stepped back, but the next thing I knew, the water had already vanished, and the lower city’s roads and buildings were as white as those in the Noble’s Quarter. I had already been given some idea of what was going to happen, but goodness, the archduke’s power was truly something to behold.”

Mm...? Isn’t he talking about the waschen that Ferdinand used, not the entwickeln that Sylvester poured his all into? It seemed that the entwickeln had gone largely unnoticed, since it mostly changed underground stuff, while the waves of the waschen had been what left a big impression on the commoners. *Oh well. It’s not like the details of how the city ended up so clean really matter here...*

“The soldiers and we of the Merchant’s Guild spread the news all throughout the city, so none remained outside at the time of. I have not been informed of any injuries or disappearances following the magic.”

Whew. So nobody was caught up in the entwickeln, drowned in the waschen, or ended up having a heart attack.

“There were some buildings in the southern part of the lower city that had water slip through the cracks of their doors and windows, which resulted in their interiors becoming as clean as the streets outside,” Benno said. He then shot Lutz a meaningful glance, so I inquired as to what had happened.

“I’m told that my family home was one such building. My mother bemoaned that if she had known what would happen, she would have kept the windows

open from the start," Lutz explained while awkwardly averting his gaze. The mental image of Karla boldly waiting for the water with the windows thrown open made me laugh. She probably would have been able to stay standing even after getting blasted.

"Unfortunately, that wide-range magic is quite costly and cannot be performed so frequently," I said. "In any case... is the city being kept clean?"

Tuuli, who was standing behind Otto, gave a proud smile. "But of course. My father and all the soldiers are patrolling the streets with sharp eyes, warning all those who would dirty them. The city is a sight to behold from the very north to the southmost point," she said.

It seemed that speaking to Dad and the soldiers in Hasse had been the right choice after all. I couldn't help but smile as I imagined him and his soldiers working hard for my sake.

"That is relieving to hear, but I have one more concern," I said. "There will soon be a surge of merchants coming to Ehrenfest from other duchies. Will there be enough inns and eateries to support them?"

"There will not be enough high-quality inns given the lack of need for them up until this point and the fact they cannot be built so suddenly," Gustav replied. "This year, we plan to have the major store owners house them, and to that end, we have sent word instructing them to prepare their homes. Thanks to the archduke limiting the number of visitors, we should have enough space if we merchants and the inns work together."

He went on to explain that they planned to use the Italian restaurant to host a celebratory dinner welcoming the merchants. That seemed like a good move to me, since we had just spread awareness of our unique cuisine at the Archduke Conference. As I was nodding along in agreement, Freida raised her hand. She was involved with the operation of the Italian restaurant.

"Lady Rozemyne, if time permits, please do visit the Italian restaurant," she said briskly. "It would certainly ease our worries if you would check the operation as one of our investors to ensure everything is suitable for outsider merchants." She wanted me to check the new menu and say a few words to the big store owners who were going to be involved, since that would apparently

have an impact on how much support they offered.

"You there," Hartmut suddenly interjected, his tone harsh. "You speak above your place. Do you think you have the right to give such direct demands to Lady Rozemyne, the archduke's adopted daughter? Not even a noble would dare speak as you have."

Tensions immediately rose as everyone feared they had just earned the ire of a powerful noble. I shot Hartmut a fierce glare. Nobles were going to be attending meetings about the printing industry from now on, but those meetings would prove useless unless they learned to stop being so stuck-up. It would also be harder for me to protect those in the lower city.

"I hold these meetings precisely to hear the direct requests of our lower city citizens. A scholar who fails to understand this and interferes will not be permitted to attend, regardless of whether they are an archnoble or my retainer."

"My apologies," Hartmut replied. "I failed to understand your intent, Lady Rozemyne."

I returned my attention to Freida. "This summer, I will need the support of the merchants not just for housing merchants of other duchies, but for interduchy marriages and the dyeing competition. I do not mind speaking to them. I will acquire permission from the High Priest when possible and personally stop by the Italian restaurant."

"You have our thanks. Please look forward to the new menu," Freida said with a smile.

"Fran, when will my schedule permit such a meeting?"

"From now until the spring coming-of-age ceremony or between the summer baptism and the Starbind Ceremony. Assuming it needs to be held before the merchants come, I would suggest acquiring permission from the High Priest right away."

Since this was going to be an opportunity to both visit the Italian restaurant and check up on the lower city, it was possible that Sylvester would want to accompany me just for the fun of it. That made me realize something.

“Freida, might I ask you to train some new chefs?” I said. “The archduke wishes to have more court chefs who can follow my recipes ready by next winter, and there is a chance he will take workers from the Italian restaurant. For that reason, I ask that you train their successors or some new candidates.”

Sylvester had mentioned not having enough chefs for the Archduke Conference, and I could guess that his first instinct would be to poach some from the Italian restaurant.

“Understood. I will start on that at once,” Freida replied, stiffening up a little and immediately opening her diptych to write down some notes.

That was the Italian restaurant matter settled, so I turned my eyes to the Plantin Company. Hartmut and Philine must have done the same from where they were standing behind me, as Benno, Lutz, and Mark all straightened their backs at once.

“For the Plantin Company, I have an update on the printing industry. Groschel has finished their preparations,” I said.

“Printing in Groschel...? I certainly did not expect them to prepare for the printing industry before building paper-making workshops,” Benno said, widening his eyes a little, but his mild surprise was quickly replaced with understanding when I explained that Groschel and Haldenzel were working together.

“Groschel, unlike Haldenzel, is planned to have paper-making workshops too. This means they will need both a Plant Paper Guild and a Printing Guild,” I reported. Mark and Lutz were busy noting this down in their diptychs, so I turned my attention to Gil, who was standing to my right, to give them more time. “Gil, please decide who from the Rozemyne Workshop we are going to use and prepare for their departure.”

“I divided them into teams according to your instructions, Lady Rozemyne. They should be ready to go whenever you need them,” he replied.

“Oh my. I would expect nothing less from one of my attendants,” I said with an elegant giggle.

Gil gave a small but proud smile upon receiving my praise. He normally would

have made his satisfaction more apparent, but that was hard to do with so many nobles present.

“From here, the archducal family and scholars will perform the final checks,” I explained. “Assuming there are no issues, the Gutenbergs will then be mobilized. Send word and ensure they are ready to leave when the summons are sent. I should also note, same as last time, that we are planning to mobilize them until this year’s Harvest Festival.”

“Understood. How will we be traveling this year?” Benno asked. Considering how much he had complained about the hardships of traveling by carriage, I could tell this was his way of asking to use my highbeast again. I personally saw no issue with that; Brunhilde was going to be heading to Groschel, so I was going there as well. Plus, as the person who wanted to spread the printing industry in the first place, I would do whatever I could to help them.

“We will travel via my highbeast,” I said. “Plan with that in mind.”

“We thank you. That information will prove exceptionally helpful.” Benno then turned around. “Lutz, the experimental pin.”

Lutz took a small pin out from a box he had been carrying and politely held it out to me. “Lady Rozemyne, this is the so-called safety pin you ordered. Johann’s disciple Danilo made it. If you are satisfied with the product, they said they can produce many more.”

I examined the safety pin from top to bottom, looking at it from every angle, before experimentally putting it on and taking it off again. It was made exactly to my specifications. It seemed that Danilo was Johann’s disciple for a reason.

“It is exceptionally well-made. Have Danilo make a good many more,” I said. I then lowered my voice to a low murmur. “Perhaps I should grant him the title of Gutenberg as well...?”

Lutz shook his head. “Johann said that he still has a long way to go. He needs to learn to make metal letter types before anything else.”

“As expected of the first Gutenberg—he is strict with high standards. Tell Danilo that I await the day he earns Johann’s approval,” I said with a smile.

Lutz nodded, his jade eyes crinkling into a smile in turn. “As you wish. I will

pass your words on to him. Now, regarding the formatted paper being produced in the Rozemyne Workshop, may we begin using it first in the lower city?" he asked.

The formatted paper had been made to avoid any confusion with paperwork when the merchants from other duchies arrived. Gil had informed me that the Plantin Company had already been trying it out, since its workers and those from the Merchant's Guild needed to be familiar with the forms before they were put to use.

"Certainly. I will purchase a sample and ask the archduke whether they may be used in the castle as well. Mark, how did the paper feel when the Plantin Company experimented with it? Does it make work easier?"

"It does. Having standardized forms made everything much easier," Mark said, deepening his smile as Lutz nodded along beside him. If it made work easier for the Plantin Company then I could surmise that the Merchant's Guild would adopt it readily.

"On this occasion, we made forms for the merchants of other duchies, but if you find them so useful, we could perhaps think of making forms for other purposes as well."

"If using standardized forms is your intention, I believe we would need to lower the price of paper so that smaller merchants can purchase them as well. More paper-making workshops would be productive to this end," Benno said, his eyes gleaming. Most merchants relied heavily on wooden boards, and he wanted us to lower the price of paper as much as possible so that he could steal their business. Benno often said that I was too hasty in my actions, but when it came to earning money, he seemed just as bad.

"It has been decided that more paper-making workshops will be established to aid the spread of the printing industry, but the exact number will depend on how many craftsmen can be assigned to work on them," I explained. "Securing more people is not an easy process, I assume?"

"Lady Rozemyne is correct, Master Benno—properly learning the paper-making process takes quite some time," Lutz said, having personally taught those in Illgner and Haldenzel. Benno muttered a few words of reluctant

understanding in response and sighed.

I giggled and then turned my eyes to Otto, Tuuli, and Theo—the trio representing the Gilberta Company. Tuuli smiled in response and raised the box in her hand ever so slightly, a silent appeal that the hairpins were inside. I gave a slight nod to indicate my understanding.

“I received word that the summer hairpins have been completed,” I said. “Tuuli, would you show them to me?”

“Here is yours. May it please you,” Tuuli said as she delicately removed the lid of the box. I could feel Philine lean forward slightly behind me, curious to see inside.

Inside the box was a hairpin decorated with two large, beautiful flowers. The center of the petals were blue, the divine color of summer, but gradually turned white as one approached the edges. It was an impressive feat, especially considering how hard it was to make flowers that matched the dark blue of my hair. Surrounding the petals were various leaves, including some yellow-green ones that would dangle about while I was wearing the hairpin. It was clear to see how much thought and effort Tuuli had put into making it.

“How do you like it, if I may ask, Lady Rozemyne?” Tuuli asked. Given the proud look on her face, however, she might as well have said, *“I worked pretty hard, huh?”*

I turned my head to the side so that my cheek was facing her. “Could you help me put it on?”

“As you wish.”

Hartmut and Philine took a few steps back, making way for Tuuli as she stepped forward with the hairpin, looking especially tense. She removed my current hairpin before slipping the new one into place. I could feel the faint sensation of the hanging leaves brushing against my ear.

“How does it look, Philine?” I asked. I would normally purchase my hairpins based on my personal thoughts alone, but this time I wanted a second opinion. And since I didn’t have any other female attendants with me, I was relying entirely on her evaluation.

Philine started examining the hairpin, viewing it from every angle while Tuuli anxiously clasped her hands together. After a long moment, she peered up again. “It is very beautiful, Lady Rozemyne.”

Tuuli exhaled with relief, her shoulders loosened, and a smile returned to her face. I put the hairpin I had previously been wearing back on and affectionately stroked the new one while looking between her and Otto.

“In that case, I shall buy this summer hairpin,” I said.

“You have our thanks,” Otto replied. “We also have here an outfit designed to match that hairpin. Tuuli designed it, and Corinna provided a few minor adjustments. What do you think?”

It was probably easiest to describe the outfit as a fancier version of the one I had worn during my lower city baptism. We had gotten a positive response from the alterations we had made over the winter, pinching up the sleeves and adding volume to the skirt, so she had gone all the way and designed an off-the-shoulder dress. The chest tuck was decorated with lace and incorporated a flower similar to the one on my hair ornament, albeit of a smaller size. Seeing the familiar outfit instantly filled me with nostalgia.

“I will soon be inviting the Gilberta Company to the castle, and I will ask that cloth suited for this design be brought for inspection,” I said. “I am extremely fond of what you have produced, but before I can order it formally, I must hear the thoughts of my mothers and attendants.”

The simple fact that Tuuli had designed the dress made me want to order one on the spot, but having more power didn’t always mean having more freedom. It was extremely likely that whatever I wore would have some kind of an impact on fashion trends, so I needed permission from Florencia and Elvira first. It was also important that I consult Rihyarda and Brunhilde, since they were already putting so much thought into my clothes.

“Thank you again. We shall await your summons,” Otto said with a smile. Tuuli was still looking especially proud, and it made me happy to know that she was working hard not just on hairpins, but on learning to make outfits as well.

Good luck, Tuuli. I believe in you.

“We also have with us two hairpins that we designed for Ella. I believe that either would suit her, but I have not seen what she plans to wear. Have you, Lady Rozemyne?” Tuuli asked. She had two hairpins in her hand, one white and one yellow. Both were decorated with plenty of small petals and differently colored leaves.

I hadn’t ever seen Ella wearing fancy clothes, but she was born in the spring, so I knew that whatever she wore would need to contain the divine color of green. It was clear that Tuuli had taken this into account when making the hairpins, since she had chosen a variety of colors that would match any kind of green outfit. I decided to go with a yellow one, since I thought it would best suit Ella’s hair.

“I shall take this one,” I announced, taking out my card and tapping it against Otto’s to pay. I would be purchasing my own hairpin and outfit later, since I still needed Ferdinand to give me the money for them. “How was the dyeing? Did the craftspeople work hard?”

“Oh, to say they worked hard is an understatement... Every single workshop finished its normal workload far earlier than usual in the hope of securing more time to do research. Things have been quite lively indeed,” Otto said, having visited each workshop himself.

Tuuli nodded repeatedly in agreement. Those connected to the dyeing industry were getting quite spirited, and it seemed that the young people in particular were striving to master these “new” techniques.

“Lady Rozemyne, may I have a moment to ask something?” Gustav interjected before glancing over at Otto. “The Gilberta Company sent a request to the Dyeing Guild. It seems that, at your suggestion, they intend to hold a large-scale dyeing competition.”

“That is correct. Did you yourself not say that it would be wise for me to acquire more exclusive relationships? I would like to see dyed cloth from all the workshops so that I might decide who to give my exclusive business to.”

I didn’t have very many exclusivity relationships with workshops, plus I had been advised to search outside of my usual group of Gutenbergs. It seemed reasonable enough to me, especially if competition would motivate the

craftspeople. I had admittedly decided on this dyeing competition on something of a whim, but since Elvira, Florencia, Brunhilde, and a number of others were already excited for it, there was no way of me stopping it now.

Gustav narrowed his eyes ever so slightly after I repeated his old words back to him. “I was also told that you are reviving old technologies, Lady Rozemyne. Do you have any particular thoughts on this matter?”

“Yes, I would like for some forgotten technologies to be revived, if possible. The existence of dyeing methods that allow for more than just single-color cloth would do the world much good. Variety is the spice of life, after all.”

“Variety...” the guildmaster repeated to himself while stroking his chin. Meanwhile, Freida was looking at me with equal parts amusement and perplexity.

“I understand your desires, Lady Rozemyne, but reviving old technologies is no simple matter,” she said. “There is simply not enough time before the end of summer.”

“Of course, I do not expect any of these techniques to be revived in less than half a year, and I am not demanding that anyone revive them either. I simply want a winter outfit made from wax-resist dyed cloth. The dyeing workshops and craftspeople can decide how to use the technologies that the Gilberta Company informed them of through the Dyeing Guild,” I said. We had given them a hint, and what they did with that information was up to them. “I would appreciate it if the Dyeing Guild were to write down any dyeing methods used this time to preserve them for future generations.”

“Preserving technologies? That is quite an interesting idea...” Freida said, blinking in surprise.

Gustav exhaled slowly. “In that case, am I right to assume this competition is being held at the end of summer no matter what?” he asked. I could guess that he viewed the whole situation as a massive pain in the neck, especially considering that Ehrenfest was going to be in a state of unprecedented chaos when the merchants of other duchies flooded in, but there was no helping it now.

“My initial aim was for this to be a private event, but upon reporting the idea

to my guardians, my adoptive mother the archduchess and several archnobles all expressed their interest. It is no longer something that I can stop with my own power," I said.

Everyone stared at me in shock, their eyes so wide that I worried they might pop out of their skulls. Benno in particular was wearing an expression that seemed to say, *"You never told me about this!"*

"The archduchess and several archnobles...?" Gustav asked. "It seems this event is going to be on a larger scale than I anticipated."

"I appreciate that, but considering that I began this competition for the sake of creating my winter outfit, it cannot be delayed until next year. Making clothes takes time. At most, we can delay things until the start of autumn. Any longer and the seamstresses will struggle."

Gustav exhaled again, his expression making it clear that he wanted to hold his head in agony, while Benno had a distant look in his eyes, as though he were recalling his struggles from back when Elvira had made so many unreasonable demands.

"That said, if one looks at this from another angle, this is also an opportunity for dyers to prove their skills to and gain the attention of nobles other than me. I assume this will serve to motivate the dyers even more, since they are more likely to come across clients who will appreciate their particular talents. To each their own, as they say."

If we introduced a voting system like we had done during the pound cake taste-testing event, there would be more dyers in the limelight, and thus more dyers winning exclusive business relationships.

"I imagine this is going to be a struggle for you as the guildmaster, since you must keep track of so many guilds at once, but please entrust this matter to the Dyeing Guild and focus on accommodating the merchants from other duchies," I said. "I will speak to the interested nobles about holding the competition at the start of autumn rather than the end of summer, and once the details are settled, we will inform the Merchant's Guild and the Dyeing Guild through the Gilberta Company."

And with that, the meeting was over. I returned to my High Bishop chambers

after seeing everyone off and asked Fran to prepare some ink and paper. There was still some time before dinner at sixth bell, and I wanted to spend it transcribing the book Hannelore had lent me.

“All those participating in that meeting had diptychs,” Hartmut noted. “Was that your doing, Lady Rozemyne?”

“Diptychs are quite convenient for commoners, as paper is too expensive for them to use comfortably. I believe my attendants and the Gutenbergs have spread them throughout the lower city, although their reach is limited, since so many are illiterate.”

“So you did not give the diptychs to them as gifts?”

“I gave them only to my temple attendants and a selection of the Gutenbergs. They spread from there on their own,” I said, which prompted Hartmut to give an exceptionally envious look. “If you would like one of your own, I could always introduce you to the Plantin Company.”

“No, I would have liked for you to gift me one yourself. If you gave them only to your temple attendants and the Gutenbergs, can they not be seen as a symbol of your faith?” Hartmut asked, which made me realize that I hadn’t given any particular gifts to my noble retainers.

“Given that not many of my noble retainers would be particularly happy with receiving a diptych, it might be best for me to think of something else. I will consult Ferdinand and come up with something.” I said.

Hartmut smiled. My saint legend had driven him somewhat off the deep end and it was troublesome, to say the least, but he was a skilled scholar, and it was a fact that he was of great help to me. I needed to praise my noble retainers just as I had praised Gil when he did his work, but this was a little more complicated. For commoners, I could simply gift them whatever they needed and express my praise through words, but I wasn’t sure how it worked with nobles.

I turned to my other retainers gathered in my chambers. “What would be considered an appropriate reward for a noble?” I asked.

“I want your mana, Lady Rozemyne!” Angelica cried out before anyone else

could speak.

"No! Lord Ferdinand forbade it!" Damuel and Cornelius shouted in unison, recalling the incident that had resulted in Stenluke. Indeed, the problem here was that I needed to avoid carelessly giving people what they wanted, even when it was well within my means.

"I will decide after asking Ferdinand what level of accomplishment is deserving of a reward, and what that reward should be," I stated. "Drawing a conclusion on my own will only lead to me getting scolded."

Cornelius laughed. "Right. Lord Ferdinand gives rather long lectures."

"I would be happy with whatever you chose to give me, Lady Rozemyne," Philine said. It was such an adorable response that I wanted to give her absolutely everything.

I really do need to ask Ferdinand first, though. He'll get mad for sure if I start giving out whatever I want.

As we spoke, the preparations for the transcribing were finished, meaning Philine and I could start working through Hannelore's book. Philine was copying the text exactly, while I was rewriting it in modern vernacular.

"This certainly is a hard book to read, what with all these old turns of phrase. How can you understand it so effortlessly?" Philine asked me.

"I am simply used to it. The first book I ever read was the bible, and so many of the other books in the temple are written in older language. Transcribing this will serve as a valuable experience for you."

"I'll do my best."

As Philine and I transcribed together, I noticed that Hartmut was also writing something down. "What are you writing there, Hartmut?" I asked him.

"I am working on my own research. I have discovered many new things today."

Wait... Is he referring to his research on me? Please, no! Stop!

Hartmut noticed that I was trying to stop him and set down his pen. He was wearing such a surprisingly serious expression that I unconsciously froze in

place with my hand outstretched toward him.

“Still, I never thought you were speaking with commoners on such equal terms,” he said. Most conversations between nobles and commoners consisted of no more than the nobles giving orders, so to Hartmut, who had worked with other scholars in the castle as an apprentice, commoners were little more than beings who arrived in audience chambers and silently listened to the commands they were given. “In the castle, they do not speak their opinions or give reports like that, not even to laynobles.”

“And that is something I find troubling. I would rather nobles pay more heed to those beneath them,” I said.

Philine looked rather pleased about my statement, but Hartmut seemed unconvinced, presumably because he was an archnoble and was thus used to others paying attention to him. I pondered the situation for a moment, wondering what I could say to make him understand.

“Although nobles are the ones to establish trends, commoners are the ones who actually create the trendy products. If one wishes to spread the trends they worked so hard to establish to other duchies, cooperation with commoners is essential. Ehrenfest has no doubt remained a bottom-tier duchy for this long precisely because it failed to understand this.”

“You believe so?”

“If we view this as nobles thinking up trendy goods and commoners making them, then nobles are the thinking mind while commoners are their hands and feet, no? Overloading commoners with unreasonable demands is no better than crippling one’s own arms or legs.”

Hartmut did not respond; instead, he pondered my words in quiet consideration.

“The Gutenbergs and all those who attended today’s meeting are like my arms and legs; without them, I would not have been able to make plant paper, nor would pound cake, karuta, or playing cards have ever come into existence. Commoners are also responsible for making our food and sweets. I merely come up with ideas; they are the ones who make them a reality. Thus, other nobles crushing the Gutenbergs is like them crushing my arms and legs.”

And that's precisely why I won't allow anyone to meddle with them.

I smiled, making my thoughts clear on my face.

"Understood," Hartmut said, seeming to have understood my intentions well. "I will take care such that your arms and legs are not crushed by other scholars."

"I hope that scholars one day understand how much they rely on commoners to make any significant progress, but parting from the way of thinking one has always known is never simple," I said with a sigh. Hartmut nodded in agreement, his brow drawn into a deep frown.

Going to the Italian Restaurant

The next day, I asked Fran to report to Ferdinand while I spent my time leisurely in the temple. It was my usual routine, but my day was far from ordinary. I called Ella over after breakfast to give her the specially made hairpin, saying it was a gift to celebrate her marriage, and she was so moved that she actually cried. Then, when I was practicing the harspiel with Rosina, Philine was watching me with such overwhelming awe that it was almost distracting. I started working on my dedication whirling shortly after, during which Hartmut asked why no blessings were being granted.

After third bell, I made my way to the High Priest's room with my guard knights and apprentice scholars. Ferdinand delegated work to all of my retainers—except Angelica, who was guarding the door with her life, as per usual—and then called me over.

"Rozemyne. I received a report from Fran. Is it true that you plan to return to the castle to finish your clothing?"

"It is a summer outfit, after all. If we do not hurry, the season will have come and gone. Not to mention, I must discuss the dyeing competition with my mothers."

"Hm. I suppose. Very well, then. I was also told that you are going to be visiting the Italian restaurant to speak with the lower city merchants. Know that I have decided to accompany you, both to forestall the danger inherent in leaving you without supervision and to observe the condition of the lower city since the entwickeln."

"So you say, but you're actually hoping to try the new menu, are you not?"

The only recipes of mine that Ferdinand knew were the ones he had purchased through Todd; there was no doubt in my mind that he was interested in more than just the state of the lower city. He responded only with a casually raised eyebrow, but his silence was more than enough to confirm my suspicions.

“My attendance is already set in stone,” Ferdinand eventually said, “but say nothing of this to Sylvester. If even a word of our plans reaches his ears, he will tag along for certain, and that is a mess we do not want to endure.”

“Something tells me the merchants will be *quite* motivated if the archduke himself arrives to speak to them...”

“This trip is scheduled for before the spring coming-of-age ceremony, correct? At the moment, some strange fervor has possessed Sylvester to actually begin going through his immense backlog of work. It is best not to disturb him now.”

Ferdinand was evidently set on blocking Sylvester from joining us. I agreed with his assessment for the most part, since having the archduke with us would only make things more complicated than they needed to be.

“Furthermore, regarding the interior of the orphanage director’s chambers...” Ferdinand continued, presumably having been informed of my retainers’ criticisms of my cheap furniture through Fran. I was afraid that he was going to push me to waste money, but my expectations were soon confounded in the best possible way. “The orphanage director’s chambers may remain as they are. Meetings with scholars from the castle will be held in the noble section of the temple, in rooms that are closer to the front gate. I have no intention of bringing nobles to the orphanage, nor do I know how they will respond to the blue priests. I intend to allow the scholars to go only where I can see them.”

“If that means I don’t need to buy new furniture then I agree entirely.”

“Indeed. I also intend to reuse the previous High Bishop’s furniture for the more formal meeting room.”

“Waste not, want not, as they say.” I nodded sagely as I voiced my agreement, which earned me an exasperated look from Ferdinand.

“However, the orphanage director’s chambers are a unique case. Remember well that you will need furniture appropriate to your status as the archduke’s adopted daughter in every other situation.”

I continued to nod as Ferdinand explained that this would most likely be relevant when it was time for me to get married. That was still a long time from now, so I immediately stopped thinking about it.

“Ferdinand, if you would allow me to change the subject... What would make a suitable reward for my retainers? I gave clothes and diptychs to my temple attendants, and those who work especially hard in the orphanage get dessert, but I do not know what to give nobles.”

For the girls, I could presumably get by with custom-made hairpins and new rinsham, not to mention the new dyed cloth. But for the guys? Absolutely nothing came to mind.

“If they are working according to their pay grade then nothing at all,” Ferdinand said. “Rewards are not necessary unless they have accomplished something quite remarkable indeed.”

As it turned out, being a retainer of the archducal family was considered enough of a reward in itself. The best thing I could do for them was to be a lady deserving of their service.

“I believe that will create a significant gap between them and my temple attendants...” I said. “If we were to assume they did accomplish some remarkable deed, what would make a suitable reward for them?”

“Something with a crest engraved on it. But such things are not to be given out lightly, so I would sincerely recommend that you discuss the matter with others before taking any action.”

We continued working with Ferdinand until fourth bell, and after eating lunch, I wrote a letter to Freida of the Othmar Company. I explained that I had been permitted to meet with them in the Italian restaurant, but that my guardian, Ferdinand, was going to be accompanying me. I also noted that we would be bringing two guards and one attendant each before asking for details on who the other expected guests were. As for the date, I asked them to select something that was at least five days from now, but three days before the spring coming-of-age ceremony. That would give me enough breathing room in case I fell sick during my commute between the castle and temple.

“Gil, deliver this to the Othmar Company.”

I handed over the letter before returning to the castle with my retainers. Upon my arrival, when I told Rihyarda that we were working with the Gilberta

Company to produce a new outfit, she rejoiced to high heaven.

“My, my, my! This must be the first time you’ve ever shown interest in one of your new outfits, milady!” she exclaimed, clearly excited that I was paying some mind to fashion. She was pretty much used to my leaving everything to my attendants and responding to her clothing-related questions with blatant disinterest. “Let us involve Ladies Florencia and Elvira as well.”

I had turned ten during my long sleep, which meant I needed to adjust the length of my skirts, even though I hadn’t grown at all. As it stood, I didn’t have any appropriate clothes. We ended up summoning Florencia’s and Elvira’s personal seamstresses as well as the Gilberta Company in order to complete the preparations for all of my summer clothes at once.

Two days after summoning the seamstresses, the ordering began. It seemed that I would be picking my outfits with Florencia, Elvira, and Charlotte. Sticking my grubby little hands into the dyeing industry when nobody was looking had apparently taught them to keep a close eye on me to prevent any other trends from spawning out of thin air. I needed to, quote, unquote, “be more thorough with my reports to those they concerned.”

Sorry... I just sprang into action right after thinking it up. I didn’t mean anything bad by it.

On the day of, Corinna arrived with her seamstresses in tow. Tuuli wasn’t with them; it seemed that while she was doing her best to learn etiquette, she wasn’t quite ready to visit the castle yet. It was a shame, but I pointed to the design she had made for me—which Corinna had spread out on the table—and sought permission from Florencia and the others to use it.

I rationalized my choice by saying how well-received my bubble skirt had proven during the winter, which prompted Florencia, Elvira, and Charlotte to peer over the design document together and start listing out minor adjustments.

“I believe this part could use a bit more decoration,” Florencia suggested. “It feels somewhat empty as is. Furthermore, the flower ornament on the chest here will do, but perhaps the flower ornaments on the skirt should be made larger?”

“What color is best?” Elvira asked. “These are summer clothes, so some shade of blue is the obvious choice.”

“I would recommend a light blue to better suit her hair color,” Charlotte replied. “Furthermore, let us use even more white lace. Doing this will make the outfit appear cooler and refreshing.”

The dress was altered to incorporate more lace and cloth, as was appropriate for nobles, but its core design had passed inspection. It came as a massive relief, especially when I had worried that it might be rejected wholesale.

Once we had finished ordering the light-blue outfit, our attendants began selecting the other designs. Brunhilde was working especially hard, teaming up with Rihyarda to carefully analyze each design before accepting or rejecting it. Lieseleta, however, was just walking around serving tea.

“I see you do not have much to say about the designs, Lieseleta. Are you uninterested in fashion?” I asked.

“I am going to be taking care of your winter dresses. My intention is to have them visually harmonize with Schwartz’s and Weiss’s outfits. It is a job I will not give to any other,” Lieseleta said with a smile full of anticipation. Wearing the same clothes as the shumils wasn’t an option, but she was burning with ambition to at least make them feel similar.

Well, she seems to be having fun, so... Okay.

“Speaking of which—we have scheduled the dyeing competition for the start of autumn, but where are we going to hold it?” I asked, looking at Florencia and Elvira as I sipped my tea. Had I been the only one evaluating the submitted cloth, we could have just summoned the craftspeople to the temple, but Florencia and Elvira had elected to participate as well. Hosting the competition in the castle was the safest option, but actually getting craftspeople inside would prove difficult.

“Given how many nobles are invited, it must be the castle,” Florencia said.

“We intend to bring craftspeople into the castle?” I asked, blinking in surprise.

Elvira looked at me with wide eyes, as though she had never expected to hear such a thing. “Of course not. What are you saying? We would never allow

craftspeople into the castle. Commoners are hard on the eyes; we do not need them walking around while we are attempting to judge which cloth will be the most popular."

Well, I suppose that makes sense... Not even Tuuli is allowed to visit the castle yet. Completely untrained craftspeople would never survive. I had thought that it might be an opportunity for me to see Mom, but reality was not so kind.

After brainstorming for a while longer, we decided to have the dyeing workshops entrust the Gilberta Company with their cloth, which we would then display in the castle. Each piece would have a metal plate beneath it displaying the name of the workshop that had dyed it, and we would vote on our preferred cloth over a tea party before selecting our preferred workshop and craftspeople.

Once I was finished with my business in the castle, I returned to the temple. The apprentices had training today, so only Damuel and Angelica were accompanying me as guards. Philine looked pale, since scholars of the archducal family would start training with the Knight's Order three days from now. A single shout from Bonifatius was apparently enough to wipe her mind and root her to the spot.

"In the event of an actual attack, loud voices are going to be the least of your concerns," I said. "Freezing in place will put your life at risk. Please do train to be able to escape from danger."

As we talked, I started writing a letter detailing the various decisions that we had made in the castle. Hartmut read it and then gave me a curious look. "You give commoners more details than I would expect, Lady Rozemyne."

"Of course. By conveying the desires of the nobility in simple terms, we make it easier for the commoners to understand them. They will answer our demands more promptly the more information they have."

I gave Hartmut the finished letter and asked him to create two more copies; we needed one for the guildmaster, one for the Gilberta Company, and one for the Dyeing Guild. As he started copying them out, and while Philine returned to transcribing the book from Dunkelfelger, I looked over Freida's response letter. Her writing was well-composed, indicating that she had experience writing for a

noble audience, and the elegance with which each word was written made it more than apparent that she had undergone a lot of calligraphy training.

It was a fairly thick letter listing each guest, their store, and the products they dealt in. There was even more detailed information regarding who had introduced the most other customers, who visited the restaurant most often, and what their recent profits were. Freida had scheduled the day of our visit for five days from now, and she concluded the letter by asking whether there were any foods that Ferdinand and I especially liked or disliked.

"Fran, Zahm, do you know of any foods the High Priest would rather not eat? Also, if you know of any foods he particularly enjoys, please do tell."

"I do not believe there is anything he dislikes enough to outright refuse. He will eat anything served to him," Fran replied.

"I believe he liked the soup served in the Italian restaurant the most," Zahm added. "He has said that his own personal chefs are yet incapable of providing the flavor he desires, that Hugo so masterfully accomplished."

I noted down everything they had learned through their attendant information network and fell into thought, wondering whether to include a recipe in my response to Freida. I answered the questions she had asked, wrote an explanation on how to make panna cotta, and then included some of the gelatin we had made when creating our hide glue.

If she leaps on the recipe, I'll sell her the production method for gelatin and have the Othmar Company start making it from now on.

"Zahm, instruct Gil to deliver this to the Othmar Company. Once that is done, inform the High Priest of the date of our visit."

"Understood."

After sending Zahm off, I needed to discuss preparations for the excursion with Fran. "Since I am going to the Italian restaurant, is it settled that Damuel and Angelica will serve as my guard knights?" I asked. "What about my attendants? I hesitate to bring those from the castle with me to the lower city."

"Your temple attendants will accompany you, myself included. We have been there before and therefore know what we need to bring."

I nodded in response. It seemed that I was safe leaving everything to him.

The day of our visit eventually came. Freida had sent two carriages to the temple such that we could arrive at the store around fourth bell. One was noticeably old, while the other was the newest model available.

My gray priest attendants climbed into the old carriage with dishes and various other implements they would need when serving us. Rosina was accompanying them, since she was going to be playing for us. Only after they had departed did I climb into the shiny new carriage with Angelica, Ferdinand, and Justus. Damuel and Eckhart were going to be guarding us outside the carriage.

"Why is Justus here?" I asked. "Did you not say we are using our temple attendants as our servers?"

"I am here as a guard, Lady Rozemyne."

Even after returning to noble society, Ferdinand apparently hadn't really taken on any new personnel. There were no guard knights who wanted to go to the lower city, so Justus was accompanying us this time just to round out the head count.

"Justus, the fact you did not contact the guard knights because you wanted to come yourself is a separate issue from whether they would have wanted to visit the lower city," Ferdinand said.

"I was simply being considerate, since I already knew what their response would be. I need to make good use of this rare opportunity to visit a store in the lower city aimed at the wealthy and locked behind an introduction system."

It seemed that not even Justus could find an easy way to enter the restaurant. As an archnoble he could not visit the lower city without an excuse, and although he could circumvent this with a disguise, he would then lack the authority to request an invitation from a rich merchant.

You know, for the introductions-only system to have shut even Justus out so thoroughly, it must be a lot more impressive than I assumed.

My thoughts were interrupted as the carriage started to move. Ferdinand

furrowed his brow slightly as he examined the interior. “Am I mistaken or is the carriage bouncing much less than last time?” he asked.

“Oh, yes. I had Zack of the Gutenbergs design a new carriage based on the technology I described to him. He truly is incredible,” I boasted. “And it seems the guildmaster wasted no time in implementing them.”

Ferdinand gave an exceptionally conflicted frown. “I had thought the Gutenbergs were concerned only with printing. Do you mean to tell me they are now designing carriages too?”

“Well, Zack is a smith; his work encompasses more than just the printing industry. He is also the one who made the pumps. You were there when we attached it to the temple well, were you not?”

“Ah... That smith was Zack,” Ferdinand murmured. “I had thought the Gutenbergs were busy expanding the printing industry, but if they have the time to produce designs such as this, they truly must be wanting for work.”

“No, they’re not,” I protested. “But unless they take on work that involves the lower city, their other patrons will abandon them.”

“I see commoner craftsmen have troubles of their own. I... Hm?”

Upon passing through the temple gate, we would usually be hit with the vile stench of the lower city... but the entwickeln and waschen had changed everything. The roads and the lower floors of the city’s buildings were as white and sparkly as those in the Noble’s Quarter. The wooden upper levels were still there, but the waschen had pretty much transformed the city.

“Amazing, isn’t it?” I said.

“We certainly need not fear the reproach of outsider merchants now...” Ferdinand remarked, looking around the lower city with a satisfied expression. I had worried that the commoners would undo all of our efforts in no time at all, but it seemed they were doing a fine job at keeping things clean.

This must be because of how hard Dad and the others have been working.

That said, the lower city felt so different from what I remembered that I struggled to relax. I found myself glancing all around, taking in all the new

sights, until we eventually arrived at the Italian restaurant.

A store employee opened the door for us to reveal twenty-plus large-store owners kneeling side by side in the entrance hall. Gustav spoke the lengthy greetings used for nobles; then we were taken to the dining hall. Several square tables were lined up in preparation for a large group to eat together.

Ferdinand and I were due to be seated in the chairs farthest from the door. Fran and the others were standing nearby, having arrived earlier than us, and Rosina was already playing the harspiel.

"This way, Lady Rozemyne." Freida guided Ferdinand and me to our seats as the soft music continued to play. Damuel and Justus guarded the door, while Eckhart and Angelica followed behind Ferdinand and me, respectively. I was able to identify my seat at a glance, since it had one of the cushions I often used in the temple on it. Fran graciously helped me up.

Empty plates were already laid out on the table. Ferdinand and I were next to each other at the narrow end of the long rectangle, and sitting nearby were Gustav, Benno, Otto, and several other familiar faces. Also at the table were the store owners who often gave the Italian restaurant their patronage, and the store owners who regularly worked with Benno and the others. The less familiar I was with them, the farther away they were seated.

Thank goodness. I'd much rather be seated near people I know than people I don't.

I glanced over at Benno and Otto with a smile before looking across all those gathered. "I thank you ever so much for coming here today. Freida, the manager, has told me how frequently you all patronize this restaurant."

I started naming and thanking the store owners who visited often to indicate that I was similarly invested in the restaurant. They widened their eyes in surprise, having never expected to be thanked so personally, and then gave proud smiles. Being recognized by the archduke's adopted daughter meant they could tell others they were a step closer to earning my favor.

"I have asked you all to gather today because I have a request for the major store owners who collectively represent Ehrenfest," I continued. It was hard to see those seated farthest away from me, but I could tell that their attention was

directed at me. “Our duchy is facing a time of great change...”

I went on to explain that Ehrenfest trends were spreading in the Royal Academy, and that while the number of merchants visiting from other duchies was limited now, there would soon be a great deal more coming to the lower city.

“Aub Ehrenfest hopes to use this opportunity to strengthen our influence with other duchies,” I said. “To that end, we need your assistance without fail.”

I explained that the city-wide magic had been used in preparation of welcoming the outsider merchants, and that it was up to the commoners to maintain the cleanliness of the lower city. I glanced over at Ferdinand and he gave a small nod, signaling for me to continue.

“However, preserving this beauty is not enough. The city of Ehrenfest has never welcomed so many merchants into its walls at once, so there will surely be chaos when they arrive. Gustav has already identified that there will not be enough accommodations of a high enough standard.”

Everyone nodded in response. “There may be one or two more inns established by next year, but they will not be ready in time for the merchants’ arrival,” one store owner said.

“That is why we are asking for your help. We need you to learn as much as you can about the cities of other duchies so that you may better accommodate our guests. If you require the assistance of nobles, I will do what I can to help. I will also use any information the Merchant’s Guild receives to make more informed decisions.”

There were quite a few store owners blinking at me in surprise, since nobles generally made no attempt to cooperate with commoners. I needed to ensure they were motivated, else our business with other duchies would suffer. And if our business suffered, *everyone* would suffer—the archduke, the nobles, *and* the commoners.

“Furthermore, it has been decided that two brides from Ahrensbach will be joining us at the end of summer. I imagine much work will need to be done to accommodate them as well.”

They would require new furniture, we would need more food to hold a welcoming feast, and there would be more people purchasing new clothes and ornaments. The marriages of nobles had always affected the economy, but the impact was going to be especially large this time around, what with everyone being so busy.

“There are plans for a competitive event to be held at the start of autumn,” I continued. “It is being overseen by the Gilberta Company and the Dyeing Guild, but many nobles are also involved, including the archduchess and various archnobles. I intend to give one participant my exclusive business and award them a new title related to fashion, in a similar vein to the Gutenbergs. I seek the assistance of any store owners who do business in fashion.”

The atmosphere of the room changed in an instant. “A new title?” some asked in slightly raised voices. Otto, in contrast, remained perfectly calm.

Having sensed that my speech was over, Freida approached me and asked whether I would like to begin the meal. Ferdinand nodded in response, so a number of employees came in and started serving drinks. Fran poured me a cup of somewhat sweet-smelling juice.

My plate was decorated with appetizers, a faux caprese salad made with pome, cheese, and herbs, and a cooked vegetable dish made with what looked to be broccoli and cauliflower. According to Freida, the vegetables had been cooked in consommé before being thoroughly grilled, so they were pleasantly infused with the thick flavor of the soup.

Once everyone had their food and drinks, Ferdinand stood up.

“O mighty King and Queen of the endless skies who doth grace us with thousands upon thousands of lives to consume, O mighty Eternal Five who rule the mortal realm, I offer thanks and prayers to thee, and do take part in the meal so graciously provided.”

Evolved Cooking

I decided to start with the caprese. I was pretty certain I had taught Hugo to cut the pome and cheese into slices for this dish, but here, the pomes had instead been cut into halves, hollowed out, and then stuffed with creamy cheese seasoned with herbs.

This is kind of hard to eat... It all falls apart the moment I cut into it with my knife.

I sliced into the caprese, taking extra care not to make a complete mess, and then tried a large mouthful. The slightly salty cheese brought out the sweetness of the pome, complemented by the gentle taste of the herbs.

Wow. It's so good...

My eyes widened. The mouthfeel was considerably better than that of a caprese made with slices. I could practically feel the chef's cooking spirit, driving them to make improvement after improvement in hopes of creating the tastiest meal possible.

Ferdinand narrowed his eyes in slight curiosity as he tried his own caprese. "This seems to taste better than what is served in the temple," he commented.

"An improvement born from how dedicated the chefs are to bettering their dishes, no doubt. The same ingredients can taste quite different when the mouthfeel and such are given such careful consideration. It seems that cooking progressed steadily while I was asleep. We certainly won't need to fear judgment from the merchants of other duchies."

I tried the broccoli and cauliflower next. It was scorched and crunchy on the outside, but the inside was soft and well-cooked. The sensation of biting into something cooked and having the taste of soup spread through my mouth was to die for.

I wonder whether Ferdinand likes it too. He is quite fond of consommé.

I glanced at Ferdinand. He was largely expressionless, but I could see that his

eyes were lowered, and a very subtle smile was playing on his lips. He was enjoying the taste to its fullest.

“This cooking style could be used on other vegetables as well,” I said. “It feels entirely like eating soup the shape of a vegetable.”

“It was my house’s chef who devised this dish,” Gustav noted. I immediately recalled Leise, who burned with the desire to improve her recipes and considered Hugo her rival.

“Is Leise experimenting with the food served in the Italian restaurant?” I asked. “I am surprised that this is better than it was two years ago.”

“She has been doubling her efforts ever since losing to your personal chef, Lady Rozemyne. I had her work the kitchen for this special occasion. She was extremely eager for you to try her new dishes.”

Gustav glanced toward the kitchen; Leise was apparently working hard for my sake. Even when I wasn’t handing out recipes, she, Hugo, Ella, and Nicola were coming up with one new dish after another through trial and error. Nothing could make me happier, since I wanted to spread as many tasty foods as possible.

“Leise always makes new recipes her own. I am quite fond of her experimental spirit,” I said.

“I have been told that you gifted us a new ingredient and a recipe several days ago. Leise was unfortunately unable to master them in time for today’s dessert. The texture is quite unique, and although it tasted excellent, she was not completely satisfied with her work,” Gustav said.

Leise had apparently experimented with the panna cotta, but she hadn’t been able to make anything of a good enough standard for her to feel comfortable serving today.

“Lady Rozemyne, what was that new ingredient?” Gustav asked. “Leise mentioned she would like more, but I could not identify what it was.”

It was gelatin made by cutting away the clearest parts during the glue-making process, simmering them like consommé, removing any scum and scraps, and then straining the resulting mixture. It was sure to expand the range of sweets

and meals one could make.

"I intend to sell the production method to Freida at a later date," I replied, which made all of the store owners look up at once. Gustav was completely taken aback, while Benno, who was sitting beside him, shot me a sharp look. His dark-red eyes narrowed slightly as he leaned forward to speak.

"You intend to sell the production method to Freida?" he repeated, as if making sure he had heard me correctly.

"Freida protected the Italian restaurant during the two years I was asleep, and she has facilitated the advancement of cooking in the meantime, as we can see. I will teach her the production method as a reward—after she pays me an appropriate fee, of course."

Besides, there's no point in me selling anything cooking-related to you, Benno, is there?

The Plantin Company already had their hands full with their own work. They were so busy, in fact, that they were having to go on frequent trips to other provinces to spread the printing and paper-making industries. I had heard they had so little manpower to spare for the Italian restaurant that they had entrusted everything to Freida.

I was a coinvestor in the Italian restaurant, and since my name alone served as marketing to draw in customers, I received a reasonable portion of its profits. That said, I hadn't done anything since offering the initial investment and providing some recipes. It seemed more efficient for me to just give any new recipes to Freida.

Not to mention, the Othmar Company prepared a lot of pound cakes for the Interduchy Tournament, which must have been pretty rough on them. This has to be okay.

"The Plantin Company has nothing to fear—I understand that it is unwise to offer production methods at a lower price, so the fee I request will be more than reasonable," I said, puffing out my chest.

Benno's lips curved into a slight frown to show how little he was amused. I could only assume there was something else bothering him, aside from his

worries that I might charge too low an amount. But as I tilted my head in confusion, Ferdinand softly called my name.

“Rozemyne. Rewarding those who protected the Italian restaurant and aided in the development of cooking techniques is an understandable—if not entirely normal—response. It is also understandable to reward the Gilberta Company for successfully completing an order for royalty. And have you also rewarded the Plantin Company for dedicating themselves to spreading the printing industry?”

“...Ah.”

They were working hard to accelerate the process simply because I wanted things done faster, but when it came to rewards, the Gilberta Company had received nothing more than my new dyeing techniques. These weren’t something they could earn much of a profit from, since I was selling them at a rather low price, but hosting the dyeing competition would secure the Gilberta Company some important noble exposure while also increasing its influence.

However, although I had praised them for their efforts, I hadn’t given the Plantin Company or the Gutenbergs any rewards of particular note.

I suppose I do have other product ideas I could sell to them, if they’re willing to suffer the consequences.

I looked over at Benno and Mark with a hand on my cheek. “There are various kinds of stationery that I am interested in having made, and if the Plantin Company so wishes, I would not particularly mind selling the rights to them and their production methods. I must warn you, though—doing this will require the Plantin Company and the Gutenbergs to take on even more than they have already. Are you sure this is what you want?”

Benno faltered for a moment, and Mark averted his eyes. But an instant later, Benno responded with a nod, now wearing the calculating smile of a merchant. “We will gratefully accept any product ideas you have,” he said. I could tell from the look in his dark-red eyes that he wanted the rights to anything printing-or paper-related, no matter how busy he became as a result. That was fine by me, but the trip to Groschel came first.

“Then we may speak of this another time,” I said. “Once things have settled

down a bit."

"Your consideration honors us," Benno replied.

Just as I thought everything was settled, Ferdinand shot me a deliberate look, the corners of his lips curving up into a grin. "So, now you have rewarded *all* those who devoted themselves to labor during the two years you were asleep: the Plantin Company, the Gilberta Company, and the Othmar Company."

In other words, "give me something too"? Sure, sure. I get you.

Ferdinand hadn't just helped me while I was asleep either; he was taking good care of me even now that I was awake again. I was more than happy to reward him with something so long as he was direct about it, but his normal bored expression made it impossible to tell whether he cared about this at all.

"As you have also greatly assisted me, Lord Ferdinand, I am more than willing to give you what you desire. Is there something I have that you seek?" I asked.

"The recipes made by your chefs. Even more have accumulated over time, correct?"

It was hard to imagine that a few recipes was enough of a reward, especially considering how much he had done for me by helping me gather potion ingredients and make Schwartz's and Weiss's outfits, but I wasn't about to question what he wanted. If recipes were enough for him, then recipes he would receive.

"Very well. I shall offer you Hugo's recipes. I plan to compile and sell them as a recipe book, however, so please do keep them a secret."

"Naturally."

More soup was brought over for Ferdinand, who was pleased at having acquired what he wanted. Freida had even come over with a sheet of paper to explain the dish to him and me.

She sure has grown up...

She had always been seated too far away or standing beside Tuuli, who had... very good proportions, so the realization had completely passed me by. Now that I could see her up close, however, I could tell that she had grown up a lot.

The Devouring meant she had been fairly small when I first met her, but now she was as big as any other girl her age.

Hopefully I'll grow up too, soon...

I let out a sigh, comparing my hand to Freida's as she began to explain the menu.

"Today's soup is a double consommé."

It seemed that Ferdinand was somewhat dissatisfied with the consommé served in the temple, since although the temple chefs were good, they were not quite as good as Hugo. Fran and Zahm had passed that information on to me, which I had then passed on to Freida, so she had prepared one of his favorite dishes: double consommé.

"I am told that you enjoyed Hugo's consommé, Lord Ferdinand. Our chef so eagerly wishes to outshine Hugo, so she has made the most carefully produced consommé of our time. Please do enjoy."

Leise had apparently put her all into making the amber soup before us, determined not to be beaten by Hugo. The taste practically carried on the steam that wafted into the air, such that the aroma alone was enough to make one's stomach grumble. It was pure enough that the bottom of the bowl was clearly visible through the liquid, and the thick color showed it had been made with the utmost care.

I brought a spoonful of consommé to my lips. The concentrated flavors of various vegetables and meat flowed through my mouth like a river of ambrosia.

"Is the soup beautiful, Lord Ferdinand...?" I asked.

"Yes, it is a picture of beauty," Ferdinand replied. He was wearing a soft smile that seemed to come from the heart—an especially rare sight indeed. "Its flavors are more complex than those of the consommé I recognize, but they are simultaneously more unified. The creation process is similar to brewing in that one changes not only the quality of the ingredients, but the brewing process itself. Not just the ingredients have changed, but also something fundamental about the recipe itself."

I didn't understand a word of what you just said, Ferdinand...

He was being more verbose than usual, expounding how challenging it was to rethink a process from the ground up and how beautiful of a success their efforts had produced. I couldn't follow in the least.

Oh well. He seems to like it so whatever.

Ferdinand enjoying the... beauty... of the consommé was good enough for me, but Freida was looking at him in surprise, as though she hadn't at all expected such a response.

"I am surprised. You are entirely correct, Lord Ferdinand. Egg whites diminish the flavor somewhat, so our chef poured much time and energy into developing an alternative way to strain the scum. I personally did not notice how this changed the taste, but I suppose those who understand, understand. The chef will surely be delighted to hear this."

It's impressive that Ferdinand can notice such a minor difference, but it's even more impressive that Leise achieved something like this in the first place...

A sigh of admiration escaped me, but then I realized—if Ferdinand had such a sensitive tongue, how in the world did he manage to make potions that taste so ungodly awful? Surely a single drop of that stuff would kill him.

"This is the carbonara."

The consommé was followed up with carbonara. The rich sauce had been made with egg yolks and thick cream and was decorated with crispy bacon. I twirled some of the spaghetti around my fork and watched excess sauce begin to flow down. Upon taking my first bite, taking care not to drip any sauce, the first thing I noticed was the strong taste and sticky texture of the cheese.

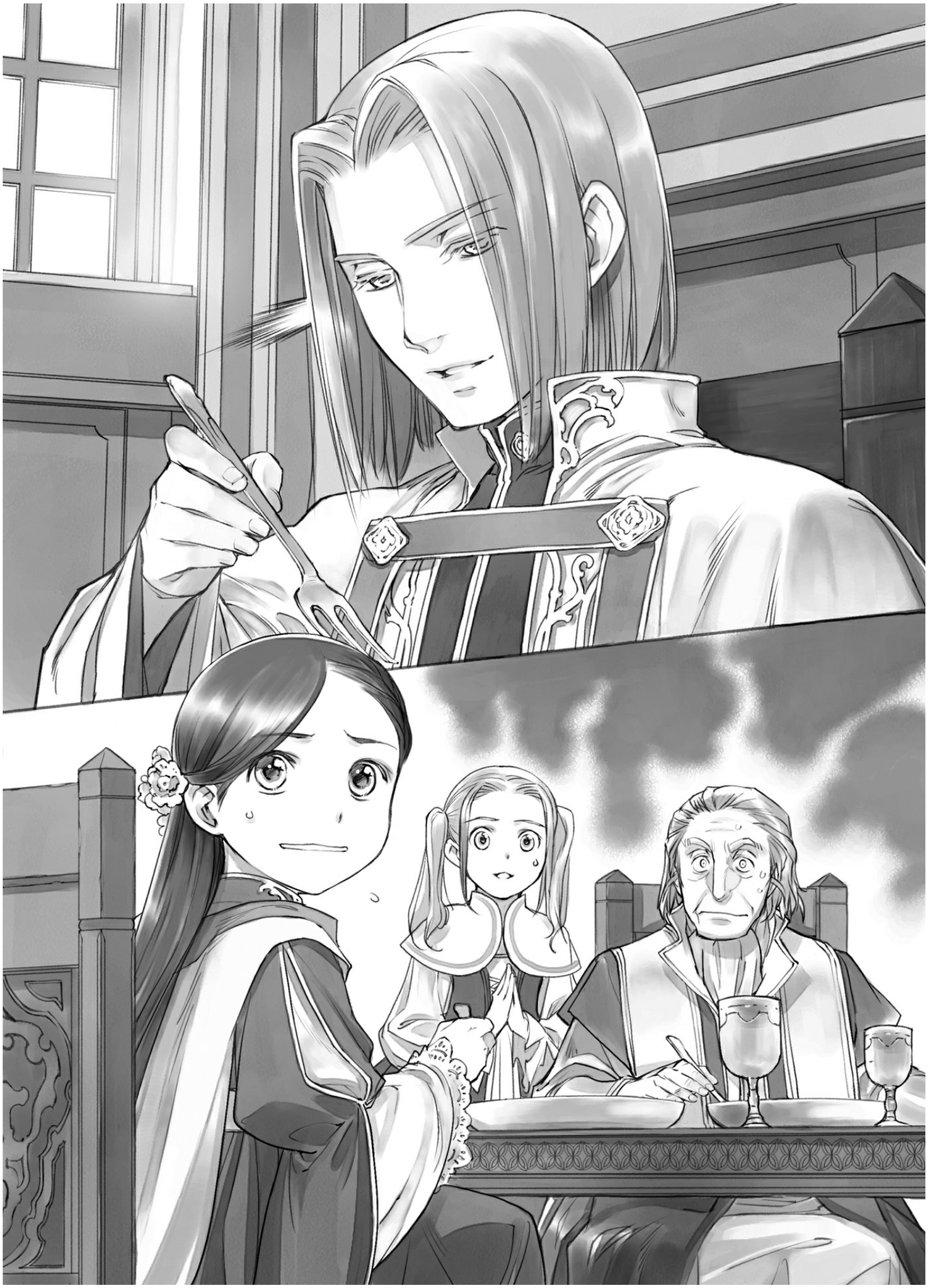
This is better than Hugo's too...

Leise had probably used some consommé as well. It wasn't what would be considered carbonara back home, but it was a solid step better than the recipe I had taught them.

"Rozemyne, this is quite unlike what you taught my chefs, is it not?" Ferdinand asked, fixing me with a stern glare after trying some himself. He could glare all he wanted, but I wasn't getting to eat this stuff either.

“This is the result of the chef striving for greater heights in the two years I was asleep,” I said. “It is clear that great strides have been made since I shared the recipes. Not even I was expecting this much progress...”

“Oh? I find myself wanting this chef...” Ferdinand muttered. The look in his light-golden eyes was so serious that I recoiled despite myself. Freida and Gustav did the same before glancing at me fearfully, afraid that Leise might be taken from them. Their silent pleas for me to intervene came through loud and clear.



Your cries have been heard, citizens. I shall save the day and stop Ferdinand, somehow.

I responded with a reassuring nod. Meanwhile, I could feel Benno and Otto looking on in amusement, like they were watching an entertaining show of some kind. They had no intention of helping whatsoever.

“Ferdinand, I trust that you would not use your wealth and authority to steal away their chef,” I said. “Leise is essential for the continued success of the Italian restaurant.”

“I am aware, but the thought that commoners are the ones who get to enjoy these dishes is deeply concerning...” Ferdinand replied. These enhanced recipes were the fruit of Leise’s labor, but he would naturally feel conflicted about commoners having such easy access to better food than nobles.

“This is osso buco,” Freida said as a new dish was brought out. “It is made by thoroughly cooking the thigh of a calf on the bone in pome sauce and Dunkelfelger-made vize.”

The glistening brown veal was covered in pome sauce, which also glistened thanks to the juices of the meat. This dish apparently used a type of wine made in Dunkelfelger that only rarely made its way to Ehrenfest. I had taught Hugo recipes using locally produced wine, but it seemed that Leise had used Gustav’s connections to search out the absolute best product for the job.

The Othmar Company is also pretty impressive, spending this much money on Leise’s experiments.

It was because they knew the experimentation would pay for itself with increased sales, but even so, the costs must have been exorbitant. I concluded it was best for Leise to keep cooking as she liked under Gustav’s patronage.

Besides, if they were willing to let Leise go, I’d snatch her up before Ferdinand even had the chance.

I paused my thoughts to cut into the osso buco. My knife sliced right through, and the veal practically fell off the bone. It was rare to see such tender, well-cooked meat here.

“Ooh.”

With hope swelling in my heart, I cut off a large chunk of veal, thoroughly soaked it in pome sauce, and then brought it to my mouth. This particular pome sauce seemed to have been made with a variety of chopped-up vegetables, as it tasted sweeter and more complex than what I was used to.

I wiggled in place, reveling in the sensation of the tender meat melting on my tongue, only to notice that Ferdinand was now looking at the food with calculating rather than admiring eyes. It seemed that he was starting to quite seriously plot how to take Leise away.

“Ferdinand, my chefs may not be as dedicated to improving their art as Leise, but they have likewise spent the past two years devising new recipes of their own. Your own chefs have not produced any such new recipes, have they?”

“Now that you mention it, I suppose no new dishes of note have been served...” Ferdinand replied, raising an eyebrow as if to ask what I was getting at.

I shrugged and took another bite of the osso buco. “That would be your fault, Ferdinand.”

“Explain.”

“Chefs are motivated to improve when you give feedback on their changes—telling them which meal was better, which flavors you preferred, what ingredients you wish for them to use, and so on. Impressions and requests make all the difference. It is due to your apparent lack of interest—your tendency to order the same thing over and over again—that your own chefs have not been able to grow.”

Ferdinand ordered his favored consommé on a heavy rotation and carefully checked to make sure it tasted the same each time. As a result, his chefs had no time to focus on improving their skills; instead, they atrophied from following the exact same recipe with practiced perfection.

“I see... It seems that I need to train not only blue priests, but chefs as well.”

“Your own personal chefs should specialize in catering to your preferred tastes. Even if you were to take Leise to the temple, it is hard to say whether

she would maintain the passion for experimentation she has now," I said to Ferdinand, taking another bite of osso buco while desperately apologizing to his chefs on the inside.

I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. He's probably going to work you to the bone now!

As Ferdinand made the decision to train his own chefs rather than stealing away one that someone else had spent so much time and money on, it came time for dessert. Today we were having brahre shortcake. It seemed that Leise basically never overcooked or burned sponge cake anymore; it was soft and tender, covered with pure white cream, topped with thin slices of brahre that had been soaked in wine and arranged in the shape of a flower.

Mm... I may want to make various piping tips for the pastry bags.

The fruit decoration was rather fancy, but the cakes were still somewhat plain compared to the ones I was used to back on Earth. For one, they could have done something more extravagant with the cream. That thought made me realize—I had seen round tips being used to pipe ingredients and such, but not once had I seen any that were fancier shapes.

"Perhaps I should ask Hugo. And if they don't already exist, I could ask Johann..." I muttered to myself as I took a bite of the cream-covered cake. Of course, Benno overheard me with his bionic hearing and shot me a wary look.

"Lady Rozemyne, do you have immediate plans to make something?" he asked. "Johann is presently quite occupied making pumps to attach to as many wells as possible before the merchants from other duchies arrive." He was chastising me for even thinking about loading more work onto them during such a busy time, and understandably so—pumps were more important than piping tips for pastry bags.

"It does not have to be Johann; Zack or Danilo could make it instead. I will send the schematics at a later date. Now that you mention it, however, we certainly are lacking in available smiths, aren't we? It may be wise to recruit a few more into the Gutenbergs."

The other store owners all pricked their ears up at once, directing their focus our way. Upon seeing this, Benno slowly shook his head. "I believe it would be best to save such a matter until after the event with the Dyeing Guild," he said.

“Are you not quite busy at the moment, Lady Rozemyne?”

Despite his polite words, his furiously blazing eyes made his true message clear: *“Stop! Rampaging! Around!”*

I considered my schedule and nodded; I certainly didn’t have the time to spare on this kind of endeavor. “I suppose we lack the time to leisurely select a new smith. I shall trust the Gutenbergs to produce a steady stream of apprentices,” I said. And with that, the meeting at the Italian restaurant came to an end.

“Here are the chefs who provided today’s meals,” Freida said as we were leaving. There was a row of chefs lined up at the entrance hall, and among them was Leise, wearing the smile of a job well done. Our eyes met and I returned the smile.

“Thank you for the meal,” I said. “Lord Ferdinand and I were both quite satisfied. We have no qualms about trusting this establishment to serve the merchants who will be visiting the city. I commend the advances you have made during my two-year absence.”

Leise shut her eyes tightly for a moment. She clenched a trembling fist, exhaled slowly, and then gave a proud smile. “Thank you. We await your future patronage.”

Visiting Groschel and the Starbind Ceremony

The lunch meeting in the Italian Restaurant ended with great success, and to reward Freida and the Plantin Company for working so hard over the past two years, I taught them the production methods for gelatin and ring binders, respectively.

“So this helps organize large quantities of paper? It seems quite useful...” Benno said, having already shifted to using plant paper for everything he could. He seemed especially interested in the binders and said that he would start producing them as soon as he could, although he would want to get one of his own first.

“And we of the Othmar Company will need to prepare workshops to make gelatin, I suppose.”

“The smell is quite intense,” I warned, “so I would advise that you build it near a farming town with many pigs.”

“I thank you ever so much. We shall consider it.”

Finishing the gelatin would really broaden the scope of what kinds of products they could make. I purchased Leise’s improved recipes, and things ended without the exchange of much more money.

“Rozemyne, the final checks are done! We can head to Groschel!”

Wilfried contacted me by ordonnanz right after the spring coming-of-age ceremony was over. He spoke with the exuberance of a job well done, and not long after, Elvira sent me an ordonnanz as the person in charge of the printing industry. Since the final checks had now been done, I would be heading to Groschel once the summer baptism was over.

I told my plans to the Plantin Company right away and asked them to contact the Gutenbergs. At the same time, I had the Gilberta Company prepare clothes for the gray priests. I also contacted the workshop through Gil and updated

Ferdinand on the situation.

After contacting my castle attendants via ordonnanzes, I formally decided on bringing Brunhilde along with me, since we were going to her family home. I would also need two apprentice scholars and two guard knights.

And so, two days after the summer baptism ceremony, we departed for Groschel. We met up with the Gutenbergs at the front gate of the temple just as we had done when heading to Haldenzel. Since there were so many of them and they had so much luggage, I was using Lessy in his coach bus form.

“Wow, the heck is this thing?! It’s so cool!” Heidi exclaimed, her eyes sparkling. She practically dived into Lessy before anyone else, leaving all the luggage to her husband Josef, and squealed with joy as he hopelessly shouted for her to come back out and help him. “So soft! So fluffy! So nice to touch! What in the world is this made of?!” she asked while patting the inside of my Pandabus all over.

Ingo looked at Lessy with mild repulsion—and at Heidi too, for that matter—but upon seeing Benno, Damian, and Lutz casually checking and loading their luggage alongside Zack and Johann, he clenched his fists to pump himself up and joined them.

“Lady Rozemyne,” Gil said. He had just arrived at the front gate with the gray priests and the workshop’s luggage.

The gray priests were wearing secondhand clothing of a quality similar to what Plantin Company apprentices would wear, since they were going to be doing work outside of the temple and cooperating with scholars. Upon returning from Hasse’s monastery, I had noticed them sometimes checking their necks and pulling on their sleeves.

“They find formal clothing a bit uncomfortable, since they’ve only ever worn work clothes and priest robes. They may need a little time to adjust,” Gil explained with a half-smile. He had gone on enough trips with the Plantin Company that, unlike the other gray priests, he was completely used to wearing outdoor clothing. “There is something nostalgic about this. It feels like such a long time since I last went on a lengthy trip with you, Lady Rozemyne.”

“I suppose the last time was when we went to Illgner,” I replied. He hadn’t

come to Haldenzel for their Spring Prayer, so it really had been a long time since we last went somewhere together. The realization made me look forward to the journey ahead just a bit more.

After everything was loaded into Lessy, Angelica climbed into the passenger seat and the Gutenbergs onto the back seat. The first-time riders wore stiff, anxious expressions, while those who had ridden before swiftly put on their seat belts and relaxed. Heidi was an exception to both groups—she was curious and wiggling around more than anyone.

"Farewell. Remember to prop Wilfried up during even the smallest of conversations and avoid causing any problems. Ensure this does not become another one of your rampages," Ferdinand said.

"I know. I have sent Hugo to your kitchen, so you should be able to enjoy a few new recipes in my absence."

Ferdinand and Fran saw us off as I took Lessy up into the air. We met up with Elvira and the others at the castle before heading to Groschel under the protection of the Knight's Order. Wilfried and Charlotte were sitting this one out, so we were having some layscholars come with us instead. I could see Damuel's older brother Henrik flying among them.

Groschel was some distance beyond the river west of Ehrenfest. It had once been part of the Central District, but when the archduke candidate previously set to become the next archduke had married Gabriele of Ahrensbach, thereby taking himself out of the running, he had been given some of the archduke's land to become a giebe.

Had Gabriele never married into Ehrenfest, that archduke candidate would have become the next archduke, and Brunhilde might have been an archduke candidate right about now. In short, Groschel was the home province of both Veronica and the late High Bishop Bezewanst. Its giebe's current wife was of direct Leisegang lineage, and he had refused to accept Bezewanst's belongings following his death.

"Welcome, Lady Rozemyne. And Brunhilde, it is good to see you well," Giebe Groschel said. We exchanged our long formal greetings and then, while Elvira was speaking to the giebe, Brunhilde went to prepare my room. She apparently

wanted to console her family by showing that she was serving me as a more than competent attendant.

After watching Brunhilde go, I introduced the Gutenbergs to the scholars Giebe Groschel had chosen to be in charge of his province's printing industry. Setting things up in Illgner and Haldenzel had both required lengthy stays, so the Gutenbergs were going to be staying in the side building used during Spring Prayer and the Harvest Festival.

Once the introductions were over, everyone but Benno and Damian carried their luggage to the side building and started preparing their rooms.

"What about the workshop luggage?" Benno asked. "Should we set it down for now?"

"If possible, I would like it brought to the workshop by the end of today," I replied. "Unloading it from my highbeast only to put it back in tomorrow would be a waste of time. Now, I would ask that someone guide me to the workshop."

"Erm... You'll be visiting the lower city, Lady Rozemyne...?" one of the layscholars asked, balking at the very idea. That attitude wouldn't do. Benno, Damian, and the more experienced scholars were already discussing our next steps.

"But of course," I replied. "I inspected the state of Illgner's and Haldenzel's printing workshops myself. Plus, Wilfried has already been here in Groschel and checked the workshop personally. Is there anything strange about me following in his footsteps?"

"I suppose not, but... we layscholars so often serve as liaisons between commoners and the nobility that I never thought archnobles and archduke candidates would carry out such tasks themselves."

"It is important to make sure everything is in order, and you are all going to be accompanying us," I said, giving an order to the scholars. Philine and Hartmut obeyed at once, so the layscholars naturally followed suit. "The Gutenbergs have work first thing tomorrow, correct? How long will signing contracts with the Plantin Company take?"

"I do not think that is a matter you need to worry about, Lady Rozemyne."

“I cannot return to Ehrenfest until the job is done. I will not leave my precious Gutenbergs alone without any security.”

As land that had once been part of the Central District, Groschel was quite different from Illgner and Haldenzel, provinces where the nobles practically lived among the commoners. Here, the castle came off almost like a second Noble’s Quarter, and the inside was strictly delineated from the lower city. Perhaps it was unwise for us to approach this province in the same way we had the others. Sensing that, I put on my most pressuring smile, indirectly telling the scholars to consider the Gutenbergs my archducal property.

“Lady Rozemyne, I do not believe you will need to attend this meeting,” Brunhilde said, expressing resistance to the thought of me sitting at the same table as commoners. However, if the nobles here in Groschel wanted to join the printing industry, they would first need to understand how everything worked.

“As the scholars here are unused to this work, I will need to observe this as a figure of authority. You accompanied us here to see Groschel’s new industry begin with your own eyes and under the influence of your own guidance, did you not?”

“...I shall accompany you.”

Although Giebe Groschel, Brunhilde, and the laynobles raised in the Noble’s Quarter were all surprised, I climbed into Lessy with the Gutenbergs and went to the printing workshop in the commoner’s district. My Pandabus seemed to have deeply unsettled the commoners, and the older guy who seemed to be the foreman welcomed us with his mouth agape.

“These are the Gutenbergs, who shall henceforth be directing you,” I said. “They will only be staying here in Groschel until the Harvest Festival. Use this time to master their techniques so that you may run the printing workshop yourself once they are gone.”

After the introductions were finished, the parts for the printing press were carried in and set down. Then, once that was done, it was time to visit the paper-making workshop. It had been constructed right beside a small river, and after we brought in some tools, I introduced Gil and the other gray priests.

The next day, discussions over the Plantin Company's contract began under my supervision. It took several days to iron out all of the details, and I used that time to bring my retainers and the layscholars—Henrik included—to the workshops, where I demonstrated my willingness to interact with commoners. Brunhilde was initially taken aback by the prospect of entering the lower city, but when I said that the printing industry was going to be our next trend, she bit her lip and forced herself to come along.

"I see your passion for trends is well and true, Brunhilde. I am moved."

"My, were you testing me, Lady Rozemyne?" Brunhilde asked, narrowing her amber eyes. I looked at her head-on and gave a firm nod.

"Indeed. I wanted to see just how much I can rely on you, and it seems I can trust you with practically all matters related to trends. That is relieving to know."

Brunhilde gave me a conflicted smile, half glad to have been recognized and half uncertain about being praised for essentially conceding to accompany me to a workshop. Meanwhile, Damuel was smiling sympathetically at Henrik and the others, who were blinking in shock at how differently I handled things than all the archnobles they had worked with.

"Lady Rozemyne is something of an iconoclast," Damuel said. "Even when you think you have grown used to her revolutionary ways, you will soon find yourself surprised yet again, Brother."

"I know that now. It seems that adjusting will prove quite difficult..." Henrik said with a bemused smile, but he had been selected specifically because he was a young scholar who was fairly used to dealing with commoners. We went to the workshop several times over the next few days, where I would arbitrate between the Gutenbergs and the craftspeople, Hartmut would consult the Gutenbergs, and Philine would ask the craftspeople questions. It wasn't long before Henrik was talking and asking questions in the same way.

Looks like he's just as adaptable as Damuel. They really are brothers.

"I had the scholars for this job selected based on their ability to heed the advice of commoners," I said. "You shall be treasured for your role here, Henrik, as you are capable of speaking to commoners without lording your status over

them. I am glad to have you working in the printing and paper-making industries."

After hearing me praise Henrik, the other scholars got used to things fairly quickly. If they continued growing as they were, we would soon have an entire group of scholars who could actually speak with commoners.

On my last day in Groschel, Giebe Groschel, with whom I had only spoken during meals, looked me in the eyes and said, "I see. Now I understand why Brunhilde and Elvira said you think in fundamentally different ways from us." That was probably his way of saying that I was completely unlike a proper noble, but I didn't care, since I was getting the results I wanted.

The time soon came for Benno and me to return to Ehrenfest. We departed in my Pandabus, leaving the other Gutenbergs in Groschel to continue their work.

Word came in that paper-making workshops had been successfully established in many parts of the duchy. The days passed steadily as I continued sending Plantin Company workers and gray priests to various provinces and coordinated with the paper-making instructors in Illgner via ordonnanzes.

"Hugo and Ella have their Starbinding tomorrow, don't they?" I asked.

"There is a ceremony in the Noble's Quarter as well, so we must plan accordingly..." Fran said with a light sigh. Since two of my personal chefs were getting married, Nicola would be alone in the kitchen tomorrow. Monika would go to help her, but then we would need a female attendant to take care of me.

"Don't worry about it," Hugo said, having been called over by Fran. He was grinning from ear to ear, not even trying to hide how thrilled he was. "We already did all the prep work needed for Nicola to handle things on her own tomorrow."

Still, that didn't change the fact that Nicola was going to have her hands full tomorrow, especially since she would need to judge when the ceremony was close to finishing and prepare lunch for me.

"Tomorrow is no doubt going to be a struggle for her, but she was smiling

happily in celebration of the wedding. She said she will do her best for you two. Hugo, show some spirit as well and protect Ella from the taues."

It was a customary part of the lower city's Star Festival to throw taues at newlyweds once the ceremony in the temple was over. The grooms would need to protect their brides from the fruit and run to their new homes, but that was easier said than done when there were so many jealous bachelors and bachelorettes among the crowds. Hugo knew this all too well, considering that he had been among them during the previous years' ceremonies, throwing taues as hard as he could.

"You can count on me. I'll laugh off all those sad, single men who can't even secure themselves a bride. I'm the star of the show now," Hugo said with a grin. It was good to see him so motivated. Ella had much to do in preparation for her big day, so she had today off work, but I was hopeful that I would get to see her in her bridal getup tomorrow at the temple.

I noticed that Damuel was glaring daggers at Hugo, having not taken too kindly to his words as one of the aforementioned "sad, single men," but I boldly elected not to draw attention to it. I had already hired Elvira's expert services for him; there was nothing more I could do.

The day of the Starbind Ceremony arrived, and I started my preparations early in the morning.

"Lady Rozemyne, I am leaving for the orphanage."

"Take care of the children, Fritz."

Gil was still in Groschel, so Fritz graciously offered to take the orphans to the forest to gather taues. He was used to it now, since he had previously taken them during my trips to Illgner and Haldenzel.

"Now then, Lady Rozemyne. Let us head to the chapel," Fran said. I took extra care not to step on the hem of my skirt as I went with him, and along the way, Damuel leaned over and whispered to me.

"Lady Rozemyne, will Lady Elvira be introducing me to someone tonight?"

"I suppose only Mother knows the answer to that."

“You could have asked her ahead of time...”

Elvira was extremely busy running her estate, expanding her faction, working on the printing industry, and preparing to welcome Lamprecht’s bride. I could only pray that she hadn’t forgotten about Damuel.

“The High Bishop shall now enter,” Ferdinand said from inside the chapel, signaling the gray priests standing outside to open the doors for me. That was the end of my chat with Damuel, and I entered the chapel with Fran carrying the bible for me.

I walked straight forward as the bells chimed, passing by the new couples and the blue priests before climbing up onto the stage. Ferdinand then started reading from the bible, his voice resonating throughout the chapel. It was a passage describing the God of Darkness marrying his queen, the Goddess of Light, and while various problems occurred after their marriage, they overcame them by uniting their strength. It was the perfect story for the Starbind Ceremony.

As I listened to Ferdinand from the podium, I gazed down across the lined-up couples. The Starbind Ceremony was always fun since everyone wore the divine colors of their birth season, which turned the crowd into a veritable rainbow of colors.

I could see Ella and Hugo in the frontmost line. Ella was looking up at the podium and wearing an emerald-green dress, since she was born in spring. Her brown, almost red hair was adorned with the hairpin that I had commissioned for her from Tuuli. It wasn’t so fancy that it made her stand out among the other brides, but it was just fancy enough to draw attention. I normally only ever saw her in work clothes, so seeing her all dressed up made her look especially cute, and especially prim and proper compared to the other brides, no doubt due to being influenced by Nicola’s proper manners at the temple.

Ella seems fine, but how about Hugo?

Unlike Ella, who gave a calm smile when our eyes met, Hugo was standing in his dark-green clothes with a rigid expression that exuded anxiousness. His proud grin from yesterday was nowhere to be seen. A sharp pang of concern suddenly struck my chest, but then I saw him look down at his soon-to-be wife

and receive a teasing smile. It was so heartwarming that I immediately stopped worrying.

No need for me to worry about him when he has a cute wife doing all the worrying already. Hope you two keep flirting forever!

Those were the thoughts that ran through my mind as I started reciting a prayer to bless the gathered couples.

“O mighty King and Queen of the endless skies, O God of Darkness and Goddess of Light, hear my prayers. May you grant your blessings to the birth of new unions. May they who offer their prayers and gratitude to thee be blessed with thine divine protection.”

When I finished speaking the prayer of the married supreme gods, black and golden lights flew out from my ring and rained down on the married couples. I could see Hugo’s and Ella’s eyes open wide; this was their first time seeing one of my blessings.

“Your future will no doubt be bright now that you have obtained the blessings of the King and Queen gods,” Ferdinand declared, at which point gray priests pushed open the creaking doors leading outside. The bright summer rays reflected off the pure white stone of the chapel, brightening the room up in an instant. The silencing magic tools lost their power at the same time, and the newlyweds began chattering excitedly.

“Alright, a real blessing!”

“We got a blessing from the High Bishop! Now we just gotta escape the taues...”

“We’re gonna win no matter what! I can feel it!”

The grooms pumped themselves up before leaving the temple, ready for the upcoming festivities. Hugo excitedly turned around to look at me, while Ella looked up at him.

“High Bishop! Thank you for the wonderful blessing!” Hugo shouted, his voice echoing throughout the chapel. His abrupt yell made the other married couples stop and call out their own words of appreciation. This was far from my first blessing here in the temple, and people always shouted with surprise, but never

before had they faced me head-on and actually thanked me directly. I couldn't help but smile.

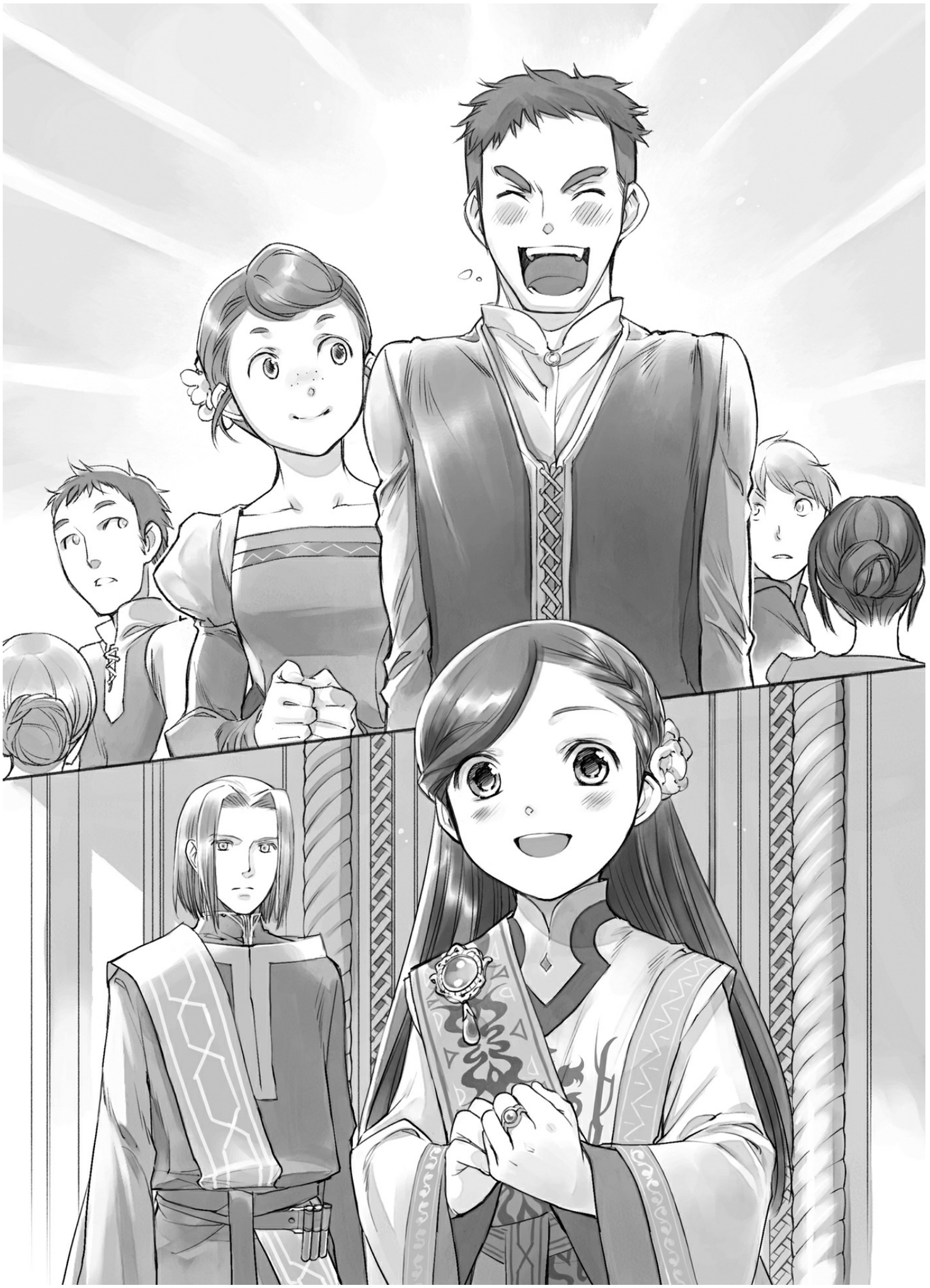
"May you all have happy lives," I said. Hugo and the other couples cheered at my response, making the atmosphere even livelier than before.

"Alright. Let's go," Hugo said to his new wife. "Today, I'm gonna protect you no matter what."

"Not just today though, right? You'll protect me forever, won't you?"

"Of course."

Hugo picked Ella up and ran out of the chapel. With any luck, he would make it all the way to their new home just like that.



My Brother Lamprecht's Wedding

The Starbind Ceremony in the Noble's Quarter ended without any particular incident. Eckhart no longer had to go to the spot where unmarried people gathered, since he was now engaged to Angelica, and the two of them seemed to be in notably good moods as they dedicated themselves to their guard duty. There was the fact that Damuel had once again failed to find a cute girlfriend, but that didn't really matter too much.

The day after the Starbind Ceremony, I received a request for a meeting from Lamprecht. He wanted to discuss his bride. Rihyarda let out a sigh after bringing me the letter.

"I know you are busy, but if you have the time to meet with him, I would recommend that you do so," she said. "At the moment, we are all on edge simply because she is from Ahrensbach. We can only pray that she is not the second coming of Lady Gabriele."

Gabriele was the archduke candidate who had married into Ehrenfest by force and caused all sorts of chaos back in the day. Rihyarda had initially been serving archnoble family members as an apprentice attendant, but the archducal couple at the time had requested that she start serving Gabriele instead.

"Lady Gabriele was an unfortunate woman. She was treated well as a first wife due to her status and the fact that she was from a greater duchy, but her husband truly loved his original wife, who was forcibly demoted to second wife, so their relationship ended up highly businesslike."

Gabriele had convinced her father that Ehrenfest would welcome her with open arms, since she was an archduke candidate from a greater duchy, but her new husband did not welcome her at all. She moved to form her own faction by spreading new trends and garnering attention, and prompted the retainers she had brought from Ahrensbach to marry Ehrenfest nobles, but finding partners for them was not so easy. Ehrenfest archnobles were all related by blood and, by extension, connected to the Leisegangs. Rihyarda was no exception, though

her blood connection was far from strong.

It was by approaching mednobles with high quantities of mana who were more rebellious toward the Leisegangs that Gabriele built up her forces. Her daughter Veronica had then inherited this faction to become the archduke's first wife.

"They eventually boasted enough strength to suppress the archnobles, including the Leisegangs," Rihyarda continued. "Those of the former Veronica faction will no doubt approach Lord Lamprecht's bride in hope of regaining the power they once had. She may feel a certain connection with them upon learning they have Ahrensbach blood."

"One certainly cannot help but feel nostalgic for a home they have left far behind..." I mused. Customs, climates, and culture varied a great deal even within Ehrenfest, so it was easy to imagine why someone from another duchy would feel so homesick.

"For these reasons, milady, please make sure to discuss the situation with Lord Lamprecht and the rest of your family. The very future of Ehrenfest will be shaped by whether or not this new bride joins hands with the Florencia faction."

I was engaged to Wilfried, who had my brother Lamprecht as his retainer, so how this new bride acted was very much significant to me.

"First of all, I will ask Lamprecht what manner of person his bride is," I said.

I sent an ordonnanz to Lamprecht stating that Mother no doubt had her own thoughts about all this as well, and from there it was decided that our discussion about his bride would take place as a family meeting. We were subsequently told to gather at Karstedt's estate. It was going to be my first time returning home since being adopted, and given the personal nature of our coming together, I would not be accompanied by any attendants or scholars. Eckhart and of course Lamprecht were going to be there with me, so I was confident that I needed only Cornelius as my guard knight, but Angelica was already gathering her things to join us.

"I'm engaged to Lord Eckhart, so I can attend these family meetings too," she said. "He told me to guard you, Lady Rozemyne."

Eckhart nodded. “It’s best for you to have a female knight with you, Rozemyne, and Angelica’s perfect for the job.”

Upon hearing this, Angelica placed a hand softly on her cheek and gave a reserved, peaceful smile. “The last thing I want is to interfere with your family’s discussion,” she said. “Just tell me what you think is best, Lady Rozemyne. I’ll do whatever you order me to.”

“Hard to believe you’re Grandfather’s disciple, Angelica...” Lamprecht said. “I’m surprised you’re able to survive his insane training regimen with such a docile personality.” He was being completely deceived—which was actually rather understandable, since he barely knew Angelica. In truth, she just wanted to avoid having to think about factions and politics and all that. She was pretty much asking me to just tell her the results of the meeting outright.

Eckhart and Cornelius both knew Angelica’s true form, so they merely exchanged glances and shrugged.

“Let’s go, then,” Lamprecht said.

I climbed into my highbeast and followed after him. I was used to traveling from the temple, but I hadn’t returned to my family home a single time since moving to the castle. Truth be told, I couldn’t even remember where it was.

I only ever traveled by carriage back when I first visited the estate, and from above, the Noble’s Quarter just looks like rows of identical ivory buildings. It’s impossible for me to tell which house is which.

It wasn’t long before we landed at Karstedt’s estate. I didn’t feel anything special about being back, since I had initially only been here until my baptism, but when Elvira and all the attendants who had taken care of me at the time welcomed me home with smiles, I strangely felt a little moved.

“Welcome home, Lady Rozemyne.”

“And so I have returned.”

We were going to be holding our family meeting right after dinner, so I made sure to take my bath beforehand. That way, I could participate in the discussion until I got tired and then go to sleep as soon as I returned to my room.

Once I arrived in the dining hall, dinner began. I had been looking forward to it ever since the attendants mentioned that the head chef was pulling out all the stops. It seemed that they had been making improvements to Hugo's recipes as well, as we were served rare mixes of ingredients and a type of dressing that I had never tried before.

"This is quite good," I commented. "I can tell the chef worked hard."

"I will pass your words on to the head chef," Elvira said. "They have been putting their all into creating new recipes."

"Rozemyne, do you have any new recipes?" Karstedt asked, looking at me with hopeful eyes.

I smiled in response and said that he would just need to look forward to my upcoming recipe book. Nicola had worked hard to put it together, so I would appreciate him chipping in to help make it successful.

Karstedt cackled and promised to buy a copy when it became available. "I see you're as good at making sales as ever, Rozemyne," he said.

We peacefully enjoyed the rest of our meal before clearing the room to begin our family meeting. It was then that I realized that neither Karstedt's second wife nor my half-brother Nikolaus were in attendance. I understood that they lived in the side building, and I had never seen them at any dinners or family meetings before, but this was important. Surely they needed to be here.

"Will Trudeliede and Nikolaus not be attending?" I asked, looking around and tilting my head.

"Trudeliede is a member of the former Veronica faction. She cannot be trusted here," Elvira replied. Trudeliede had mostly been forced onto Karstedt by Veronica, which explained why I had never spoken to her, and why Cornelius had warned me to be on guard after Nikolaus's baptism ceremony.

Faction politics intrude even on households, huh? Nobles sure like making things difficult...

"Now then, Lamprecht. Let us hear your case," Elvira said with a calm smile. "What manner of woman are you bringing into our house? Naturally, I have acquired some information myself, but I wish to hear it from you."

After sitting up straight, Lamprecht began. His bride was called Aurelia. She was the daughter of Aub Ahrensbach's little brother, but her mother was a third wife. As a result, despite Aurelia being the aub's niece, she had spent little time with him and was treated poorly among her father's other children. Even her younger sister fared better, for she was smart, friendly, and loved by all. Finally, Lamprecht informed us that Aurelia's mother was an archnoble from Frenbeltag, which meant her position had suffered following the civil war.

"Where did you meet, and what was it that sparked your connection?" Elvira asked, holding a pen over the several sheets of plant paper she had set down on the table. She looked deadly serious, but... I was *pretty* sure she was just hungry for material for her next romance story. She pried into every detail from the first time they had met to how they had felt about having to separate and then gave a satisfied nod. "As expected, there is much one can only know by asking those involved. Some of what you said differed from what I understood."

"I'm unsure what you heard, Mother, but Aurelia simply has naturally sharp, narrow eyes that make her resting expression look deceptively... evil. She is not a bad girl, in truth. I swear it," Lamprecht said, hurriedly explaining that people often misunderstood Aurelia due to her features. "Please do everything in your power to get her into the Florencia faction."

"She will soon be a part of our family regardless. No matter the situation, I will welcome her and invite her to our tea parties. What happens next, however, depends on Lady Aurelia."

The former Veronica faction would approach Aurelia without fail. How would she judge them, and what place would she take in Ehrenfest? Lamprecht needed to be deliberate in what he said to her in order to guide her into the Florencia faction.

"Setting Lady Aurelia up to have a comfortable life here is not my job, Lamprecht, but yours as her husband," Elvira said.

"Mother?!"

"The strength of our factions may have changed, but she is a bride you selected and petitioned to marry, no? Should you not be demonstrating that you are determined to protect your wife under any circumstances? How can

you work as a knight if you cannot even do that?”

Lamprecht swallowed hard. I could see Karstedt averting his gaze out of the corner of my eye, no doubt having realized since taking me as his daughter how much of a burden he had put on Elvira during the conflict between his second and third wives.

“It is necessary to teach Lady Aurelia the politics of Ehrenfest as soon as possible,” Elvira continued. “She needs to know what Lady Gabriele and Lady Veronica did, the vengeance of the Leisegangs, what happened to Rozemyne, that her marriage may split apart the factions that were finally starting to unify, and so on. These are all matters of the past that Lady Aurelia had no involvement in, but knowledge of them will determine her future.”

Even if Aurelia wasn’t personally to blame for such events, local feeling toward Ahrensbach was simply too conflicted.

“What will you reveal, and what will you keep hidden? Who will you introduce to her, and who will you keep from her? How will you protect your wife from another duchy? I shall be watching to see how you handle all these things, Lamprecht,” Elvira said, her dark eyes gleaming as she eyed him carefully. Cornelius and Angelica gulped at the intensity of her words, and she wasn’t even speaking to them. “If Lady Aurelia were to display the skills necessary to organize the former Veronica faction and guide them into joining our faction, I would throw up my hands and welcome her with open arms.”

Lady Aurelia... You have one heck of a job ahead of you!

I was sure that Aurelia wasn’t expecting to be faced with such a Herculean task. Lamprecht wasn’t really much like Elvira, after all.

“Moving on,” Elvira said. “I will prepare your living space in a side building. It is best that you remain within the estate so that we may observe the movement of nobles. You may find this a little stifling, but you will survive.”

“Mother, what of our furniture?”

“We have some to spare that you may use. Lady Aurelia likely has her own tastes, so it would be best to wait until she arrives to purchase some of your own,” Elvira replied. In truth, it seemed like somewhat of a negligent

suggestion. Perhaps it was because this matter only involved family, but it was rare for Elvira to be slack like this when she was usually so on top of things.

I wonder if she's tired...

"Lamprecht, you are preparing for your wedding as well, no?" I asked. "Rather than leaving it all to Mother, I would suggest finding out what you will need to purchase for yourself."

"I suppose, but is this not a task best suited for a woman?"

"Not in the least. You know Lady Aurelia's tastes better than any of us, do you not? Mother has never met her before, so there is no way she can know what is needed. Unless, dear brother, you mean to tell me you do not know your own bride's preferences."

I went on to ask Lamprecht a few questions about Aurelia's tastes, and the answers he gave were actually pretty good. It seemed that he really was keeping a close eye on her. The situation was somewhat unfortunate, but he was lucky enough to be marrying someone he actually loved, so I hoped their marriage was going to be a happy one.

"Lamprecht, what manner of jewelry does Lady Aurelia like?" Elvira asked. "What feystone did you prepare for her? Choosing furniture will prove considerably easier if we go with a common theme that is to her preference."

Elvira continued probing further and noted down each response. She was clearly having fun with this, since it all served as new material for her stories. I had to respect her ability to keep enjoying her hobbies no matter how exhausted she was from work.

Eventually, Elvira set down her pen with a satisfied smile. "I hope that she is as sweet of a girl as you claim," she said to Lamprecht before looking over at me. "Rozemyne, avoid contact with Lady Aurelia until her place is certain. You have more secrets that must be kept hidden than anyone in Ehrenfest and yet you speak with the least restraint."

I nodded solemnly, unable to argue against her sound reasoning, and promised not to meet with Aurelia before I received permission from my guardians.

“Cornelius. Angelica. Keep a close eye on Rozemyne as her guard knights,” Elvira said.

“You may trust us, Lady Elvira. I won’t let her see Lady Aurelia until you say so,” Angelica replied, a heroic glint in her eyes as she accepted the job.

Elvira gave a pleased nod and then looked between Angelica and Eckhart with a quizzical expression. “Speaking of which, when will you and Eckhart marry?” she asked. “The matter is not particularly pressing and can wait until next year, unlike Lamprecht’s marriage, but it would be best to start soon. Would you not feel uneasy if things were not settled soon?”

Apparently, Eckhart was still living in the separate estate he had shared with his late first wife. For Angelica to move in, he would need to clean up the place and exchange old goods for new ones.

Eckhart grimaced slightly at Elvira’s words, but Angelica shook her head with a smile. “I’m letting Lord Eckhart decide when that happens. And since I still have a long way to go when it comes to my combat skills, I want to prioritize earning Master’s approval. I’m not in a rush. I can even wait until Lady Rozemyne comes of age,” she declared, puffing out her chest proudly.

Eckhart gave a half-hearted smile, knowing that was much too long of a wait, while Elvira cradled her head. “Until Rozemyne comes of age?” she asked. “I could never put your parents through that. I cannot believe there is a woman even less interested in marriage than Eckhart.”

Mother, you won’t find a shred of romance anywhere in Angelica’s heart. The sooner you accept her for what she is, the better.

We settled on Angelica marrying before she turned twenty so that she wouldn’t be considered socially out of date, and that marked the end of the day’s family meeting.

“Now then, Rozemyne. Off you go to bed,” Elvira said, having called the meeting to a close. I only caught a few glimpses of her expression on my way out, but she looked quite tired.

“Erm, Mother... You must be quite busy unifying factions and preparing for the brides, on top of all your scholar work, no? I may not be very useful, but I

could at least offer a blessing of healing. Would you like one?”

“Of healing? I am not hurt or anything of the sort.”

“It might do something to ease your spirit. Mother, may you have Heilschmerz the Goddess of Healing’s blessing.”

I prayed to my ring and a green light slowly floated out. My hope was that it would heal Elvira’s heart, even if only a little. She gave a kind smile, as if my feelings had been conveyed.

“I thank you ever so much, Rozemyne. I feel as if my exhaustion has faded. Let us have a family tea party tomorrow; it has been far too long. Our head chef can make various sweets of their own now.”

“Certainly. I am looking forward to it.”

On the way back to my room, Cornelius slumped his shoulders. “I’m exhausted,” he said. “I knew interduchy marriages caused a lot of problems, but I didn’t think they were this much of a pain in the neck.”

“Agreed,” I replied. “I already knew that love isn’t enough to justify a noble marriage, but this surprised me as well. Are you this apprehensive because you have your heart set on someone from another duchy?”

“No, she’s from—”

Cornelius started responding as per the natural flow of conversation before suddenly clapping a hand over his mouth. He stared down at me, looking absolutely horrified. He forced a neutral expression a split second later, but it was already too late.

I cackled. “My, my... So you wish to escort a girl within Ehrenfest, then? Have you asked her already? If you wait too long, some handsome man may come and sweep her off her feet.”

“Gah... It’s like I’ve got two mothers now. Here, we’re at your room. It’s time for you to sleep. You’re tired, right? You’ve gotta be tired. You should rest now so that you can sleep with Schlaftraum’s blessing.”

And with that, Cornelius speedily pushed me into my room without answering a single one of my questions.

Our tea party the next day was also about Lamprecht's marriage. Since the ceremony was going to be held at the duchy border, we were planning to eat lunch at Count Leisegang's mansion before heading to the border gate.

"Will we be spending the night at Count Leisegang's estate?" I asked.

"I would imagine so," Elvira replied. "It has not been set in stone, but there are many members of the former Veronica faction in that area, and few other places suitable to house the archducal family—especially now that Lady Veronica has been punished."

I recalled that I had been attacked even at Count Leisegang's mansion during a past Spring Prayer, while I was in the side building for priests. I had been asleep, so I was unsure of the details, but I hoped the same thing wouldn't happen again.

"You do not need to fear any attacks," Elvira said with an elegant giggle, no doubt having read my expression. "We shall be bringing the Knight's Order with us."

We went on to discuss the dinnertime feast that was going to be held on the day of the ceremony, and the debut that would take place to welcome Aurelia. As our conversation went on, I suddenly remembered something.

"Speaking of which, were you unable to find a partner for Damuel, Mother? Was it too much even for your talents?" I asked.

"The timing is simply unfortunate. There is not much that can be done until the faction politics begin to settle down," Elvira said with a troubled sigh.

Finding a wife for Damuel was apparently going to be exceptionally difficult indeed. First of all, Elvira was unable to pair him with another laynoble—although they were of the same status, they would have incompatible mana levels. Pairing him with a mednoble seemed like the natural solution, but just as Brigitte had shown resistance, it would take a lot of resolve for a mednoble to lower themselves in status to wed into the family of a layknight with no estate to inherit.

On top of all that, anyone who married the retainer of the archduke's

adopted daughter would essentially be locking their faction alignment in place. Few mednobles wanted such a thing, as their general strategy was to stick with whoever appeared to be winning. And now that Ahrensbach brides were being wed into the duchy, laynobles and mednobles alike were all watching with bated breath to see how the power structure would shift.

Of course, there was also the fact that, despite him now being my retainer, Damuel had originally been made to serve in the temple as punishment. I valued him a great deal, but outsiders had no way of knowing that—to them, it looked as though I might cut him off at any moment. The majority thought it was only a matter of time before I swapped him out, much like Bonifatius had recommended, which complicated matters further.

Upon returning to the temple, I informed Damuel of what Elvira had told me. “In short, it seems that it will prove difficult to find you a wife in the near future,” I said.

“Or in other words, I’ll never get married here?” Damuel asked, hanging his head. I was feeling too sorry for him to outright agree, so I tried to come up with a better way to phrase my response.

“It will simply take some time. You need only wait until politics have calmed down and my mothers have complete control over Ehrenfest, or when younger laynobles with my compression method grow up enough to match your mana.”

“You might as well have said it’s never going to happen...” Damuel murmured sadly, but there was no helping the situation—I didn’t have any appropriate connections among the nobility, plus it wasn’t even my place to help him.

As Damuel slouched over, dejected, I started preparing to hold a Starbind Ceremony at the border gate, which lacked a chapel, and selected which gray priests were going to accompany me.

I spent the following days under Ferdinand’s tutelage, learning to make armor from feystones and protect the gray priests. I was taught a spell that used bands of light to ensnare an opponent, a spell that produced a net to capture many foes at once, a spell to make a simple Goddess shield, and several others, all to ward against ambushes.

Better safe than sorry.

According to my retainers who traveled between the castle and the temple, a discussion had taken place in the castle regarding our guards from the Knight's Order, the lodging arrangements, and the preparations for the feast. Everyone had now been given their duties.

A letter from Gil soon arrived, informing me that the merchants from other duchies had started to appear, and when I visited the orphanage and the workshop, I could just feel how much busier the lower city was.

The summer proved much livelier than any summer the lower city had ever seen before, and when it eventually came to an end, we prepared to depart for the duchy border.

The Wedding on the Border

For today, I had made my Pandabus especially large. I was transporting Fran, Monika, and Nicola as my temple attendants, two of Ferdinand's temple attendants, Hugo as my personal chef, and four castle chefs, as well as the offerings and divine instruments needed for the Starbind Ceremony. As for my noble retainers, there were Ottilie and Brunhilde as my attendants, Hartmut as my scholar, and Angelica and Leonore as my guard knights. I had prioritized bringing Leisegang-related nobles since we were going to be staying in the Leisegang summer mansion, and Angelica was coming because she was engaged to Eckhart. Everyone else was staying behind.

Cornelius was coming along not as my guard knight but as the groom's younger brother. Likewise, Karstedt was coming as the groom's father, rather than the commander of the Knight's Order, so Sylvester's guards were being organized around the vice-commander.

Since the ceremony called for the participation of both archducal families, Wilfried and Charlotte were coming with the archducal couple. Bonifatius might have been expected to come with us in that sense, but he was already retired, so it was perfectly acceptable for him to stay behind. He was going to be guarding the castle, which was now less protected than usual, considering that we were bringing so many retainers with us.

We had with us temple workers for the ceremony, our attendants, the archducal family and their retainers, the Knight's Order to serve as guards, and to top it all off, Freuden and his family. I couldn't hide my surprise after being told just how many people were going to be participating.

"That certainly is a lot..." I said.

"If not for diplomatic tensions and the fact that the bride is the niece of the current Aub Ahrensbach, we would not have needed to come out in so much force," Ferdinand noted. It seemed that when a normal noble was being wed into another duchy, their families would receive permission from the aub

before going to the border gate to see them off. The involved families would greet each other, then the bride or groom would take their partner home. They would not be married at that point and would simply wait for the summer Starbind Ceremony to be officially wed.

"What would an abnormal noble be?"

"One who requires permission from the king."

Marriages involving royalty and archducal family members required not just the permissions of the relevant aubs, but also the permission of the king himself. Such weddings were held at the Archduke Conference with the Sovereign High Bishop coming from the Sovereignty's temple to perform the rites. The Starbind Ceremony would then be held in the chapel deep within the Royal Academy—where we had gone to get our Divine Wills—and following that, those wed would be debuted in their duchy. The wedding certainly wasn't held at a border gate with the archducal families gathered like this.

"The question is, why has this particular marriage ended up so large-scale? Perhaps Aub Ahrensbach is worried about his niece marrying into a family with rich Leisegang blood and is putting pressure on us to ensure she is not neglected as Lady Gabriele once was," I said, stating my theory with a proud expression.

Ferdinand shook his head. "Your thinking is shallow. If Lamprecht is to be believed, his bride is the daughter of a third wife from Frenbeltag. She would not be worth this much of a fuss. I would imagine Aub Ahrensbach's primary objective is to intimidate us into obedience, given our attempts to move away from Ahrensbach by settling on trade with Klassenberg and the Sovereignty. His duchy is presumably in quite a panic right now..." he said with a sigh. "For decades, Ehrenfest was under the control of the Veronica faction, which had deep connections to Ahrensbach due to her being the daughter of Gabriele. It was expected that these connections would be maintained once Sylvester, as Veronica's son, became the aub. But instead, Sylvester chose to save your life and punish his mother and uncle, even at the cost of cutting off his own power base entirely."

Only then did I finally understand the situation that Sylvester had been in.

Back then, when my understanding of noble politics had been practically nonexistent, I had wondered why a blatant criminal like Bezewanst had been allowed to act as he pleased. Now, I realized that punishing him would have cost Sylvester the support of all the nobles backing him. Sylvester had essentially turned his back on the very faction that had given him the power to become the archduke in the first place. It must have been terrifying.

Sylvester's situation was comparable to me executing or distancing the archducal couple, my siblings, Karstedt, Elvira, and almost all of my retainers at once. My new power base would become former allies who no longer trusted me, nobles who weren't at all close to me, and nobles of the opposite faction who had previously been working against me. I would need to live and lead the duchy with barely anyone I could trust on my side.

"You do not need to look so down," Ferdinand said. "Sylvester made the decision he did because he believed it was necessary. And indeed, it was necessary for the future of Ehrenfest. That aside, I imagine Ahrensbach hopes to use this opportunity to observe you, which they failed to do at the Royal Academy."

"Let me stop you there, Ferdinand. I already know what you're getting at. I won't do anything without your explicit permission, and I need to keep the power of my blessings to a bare minimum. Is that what you were about to say?"

Ultimately, the plan was for me to follow behind Ferdinand like a duckling—to make it seem like I was little more than a powerless puppet being controlled and propped up by my guardians.

It was early in the morning when we actually departed, and we arrived in Leisegang at noon. Compared to when we traveled all over for Spring Prayer, it was a rather quick journey—and a rather simple one, considering that we had just needed to move in a straight line. It helped that we could go faster in our highbeasts than normal, since everyone in our group was a mednoble or greater.

"Welcome, welcome."

Upon our arrival, we were greeted by Count Leisegang and his entourage. The archducal couple, Wilfried, Charlotte, and the others were guided into the

mansion, accompanied by their retainers and the Knight's Order.

"These are our chefs," one of the mansion attendants said. "They are ready to provide their service."

Hugo and the court chefs from the castle were here to help prepare tonight's feast. They were also going to be demonstrating how to make the recipes in the book my great-grandfather had purchased, to compensate the Leisegangs for allowing us to stay in their mansion.

Although we had now arrived at our destination, Ferdinand and I could not go inside immediately; we needed to ensure my highbeast would stay formed without me and give instructions to Fran and the others. Our noble retainers stood by while we directed our temple attendants.

"After lunch, we will go to the side building to change," I said. "Ensure our rooms are ready by then."

Just like during Spring Prayer and the Harvest Festival, priests and shrine maidens couldn't go into the count's mansion, so Ferdinand and I had to change into our ceremonial robes in the side building instead. This was apparently the norm, and in retrospect, Illgner was pretty slack for having allowed the gray priests to walk freely in their mansion in service of me during the Harvest Festival.

"We shall depart for the border gate first, to prepare the shrine," Ferdinand added. "We do not have much time."

"Understood."

After receiving our orders, the gray priests got to work. They needed to ensure the side building was clean, move everything we would need to get changed into our rooms, and find an opportunity to eat the lunches that Ella had prepared for them. All in all, they were going to be pretty busy.

Once we had confirmed that the gray priests had started carrying out their instructions, Ferdinand and I entered the mansion with our retainers. We were going to have lunch, change into our ceremonial robes, and then prepare to leave for the shrine. It was temple business, but we were going to be bringing our noble retainers with us nonetheless.

Ceremonies weren't usually held at the border gate, so there was no shrine there for us to use. We were having to make one ourselves. At the same time, as a precaution in case of any ambushes, Ferdinand was going to be performing several modifications to the gate waiting rooms and the room where the ceremony was being held.

Monika and Nicola helped me change clothes, then we all climbed into Lessy. Angelica was in the passenger seat, and after making sure all the gray priests were in the back seat, we set off, traveling through the air to a point further south than Leisegang.

"Wha...?"

Back when I had performed Spring Prayer as a blue shrine maiden, the border between Ehrenfest and Ahrensbach had been blurred by a great forest. Now, however, it was clear as day, as the vast expanse of trees abruptly became a flat grassy plain. I had only been handling Spring Prayer and the Harvest Festival in the Central District for quite some time now, never having reason to come this far south, so I had been unaware just how dramatically the border had changed.

I glanced over at Ferdinand, who was observing the scene with a tight frown. As expected, this had bad implications. I wanted to ask him a few questions, but the wind roared in our ears, and I could tell that he would chastise me as unladylike for trying to shout over the noise when there was no emergency. For that reason, I decided to wait until we landed at the gate.

It seemed that this protective barrier along the border allowed the archduke to know when nobles crossed the border, which meant he would be able to tell the instant nobles from other duchies attempted to launch an invasion—although the barrier did not detect those who had too little mana to be considered a noble. The border gate had therefore been established to allow nobles to visit other duchies without being suspected of plotting an attack.

"So that's the border gate, hm?"

A towering white gate sat in the middle of the sprawling forest. It was significantly larger and wider than the castle gate, since it had been made explicitly for nobles to travel through, but there were no walls stretching out on either end. As the barrier was invisible, from where we were, it looked to be a

randomly placed gate. And because everything except the city roads for carriages was green, it stuck out like a sore thumb.

"I really like that it stands out," Angelica said. "It makes it hard to mistake it for anything else."

She was exactly right. Not particularly insightful, but exactly right.

We were greeted by the knights guarding the gate when we landed. "Lady Rozemyne. Lord Ferdinand. We were informed of your arrival," one said. I could see there were Ahrensbach knights here as well.

"I imagine it will be a challenge with the archducal families of both duchies arriving for the ceremony, but I trust that you will serve well," I said.

Ferdinand instructed me to greet the representatives of both duchies and gave me pouches to hand to them, so I did just that. Inside the pouches was money for the knights stuck at the backwater gate to buy celebratory wine with later. We couldn't give them the alcohol outright, as doing so might lead to suspicions that we were attempting to poison them or tempt them to drink while still on the job. Formally handing the representatives money in front of the others was also a good move because it prevented them from being able to hide it away for their own purposes.

"Our gratitude is yours."

The knights smiled just a little, since the amount we had given them was very much appropriate to the size of the event. First impressions were important, after all. And with that, the knights took us to the room where the ceremony was going to be held.

"Priests, construct the shrine," Ferdinand instructed. "Rozemyne, go to the waiting room."

Fran and the others unloaded all of the luggage from my highbeast, after which I put away Lessy and moved to the waiting room. Ottilie and Brunhilde were the only ones with me while the others were busy with preparations; they swiftly prepared tea for me and set down the cookies Ella had made before my departure.

As I munched my way through my snacks, Ferdinand came into the waiting

room with his retainers, having likely finished putting the divine instruments and such into place. Justus poured him some tea right away. I didn't recognize several of the other retainers, and it was somewhat odd not seeing Eckhart among them.

Ferdinand and I discussed the day's ceremony and who would be handling which portions. Once that was done, I was finally granted the opportunity to pose the question that had been playing on my mind.

"The environment here certainly has changed... Unless my memory deceives me, is this not the place where we were ambushed in the past?" I asked.

It seemed my deliberately vague use of "in the past" had gotten my message across loud and clear; Ferdinand nodded and said with furrowed brows that this was at least close to the same place. I had already known that it wasn't exactly the same area, since I hadn't seen the extremely memorable gate back then, but it was nearby in the sense of being close to Ahrensbach's border.

Ferdinand took out the sound-blocking magic tools from a leather pouch hanging from his belt and held one out to me. "There are Ahrensbach knights here," he explained with a defeated sigh, informing me that I had blundered once again.

"Sorry."

"No matter. I expect that the Ahrensbach province on the other side of this border was under the jurisdiction of Count Bindewald, whose fate you know well. It is clear to see that they are suffering quite a severe mana shortage. The question is whether this is because his replacement lacks enough mana, no replacements were sent as punishment, or Ahrensbach as a whole is lacking in mana compared to the past."

I pursed my lips. "What are they thinking, sending over two brides when they're suffering this much already? The archduke's niece is surely an archnoble, and she has more mana than Lamprecht did before he learned my compression method, does she not? I would have assumed she was quite valuable to them."

"They will be demanding something of greater value than the two brides, obviously. We simply do not yet know what that something is. We know too

little and lack far too much information," Ferdinand said before sipping his tea.

By the time the shrine was in order, the Ehrenfest party had arrived. The Ahrensbach party showed up a short while later, and the two archdukes exchanged quite lengthy greetings. I listened in a daze while observing those from our neighboring duchy. The brides were standing in the back, their faces covered with embroidered veils, so I was mainly watching Aub Ahrensbach and his family.

So this is Aub Ahrensbach, huh?

He was presumably no younger than fifty-five—old enough to be called a grandfather without hesitation. Georgine genuinely looked like his daughter standing next to him, and with Detlinde there too, it was like seeing three different generations all at once.

There was a girl even younger than Detlinde, perhaps my age, hiding behind Aub Ahrensbach. She had blonde hair, blue eyes, and gosh, was she cute.

Is she the other archduke candidate...?

Her being an archduke candidate meant she was the archduke's child for sure, but she couldn't have been Georgine's child. I had heard that Detlinde was her youngest daughter. Not to mention, they looked entirely different, and she was standing too far apart from the others.

Either the archduke has another wife, or he adopted her just like Sylvester adopted me.

The archducal greetings ended as I observed the Ahrensbach archducal family. Georgine was standing a half step behind the foreign aub, a peaceful smile on her face. She came across as more restrained here, and very different from how she had seemed in Ehrenfest.

Detlinde approached Wilfried, looking especially friendly. "I heard you are now engaged to Rozemyne," she said. "It does not seem to me that your relationship has changed much."

"We were family to begin with," Wilfried replied. "It is only natural that our relationship would not change."

I watched Detlinde go on to exchange first greetings with Charlotte before turning to look at Aurelia, who was standing with her family. The veil covering her face meant I couldn't see her facial features very clearly, but her fancy clothes were certainly appropriate for the niece of an archduke. She was quite tall for a woman, which made her a good match for a muscular knight like Lamprecht. They would no doubt look great standing together.

Aurelia's father seemed just as old as Aub Ahrensbach; his first grandchild was surely coming of age right about now. Aurelia's mother was his third wife, and presumably his latest. She seemed about as old as Elvira, and she was standing beside a girl whose identity was easy enough to guess.

Is that the smart, friendly, and beloved little sister? She looks a little bit like Tuuli, I think.

Her long braid, bright smile, and lively aura all made me think of my own sister. She looked to be about the same age as well, but Tuuli was more well-developed than most, so I could assume this girl was actually about as old as Detlinde. She was already in the Royal Academy for sure, even if they weren't in the same grade.

Behind Aurelia's family, I could see Freuden's family greeting the Ahrensbach mednoble family from which his bride descended.

"Now then, let us begin the Starbind Ceremony."

Ferdinand signaled for the Starbind Ceremony to commence, prompting the involved families to move to the room with the makeshift shrine. His and my retainers stayed in the waiting room, along with the brides and grooms.

"Um... Are you perhaps Lamprecht's little sister, the High Bishop who will be performing this ceremony?" Aurelia suddenly asked. "I am told you are known as the Saint of Ehrenfest, but will you be okay performing at such a young age?"

I had been told not to speak to anyone, but I couldn't ignore someone who had already approached me. I turned around on reflex just as Angelica and my retainers surrounded me, the former having taken up a defensive posture. The knights from Ahrensbach did the same around Aurelia, as if acting in response.

"Stand down. There is no place for violence on this day of celebration," I said

to my retainers before turning my attention back to Aurelia. “I understand that someone not from Ehrenfest might find it unsettling to see someone as young as me being entrusted with such an important event, but I have performed many ceremonies as the High Bishop before. You may rest assured that your wedding will be a blessed one.”

“Lady Rozemyne, it is forbidden to speak directly to the bride,” Leonore said. I raised my chin and turned my head away from her dismissively, prepared for whatever scolding my guardians would give me later.

“I am not speaking to the bride,” I said. “I am merely thinking aloud.”

“My, my... Your voice was quite loud though,” Ottilie said, but I was determined to stand my ground. That was when a thin, shaky voice came from amid the Ahrensbach knights. It was presumably Aurelia, but there were so many people now between us that I couldn’t quite tell.

“This is me thinking aloud too, but... will you truly be blessing us?”

I blinked, as surprised as Aurelia sounded. Ehrenfest was rupturing internally since the former Veronica faction was feeding information to Ahrensbach, at least from what I knew. From our perspective, these brides were being forced onto us, but perhaps they were being forced into this by higher authorities. If so, they must have been more worried and anxious than anyone, since they were traveling to new homes amid what was nothing short of political turmoil.

“I am still thinking aloud, but it is only natural that new couples would be blessed. That is why I am here. Of course, I imagine everyone is ill at ease, given the complex political relationships at play... but the brides and grooms will need to build their own lives in Ehrenfest by communicating and supporting one another. I pray that these lives will be filled with joy.”

As Aurelia and I continued our conversation under the weak guise of thinking aloud, our guard knights faced each other, sighed, and then ultimately backed down. The atmosphere in the room seemed to relax soon after.

“The High Bishop shall now enter,” came Fran’s voice from the other side of the door. I smiled at the two brides before heading for the open door with the bible in my arms. I entered the room in which the ceremony was being held and made my way over to Ferdinand—naturally taking great care not to step on the

hem of my robes and fall flat on my face during this important ritual—before eventually taking my place beside him. I could feel the intense gazes I was receiving from Ahrensbach's side of the room.

I had Ferdinand put the bible on its podium, as per usual, and then stepped onto the stand that had been placed for me behind it. Ferdinand began speaking when I was ready.

"Now begins the Starbind Ceremony. All brides and grooms, step forward!"

Gray priests opened the door, and the two new couples stepped inside. It was a tense moment for both the Ehrenfest and the Ahrensbach Knight's Order, who were busy staring each other down, but the involved families clapped and gave words of celebration, which was a relief to see.

Ferdinand read from the bible before confirming the couples' intent to marry as both archdukes stood by. Since the brides were marrying into Ehrenfest, we were the ones who had to prepare the wedding documents. Sylvester took out two contracts, which went up in golden flames after the brides and grooms signed them with magic pens. Once they had vanished completely, the wedding was complete.

"The High Bishop shall now bless the newly formed couples."

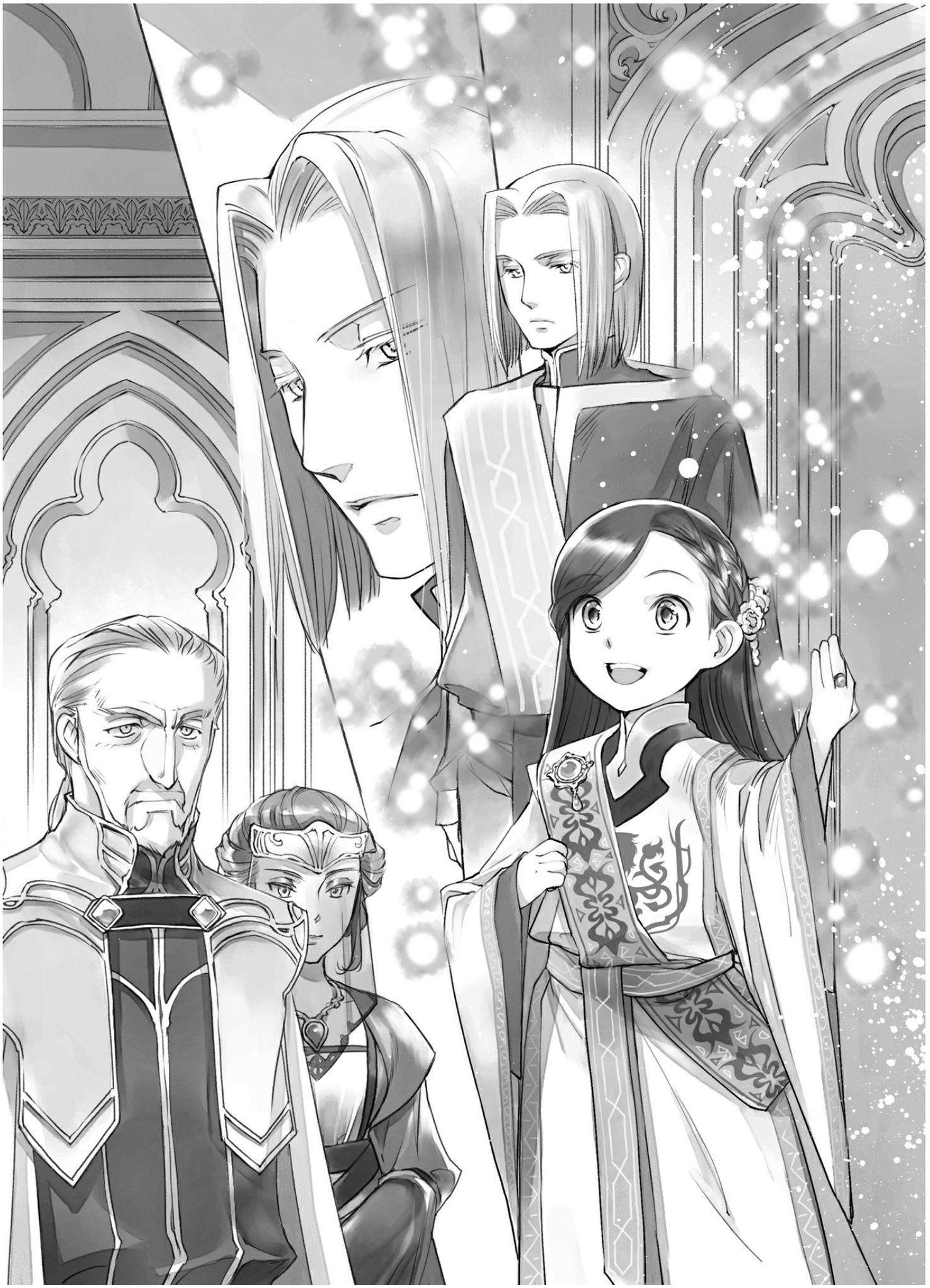
It was my time to shine.

Ferdinand handed me a feystone he had preemptively filled with the proper amount of mana, such that my blessing would not end up being too great. It was effectively Plan A in his Rozemyne Chaos Prevention Scheme. He gave me a sharp look that seemed to stress just how important it was that I not mess this up, and I returned a brisk nod to show my understanding before taking a deep breath.

"O mighty King and Queen of the endless skies, O God of Darkness and Goddess of Light, hear my prayers. May you grant your blessings to the birth of new unions. May they who offer their prayers and gratitude to thee be blessed with thine divine protection."

As I prayed to the supreme gods, black and golden light swirled in my ring like usual, then shot up to the ceiling. The colors overlapped, mixed together, and

then burst apart into specks of light dust, which rained down upon the newlyweds.



I had been told not to make a spectacle, and since there were only two couples, the blessing ended up fairly small. Its distribution was usually affected to at least some degree by my feelings, but this time, it went out equally to Lamprecht, Freuden, and their new wives. As I sighed in relief, I heard awed mutters and whispers from the Ahrensbach side of the room.

“O Saint of Ehrenfest, that was a magnificent blessing.”

“I am honored.”

Aub Ahrensbach wore a smile as he praised my efforts, but his eyes were not on me. They were on Ferdinand.

Pre-Meeting for the Dyeing Competition

The Starbind Ceremony ended without incident, and as expected, I ended up bedridden immediately after. When I eventually woke up, the first thing Ferdinand told me was that a planned ambush had been foiled thanks to the efforts of some children from the former Veronica faction.

“The would-be ambushers must have thought that we of the temple would be traveling by carriage,” he said. “The Knight’s Order reported that they detected a great number of people lurking among the trees close to the roads.”

“Traveling by carriage? For what purpose?” I muttered in confusion. “Having highbeasts means we can fly straight to our destination without having to worry about roads and the like. What were the ambushers even thinking?”

Ferdinand narrowed his eyes in a glare. “No doubt they did not expect you to travel with all of the gray priests in your highbeast. Only select nobles are aware that you can freely change its size, and a normal noble would never expect the adopted daughter of an archduke to allow such people to ride with her.”

“In other words... my freethinking spirit saved the day.”

“It would be more accurate to say that your *incomprehensible abnormality* was responsible.”

The ambushers had apparently lost sight of us due to how unpredictable my actions had been from a noble’s perspective. It was amusing to imagine them waiting in the forest for a carriage to pass by, completely unaware that we had already flown over them. They must have felt dumb, to say the least.

Unfortunately, the ambushers possessed so little mana that the Knight’s Order had struggled when searching for them. They had also scattered as soon as they realized their plan had been compromised, such that any traces of the mana being used to track them vanished in an instant. The knights ultimately lost sight of them in the forest and decided to strengthen the security around the border gate instead.

“The ambush may have been doomed from the start, but we must acknowledge that children of the former Veronica faction did all they could to warn us about it,” Ferdinand continued. “It is because of a letter we received from Roderick and those who informed him that we were able to learn of those hiding in the forest. According to Rihyarda, their hearts were moved by your efforts to bring everyone together in the Royal Academy, no matter their faction.”

That was unexpected. I had pushed for everyone to work together purely because I didn’t like how hostile things seemed in the dorm. My assumption had been that this cooperation would end as soon as we returned to Ehrenfest and parents got involved, but apparently not. Although my plan had been to absorb the other children into my faction once they came of age and could choose their allegiances for themselves, it seemed that those of the former Veronica faction were already a lot more proactive.

“So Roderick and the others worked up the courage to warn us, thereby displaying their loyalty to the archduke?” I asked. “Ferdinand, please join me in asking Sylvester to allow them into our faction. He must know all too well what an ordeal it can be to oppose one’s parents.”

In noble society, resolving to oppose one’s parents before coming of age was the same as throwing away one’s entire support base. And given that even apprentice work was normally done under the observation of one’s parents, these children’s futures would be indescribably bleak if new guardians did not come to assist them.

“*You* are the one they were trying to contact,” Ferdinand noted. “Should you not be the one to absorb them?”

“Is that an option? There are some I would even like to take as my retainers, but it would not be very commendable for me to lay claim to them first, would it?”

It seemed to me that it was best for Sylvester or Wilfried to take them, since their foundations were still weak. That said, if me taking them with the Leisegangs at my back was better for quashing the former Veronica faction, I would do so without hesitation.

“Hold on. You intend to take them on as retainers, not simply reward or praise them for their efforts? You are as hasty as ever. It would be dangerous to make such an abrupt move over this one incident.”

“This isn’t an abrupt move; I have seen their work in the Royal Academy. Hartmut and Brunhilde were far more abrupt, considering that they were selected without me having ever met them before.”

I knew that it didn’t seem abrupt from my guardians’ perspectives, since they had chosen my retainer candidates after much time spent combing through all of the options, but I had been prompted to choose retainers I had never met and knew pretty much nothing about. In contrast, I had observed these children’s behavior for a full season at the Royal Academy.

At first, the students of the former Veronica faction had been hesitant about working with those of other factions, but once I divided everyone into teams and we started on our studies, they worked flawlessly as a group. In no time at all, we were sharing resources and teaching each other. Even when it came to earning money through the gathering of intelligence, they had proved to be valuable allies by offering up information on Ahrensbach that only they could get access to, and aided us in preparing for the Interduchy Tournament in their own way. No matter how much nobles tried to put on masks, I found it easy to learn more about them after spending so much time living with them.

Putting aside the fact that I may not have a good eye for people, of course...

“I see. I suppose this would not be abrupt from your perspective, but that does not change the fact that it would be to everyone else,” Ferdinand said. “Any children from the former Veronica faction will need more time and more accomplishments to their names before you can take them on as retainers. I would still advise that you reward them and encourage this behavior, though. In that regard, what would you like to do?”

It was a hard question. I had already said that I wanted to take them on as my retainers. Was there some other reward that would actually make it easier for the children to enter our faction while changing the minds of adults as much as possible?

“If taking them on as retainers is not an option... I suggested it before, but

how about adjusting the conditions of the magic contract and teaching them my mana compression method?”

“Your mana compression method, hm...?” Ferdinand mused.

At the moment, we were only teaching nobles who were already locked into the Florencia faction, but if we demonstrated that we were also willing to teach those from other factions who worked for our sake, it would potentially encourage even more cooperation going forward.

“The children of the former Veronica faction bemoaned that they could not choose their faction for themselves, and they stressed that a large gap would form between them and the others if they had to wait until they came of age to learn my compression method.”

“As they should; the compression method will dramatically impact one’s mana growth. One need only compare Lamprecht and Damuel or Angelica and Cornelius to the others in their respective generations to see that the difference is obvious.”

“Was your original intention not to spread the compression method to resolve Ehrenfest’s mana shortage?” I asked. “Signing contracts for the mana compression with children who will one day be our allies will allow them to develop more mana over their growth period.”

Ferdinand listened carefully, his brows knitted in a tight frown. The fact that he hadn’t refused the idea outright meant there was still some hope.

“I cannot say whether the others will agree to this, but absorbing the children into our faction is an immediate priority,” Ferdinand eventually replied. “The time will come when we must make a decision: absorb the children and then absorb their parents through them, or save only the children to avoid their talents being wasted and cut off the parents entirely. And I believe that time will be coming soon, whether we like it or not.”

“I agree. At this rate, the conflict between parents who wish to lean on Ahrensbach and the children who desire to pick their own faction will only intensify, and any underage children we absorb alone will need guardians,” I said. It was beyond me to look after all the children of the former Veronica faction myself—that was the job of Sylvester, the top dog of Ehrenfest. I

wanted him, the archduke, to reward their efforts and resolve.

“I understand your position and shall convey it to the others.”

After making a full recovery, I returned to my normal daily life. A letter requesting meetings came from the lower city once Philine and Hartmut were back to visiting the temple regularly for work. It had been sent by the Gilberta Company, who were going to be managing the dyeing competition, and after settling on a date, I sent an ordonnanz to Brunhilde.

“Brunhilde, we will soon be meeting with the Gilberta Company in the temple to discuss the upcoming dyeing competition. What will you be doing? I believe you will find it much more agreeable than Groschel’s lower city.”

Her reply came swiftly: “Philine and Hartmut are already visiting the temple, after all. Worry not for my sake; I will be coming along too.”

It seemed that Brunhilde took no issue with visiting the temple. Her resistance toward it had faded considerably compared to the lower city, since she regularly spoke with her fellow retainers who visited the temple almost daily.

“Hartmut, what have you said about the temple?” I asked.

“That it is as clean and orderly as the castle, simply with priests in place of nobles, and that even the commoner gray priests are well-trained enough that spending time with them is not unpleasant in the least.”

“I’ve been telling Brunhilde about my work here too,” Philine added with a smile.

“Lady Rozemyne,” Hartmut said, “if the next meeting with the Gilberta Company is going to be a preliminary discussion on the dyeing competition, I would suggest contacting not just Brunhilde, but Lady Elvira as well.”

I followed his advice, and it was subsequently decided that Brunhilde and Elvira would attend my meeting with the Gilberta Company, alongside a number of guard knights and scholars.

Since we had Elvira and Brunhilde joining us, rather than using the orphanage director's chambers as per usual, we were going to be using a newly renovated parlor that was as close to the temple's front gate as possible.

"We are on our way," Elvira informed me via an ordonnanz.

I asked Nicola to make tea and sweets, then headed to the front entrance with Fran, Monika, Damuel, and Angelica. I watched the sky and soon spotted several highbeasts flying toward us in formation, coming from the direction of the castle. There were more than I expected—as well as Elvira and Brunhilde, there were two apprentice scholars and three apprentice guard knights.

"So this is the temple..." Brunhilde muttered. But as she looked around curiously, taking in the sights she had never seen before, Elvira walked inside without the slightest hesitation, having visited my High Bishop's chambers before. It was a sight that made Brunhilde widen her amber eyes in disbelief.

Nobody else hesitated either and Brunhilde soon found herself swept up in their march into the temple. She was trying to maintain a blank facade, but I could see her eyes wavering a bit.

"This is the parlor, which we shall use for meetings between noble scholars and the lower city merchants," I said. We were using the furniture that had once belonged to Bezewanst and had otherwise been gathering dust in the temple storeroom, since his family didn't want it, and the blue priests had sensed that politics were going to be changing.

Ferdinand had instructed that we use the furniture for the sake of efficiency. Bezewanst had already ensured that it was appropriate for his family's status, and after reupholstering the chairs and polishing the wood, it was perfectly suited for a parlor being visited by archnobles.

Brunhilde twirled around once as she looked the room over, then nodded with satisfaction. Philine, however, seemed frozen to the spot. Perhaps the furniture was too fancy for laynobles, so she was hesitant about using it.

"Today's sweets are fallold tarts. They are quite new," I said, recommending the seasonal treats that Ella and Nicola had made. Fran poured tea in the meantime, and it seemed that Brunhilde rather liked his brew; she took one sip, then closed her eyes as if to savor the taste.

“This tea is quite good,” she remarked.

“Fran was trained by Ferdinand himself and received notably high marks.”

“Goodness...”

We enjoyed our tea and sweets for a while longer until, soon enough, Fritz arrived with our visitors from the Gilberta Company. I saw Otto swallow hard when he saw how many nobles were packed into our new meeting room. He then looked my way and put on a broad smile, probably to hide how unsettled he was.

Can’t say I blame him. There are ten nobles here.

After the long greetings, I directed Otto to his seat and prompted him to have some tea. “How is the lower city?” I asked him while sipping tea and eating tarts. “The merchants from other duchies are flooding in now, correct? A trip to the workshops and orphanage shows a bustle much busier than previous years.”

I needed to show the nobles that information from the lower city was still useful.

“The amount of activity there is unprecedented,” he replied. “The Merchant’s Guild and the large stores all have their hands full with business, and while there is much room for improvement heading into next year, things are currently going smoothly.”

More people meant more business opportunities, and it seemed that the large store owners who had come to my meeting at the Italian restaurant were already working to prepare for next year.

“Rinsham and hairpins are selling well in the Gilberta Company, and the Italian restaurant is developing a certain high-class prestige due to the introductions-only system limiting visitors,” Otto continued. “Even the Sovereign merchants were stunned when they tried the food for themselves. Ehrenfest is still lacking in many areas, but what we do have excels far beyond that found in other duchies, so we can do business with our heads held high.”

The image of Otto and Benno cockily doing business with Sovereign and Klassenberg merchants easily came to mind and was endlessly amusing.

“I am glad to know there have been no major problems,” I said. “Is the cleanliness of the city being maintained also?”

“But of course. The soldiers are continuing their patrols, but they have to warn people much less regularly now. You may rest assured, everyone has grown used to their new way of life.”

It seemed that passages and roofs were being built such that people could properly dispose of garbage and waste even when enduring the deep snow of winter. Construction workshops and lumberyards were apparently quite busy as well.

“Moving on—let us discuss the dyeing competition. How are the dyeing workshops?” I asked.

“They are exceedingly invested in the competition, since it is an opportunity to earn a title from the archducal family and secure exclusive business from the nobility. The young craftspeople are burning with passion to acquire a title equal in prestige to that of the Gutenbergs, and seasoned craftspeople are frantically working together in an attempt to remember what the foremen of their youth said of the techniques.”

The dyeing techniques may have been abandoned, but there were still old records and pieces of cloth in the Gilberta Company and scraps of documents in the storerooms of the Dyeing Guild, which were being used to revive them. Things were apparently quite lively.

“This is a list of the dyeing workshops and craftspeople due to participate,” Otto said, holding out a sheet of paper. I scanned the names, and one in particular immediately caught my eye: Effa. The very moment I confirmed that her workshop’s name was there too, my enthusiasm shot through the roof.

Aah! Mom’s participating! I’m gonna choose her to be my personal craftsperson for sure!

I struck a victory pose on the inside while otherwise maintaining a cool exterior, and Otto took this opportunity to turn to Elvira. “Lady Elvira, might I ask when the competition is planned to take place?” he asked. “The craftspeople must be given a set date.”

He and Elvira proceeded to iron out details such as when the goods would need to be delivered on the day, when the tea party would start, how large the party would be, how many people could be brought to the castle, and so on, with the occasional interjection from Brunhilde. I pretty much just nodded along as other people made the decisions, wondering what title I should give those working in the field of dyes and fashion. Otto had said that it was important to them, but a perfect name just wasn't coming to mind.

The whole Gutenberg thing was pretty much a slip of the tongue, since I was so moved by Johann's metal letter types. Plus, I mean, I don't even care that much about dyeing. Printing is one thing, but fashion? Meh.

I knew a lot of names that cropped up in connection to libraries and the printing industry, but my only experience with dyeing in my Urano days had been when my mom invited me to try it out. I certainly couldn't remember any relevant important people.

The number of books I had read was of little consequence when I struggled to remember what they said. To be clear, I only even thought about spreading dyeing techniques in response to Justus's intelligence gathering. At no point had I expected that it would spawn an entire competition or that a new title would be involved.

Mm... I can't come up with the names of any people, but maybe I could use the name of a dye? "Yuzen" was the first thing that came to mind back then, but I'm pretty sure the people here struggle to pronounce Japanese words...

Not to mention, the names given by nobles tended to be longer in this world. The craftspeople would almost certainly give me strange looks if they were rewarded for their hard work with a short title.

Oh boy. Maybe I should just, like, use a word that means the revival of technology or something. There was a word like that, right? I mean, I've forgotten so much by this point, but I'm pretty sure one existed. The revival of an entire era of technologies... The revival of a culture so rich it would be difficult to categorize...

"Oh, right! Renaissance!"

I shot my head up, beaming with satisfaction, only to realize that everyone

was looking at me in utter bemusement.

“O-Oh. My apologies,” I stammered. “That would be, uh... I was just thinking of the title to give to the skilled participants of the competition. Ohoho...” I attempted to cover up my sudden outburst with a chuckle, but the strange looks I was receiving remained unchanged. Only after a lengthy moment of silence did Otto force a smile and glance around the room.

“Ah, Renaissance! Is that what you intend to call the dyeing craftspeople, Lady Rozemyne? You were making such a difficult expression that I feared I had made some blunder, but I see now that you were dedicating your formidable mental prowess to devising the perfect title.”

Holy cow... Otto is working so hard to fix the awkward silence. I can’t just tell him I was talking to myself like an idiot. What should I do?!

Brunhilde nodded. “I am glad you have found a title that you like, Lady Rozemyne,” she said.

“Renaissance...” I muttered, trying to figure out how to fix the situation. But the next thing I knew, everyone had settled on “Renaissance” being the dyeing-related title. Hartmut and Philine were already noting it down, and I could see Otto’s assistant Theo adding it to his diptych as well.

Oh no, no, no! It doesn’t even have anything to do with dyeing! At this point, Mom is going to be called a Renaissance. That doesn’t even make sense! And it sounds terrible! GAAAH!

The meeting came to a close shortly after, and our visitors from the Gilberta Company filtered out. Elvira then ordered the layscholars to exit. “You all may leave now,” she said. “Create records of today’s meeting and deliver them to Lady Florencia and Lady Charlotte. I have more to discuss with Lady Rozemyne and Lord Ferdinand.”

Elvira and Ferdinand had apparently agreed to talk after our meeting with the merchants. The layscholars departed, and as Monika went to summon Ferdinand, Fran poured me a freshly prepared cup of tea.

“What is there to talk about?” I asked. “I don’t recall being told about anything like this.”

“It is about what Aurelia has told us of Ahrensbach’s internal affairs,” Elvira replied. “Lord Ferdinand may not think it is necessary for you to hear this, but I believe you are better off knowing than not.”

I looked at my retainers. Brunhilde and Hartmut both seemed to agree; their relief at our previous meeting finishing had already vanished from their faces.

“Mother, what kind of person is Lady Aurelia?” I asked.

“You will generally be meeting her as the archduke’s adopted daughter, so address her only as ‘Aurelia.’ In any case... she has spoken with Lamprecht, and since she has only met with a careful selection of people, it seems that the former Veronica faction has yet to make contact with her.”

Since Lamprecht and Aurelia were living in a side building on Karstedt’s estate, Elvira and the others were able to monitor who went to see them.

“It seems that the other bride, Bettina, is already closely associating with the former Veronica faction,” Elvira continued. “That much was to be expected, of course.”

Freuden was apparently a mednoble in the former Veronica faction. Socializing with his family meant directly socializing with the former Veronica faction, so there was no avoiding this.

“One thing of particular note is that Aurelia appears to wear her veil at all times,” Elvira said. “I have yet to clearly see her face.”

“Ah, yes. I seem to recall Lamprecht saying that she wishes to avoid being misunderstood because of her sharp features.”

“I am sure that her continuing to wear an Ahrensbach veil will invite more misunderstandings than anything...” Elvira said with a sigh. However, if she had lived her life up to this point being subject to constant misunderstandings, it only made sense that she would want to avoid any further misunderstandings in this tense situation.

“Erm, Mother... Shall we invite Aurelia to the dyeing competition? I am not allowed to contact her at the moment, but we cannot just leave her out, can we?” I asked. Not inviting Aurelia to a competition being hosted by Florencia, Elvira, and me—the mother of her husband’s lord, her mother-in-law, and her

sister-in-law, respectively—would give off the impression that she was being deliberately ostracized.

“Indeed. We must invite her. I will strive to remain with you at all times but have Brunhilde with you as well. You must also take care with all that you say.”

As I was heeding Elvira’s various warnings, Ferdinand arrived. “Elvira. Speak what you know,” he said.

Elvira prefaced her response with a, “Now, this is secondhand knowledge from Lamprecht...” before going on to explain the reason why Ahrensbach had lost almost all of its archduke candidates. “It seems that Aub Ahrensbach’s first wife was from Drewanchel, and his second wife from Werkestock. His third wife is Lady Georgine, as we know.”

“Werkestock... That explains that,” Ferdinand said. He had evidently inferred something crucial from Elvira’s answer, but I was still absolutely clueless. The most I knew was that Werkestock was a greater duchy that had been lost following the civil war.

“His first wife had three daughters and no boys, while his second wife had two boys,” Elvira continued.

Since both the archduke’s first and second wives were from greater duchies, it had been expected that one of his second wife’s sons would succeed him. Some of his first wife’s daughters had married into other duchies as a result, while one married an archnoble inside the duchy. However, the civil war had then occurred, and the first and second wives became politically divided. Aub Ahrensbach had supported the faction of his first wife’s family in Drewanchel, which had ultimately put him on the winning side.

“As you know, there was a large-scale purge following the civil war,” Elvira went on. She was referring to the purge of nobles that had been carried out by the new king and Klassenberg, through which the defeated greater duchy was severely punished. “Aub Ahrensbach’s second wife was executed for being the little sister of Aub Werkestock. Her sons were going to be executed along with her, but due to the desperate pleas of Aub Ahrensbach, their lives were spared on the condition that they would be reduced in status to archnobles.”

Thus, despite Ahrensbach being on the winning side, it quickly fell into a

succession crisis. This was only made worse by the fact that they had been given a portion of Werkestock's land to manage, thereby enlarging their duchy.

"By the time the second wife's sons had been reduced to being archnobles, the first wife's daughters had already been married away, meaning they were no longer of Ahrensbach's archducal family. It seems that Aub Ahrensbach is attempting to increase his duchy's number of archduke candidates by adopting his daughters' children—that is, his grandchildren."

Unfortunately, every duchy was suffering from a shortage of nobles, so he had only been able to adopt one of them. His plan was to raise this child as the next aub. Incidentally, when his first wife died, Georgine had taken her place.

"Lady Georgine's oldest daughter had similarly wed an archnoble and is no longer an archduke candidate. That leaves only Lady Detlinde and Lady Letizia, the previously mentioned adopted granddaughter."

"The archduke's younger brother is a member of the archducal family, is he not?" Ferdinand asked. "If he has an abundance of children, could the aub not relinquish his seat early and prioritize regrowing the archducal family?"

Elvira slowly shook her head. "It seems to be tradition in Ahrensbach for all other members of the archducal family to lose their status. Aurelia's father was given land and became an archnoble," she said, making it clear that Ahrensbach truly was out of options. "And that is all I have heard from Lamprecht."

"I still have many questions, but given that Aurelia is the daughter of a third wife from Frenbeltag, it is possible that she knows no more than that," Ferdinand said. His brows were pulled into a frown, and he began to contemplate the situation with a look of thorough displeasure on his face.

The Dyeing Competition

Since Lamprecht's and Freuden's Starbindings had taken place at the end of summer, the summer coming-of-age and the autumn baptism ceremonies came right after. I carried out my roles for them before moving to the castle for the dyeing competition. I would be staying there for a brief period until the Harvest Festival.

"Just a bit longer, Lady Rozemyne," Lieseleta said when we arrived. She was spreading out colorful cloth adorned with intricate magic circles (and decorations to hide these magic circles) with an overjoyed smile on her face. The embroidering for Schwartz's and Weiss's outfits was almost done thanks to her, Charlotte, and the others.

"They look wonderful, Lieseleta!" I exclaimed.

"There's still a bit more that needs to be done. Let me help too," Angelica said, her blue eyes flashing intently as she picked up a needle. She was determined to learn the magic circles. Judithe quickly grabbed some thread, not wanting to be beaten out.

Wowee. Everyone has so much girl power.

I could only bow to their overwhelming femininity, so I elected to do something else entirely.

"Damuel, Cornelius, I will entrust you with guard duty. Hartmut, Philine, there is transcribing to be done. We do not have much time, so let us hurry," I said. My aim was to finish transcribing Dunkelfelger's book and translating it into modern vernacular before my return to the Royal Academy.

I left the tea party preparations to Brunhilde, Elvira, and Florencia while focusing on my translation, and soon enough, the day of the dyeing competition arrived.

The tea party was being held in the afternoon, but the Gilberta Company was due to start bringing in the cloth at third bell. A messenger soon announced

their arrival, so I moved to the location of the event to meet them. I was the first one there, but Florencia and Elvira came moments later. Otto paused giving instructions to his workers when he saw us and came over. We exchanged lengthy noble greetings, then Elvira peered around the room.

"Otto, what are these wooden frames?" she asked, nodding toward the objects that the Gilberta Company staff were setting up along the walls.

I immediately recognized the frames as hangers used to hold cloth. They were around two meters tall and somewhat similar in appearance to a torii, the gate built at the entrance to Shinto shrines. In fact, they were better compared to the stands used to display kimonos in Japan. Florencia and Elvira were used to merchants spreading the cloth out for them rather than hanging it up for all to see, so they didn't quite understand. Elvira was watching the workers with her brow furrowed.

Otto responded with a subtly troubled smile. "Although this is the debut of the new dyeing method, it is also a tea party. We thought this would allow guests to view the cloth from a distance," he said.

Normally, when nobles decided on cloth, the various options were lined up in front of them. They would feel each piece and select their favorites, which the merchants would then spread out for them. But given the nature of this event, there wasn't enough manpower, cloth, or time for each noble in attendance to be tended to individually. Otto had apparently agonized quite a bit over how to solve this predicament.

"The craftswoman who makes Lady Rozemyne's hairpins suggested this design," he said. "She believed the colorful cloth would stand out well against the pure white walls of the castle. By using these hangers, it should be easier to decide on one's preferences."

"This event is not just being held to view new cloth," I added, doing my best to support Otto and prevent any disagreements. "We also intend to display a new dyeing method and decide whom to reward with our exclusive business. For that reason, all cloth must be shown equally, regardless of individual preferences. It would no doubt be too much of a struggle for the Gilberta Company to host all of our guests at once on their own, but by displaying

everything at once, everyone can easily identify their favorites. There should not be any issues so long as the proper steps are taken when we decide on our workshops and select our cloth."

Elvira's expression softened a little. "It is true that we lack the time for each piece of cloth to be directly presented to each person."

The displayed cloth was intended to be used for winter clothing, so each piece was the divine color of winter. Rather than there being only red, however, the wall ended up decorated with a variety of colors from pink to orange. Some pieces even incorporated gradients, seamlessly blending several colors from this spectrum into one another. Most of the cloth was decorated with floral patterns, perhaps because it had been made at my suggestion.

Of course, Brunhilde wasted no time in voicing her thoughts to the Gilberta Company. "You there. Place those frames further apart," she said. "The design on the cloth is hardly visible."

"A-As you wish."

"This cloth should be positioned such that this flower is easier to see."

"Of course, my lady."

She continued to give precise instructions on how each piece needed to be displayed. I sympathized with the staff members who were having to meet her meticulous demands, but there was no denying it—Brunhilde had impressively sharp eyes. The minor alterations she asked for truly did make the cloth look better on display.

"Lady Rozemyne..." Otto whispered quietly. He was hoping that I would intervene, since his ravaged employees were shooting him desperate looks, but I wasn't going to stop Brunhilde. I hadn't seen her this lively in quite a while.

"I believe the tea party will run a lot smoother if we trust Brunhilde's sense for these things," I said. "You may use this opportunity to learn the aesthetics of an archnoble."

Soon enough, the castle's attendants were hurrying about, busily getting things ready for the tea party. The tables were set, and Florencia went to oversee preparations for the sweets and such. Meanwhile, Elvira was watching

the Gilberta Company's staff as they put the cloth on display. All of a sudden, she looked up and summoned Otto, as though she had noticed something.

"It occurs to me that although the cloth is all visible, we cannot tell which piece was made by whom. Will there be name tags?" she asked.

Otto shook his head. "In order to maintain fairness, we have attached numbers to the cloth that only we of the Gilberta Company can decode. If a particular piece earns your favor enough for you to want to give that workshop your exclusive business, please state its number. We will inform you of the workshop's name and the craftspeople who made it."

"So we need only rely on our eyes, then. That sounds suitable for a new method such as this," Elvira said with a nod, but I didn't approve in the least. It was possible that this anonymity would prevent me from selecting Mom to have my exclusive business. Otto had said this was to "maintain fairness," but it was clearly to prevent my nepotism in particular. I pursed my lips.

Come on, what's the problem with a little nepotism?! Don't be mean, Otto!

Having no other choice, I resolved to find Mom's cloth on my own.

And I'll do it too! The power of my love will see me through!

After lunch, we checked over the preparations and then waited for fifth bell, when the event was due to begin. Rihyarda had scolded me for having a light lunch so that I could gorge myself on sweets at the tea party, but Ella had started focusing on pies and tarts recently, so I needed all the room I could get.

"Lady Rozemyne, if you do not mind, there is someone I wish to reintroduce you to," Elvira said. She had returned home for lunch and now had Aurelia with her.

Just as Elvira had feared, Aurelia was hiding her face behind a thick veil decorated with elaborate embroidery. And indeed, at first glance, Aurelia seemed to be rejecting Ehrenfest culture and expressing her allegiance to Ahrensbach traditions.

"This is Aurelia, Lamprecht's wife," Elvira said. "I understand that it is a little early for guests, but as she would not be comfortable entering the castle alone, I decided to bring her with me. Aurelia, this is Lady Rozemyne. She is my

daughter and Lamprecht's younger sister, but she was adopted by the archduke. I imagine you know her from the Starbind Ceremony, where she acted as the High Bishop."

"Yes," Aurelia replied. "I was truly happy when she blessed us."

I went on to exchange greetings with Aurelia, but as her face was still covered, it didn't really feel as though I was meeting her properly. "There are going to be many other nobles gathering today, so would it not be wise to remove your veil...?" I asked her.

"See, Aurelia? Lady Rozemyne thinks so too," Elvira said.

"I'm sorry, Mother. I've told you, I simply... I simply cannot..." Aurelia replied, tightly gripping her veil as if obstinately securing it in place. I could tell that Elvira had urged her to remove it countless times already, aware that not being able to see someone's face inevitably made them seem more hostile and foreign... but Aurelia's trembling hands made it equally clear that she was terrified even while hidden beneath it.

"Aurelia, I am concerned for you," I said. "The act of stubbornly wearing an Ahrensbach veil makes it seem as though you are refusing to embrace Ehrenfest."

"That is not my intention whatsoever..." Aurelia murmured, but her grip didn't appear to loosen in the slightest. I had no idea how many people had misjudged her based on her facial features before, but it had evidently been enough to traumatize her.

"If you insist on wearing a veil, perhaps you could wear one made with Ehrenfest cloth," I proposed. "That would at least somewhat demonstrate that you consider our duchy to be your new home."

Aurelia twitched at the suggestion. Elvira shook her head warily, but she did concede that it would help her make at least a marginally better impression.

"Today, we are going to be looking at cloth dyed with both old and new dyeing techniques, some of which I personally suggested," I said. "Aurelia, perhaps you could select your favorite and use it to make a new veil. That alone would make a much more favorable impression."

“I thank you ever so much for the wondrous idea, Lady Rozemyne. I would indeed like to make a new veil with Ehrenfest cloth,” Aurelia replied, her relief palpable in her voice.

Once that was decided, Elvira began walking briskly around the room, carrying out final checks with Florencia, who had similarly returned from lunch. Brunhilde was closely checking each piece of cloth with narrowed eyes, making sure they were displayed in the most effective manner. Meanwhile, I was trying to work out which one was Mom’s. There were some pieces of cloth that varied in color from orange to purple, some that varied from dark to light red, some with an uneven tie-dye, and some with repeated patterns.

Now, which one is Mom’s...?

Among the various pieces on display, some had opted to use bright colors for the flower petals, while others had used green for the leaves. They stuck out the most, since not too many people had experimented much beyond the divine color of winter.

Wait... Is Aurelia following me? Erm... Has she imprinted on me or something...?

For some reason, Aurelia was walking around with me, like a duckling following her mother. Both Florencia and Elvira were busy, so maybe it was my role as a host to entertain her.

What to talk about, what to talk about... Um... Er...

“Aurelia, can you see in front of you while wearing that?”

“Um...”

“I used a face-concealing veil in the past, but I could only see my feet, and not the faces of those I was meeting with.”

I had worn a veil during the Spring Prayer I attended as a blue shrine maiden, and while it had proven effective at stopping people from seeing my face, I hadn’t been able to see their faces either. Surely it was making it more difficult for Aurelia to socialize.

“This veil is inscribed with a magic circle, so...” Aurelia trailed off, her tone

apologetic. It seemed that she could see her surroundings just fine.

"So you're able to see the people around you, even with your face covered?"

"Y-Yes, that's right."

"The embroidery does seem fairly complex. Are you skilled at embroidery, Aurelia?"

"I am merely average."

In other words, super good...? I'm pretty sure Lieseleta described herself the same way.

"You are skilled at everything, aren't you, Lady Rozemyne? Lamprecht always boasts about being your older brother. I am told you are as compassionate as a saint," Aurelia said.

Apparently, Lamprecht had mentioned at some point or another that he was only where he was today because I had saved him.

"Lamprecht said that you would not despise me when we first met, as you show compassion even to orphans and those of other factions, but I could not bring myself to believe it," Aurelia continued. "And yet, on the day of the Starbind Ceremony, you graced me with kind words. I was truly happy. Even today, rather than having me remove my veil, you graciously suggested that I replace it with a new one. I can hardly express how thankful I am."

I hadn't known this, since I rarely had reason to meet with Lamprecht and thus rarely spoke to him, but he was apparently really grateful to me. It seemed that Aurelia was sticking to me so closely in large part because she valued his words so highly. I wanted to praise Lamprecht in turn and boost her opinion of him further, but nothing really came to mind, so I elected to continue deepening my own bond with Aurelia instead.

"In that case, as your new little sister, I will give you a piece of cloth myself. Consider it a gift in celebration of your marriage. Would you rather have something cute or pretty?"

"Given my height, I do not believe cutesy cloth would complement me very well..." Aurelia replied. She shook her head dismissively, but I could tell from

her tone that she liked cute things, even if she didn't think they suited her.

"As this is only a face covering, there is no need for you to fret about your height," I said. "The most you should pay attention to is the color, so that you may ensure it goes with the clothes you normally wear."

Aurelia's face twitched nervously beneath her veil. It was as though her heart was speaking through her body, which was pretty amusing to see. I turned to Brunhilde, who was following behind me; she could provide better advice than anyone else here.

"Brunhilde, which design would best suit a veil similar to the one Aurelia is currently wearing?"

"Might I suggest this one made using both tie-dyeing and resist-dyeing?" Brunhilde responded. "If you would prefer a more prominent design, this one is quite nice. If one's intention is to embroider a magic circle, cloth with designs on the side but none in the middle might be easiest to use."

Aurelia began looking at the pieces of cloth on display. I couldn't see her expression, but I could tell that she was examining them more seriously, because she was actually stopping in front of them and staring at them for much longer than before. Brunhilde was observing this process, writing down the numbers that Aurelia considered for a particularly long time.

As this went on, I returned to looking for Mom's cloth.

Because of my time spent bonding with Aurelia, I was seated between her and Elvira when the tea party eventually began. I had received the secret order to bring up Ahrensbach and try to extract as much information from her as possible. It was a critically important mission.

Ahrensbach topics, hm...?

I sipped my tea and then turned to Aurelia. "You know, Aurelia... There are a few questions I have about Ahrensbach. Could you assist me?"

"Y-Yes. Of course. Assuming they are questions I can answer..." Aurelia replied. She sounded defensively tense, but I needed to press on with my important mission.

“How many books are there in Ahrensbach’s libraries?”

“B-Books? Libraries...?” Aurelia repeated, her voice cracking in surprise. Meanwhile, Elvira and Florencia lowered their eyes, as if showing their dissatisfaction with my choice of question.

“Indeed. As a greater duchy, the castle must be filled with books, no?”

“My apologies, but I do not know the precise number. I did not visit the castle very often. I do remember, however, that the Royal Academy’s library has many more books.”

I recalled that despite Aurelia being the archduke’s niece, she had been poorly treated as the daughter of a third wife. It made sense that she wouldn’t visit the castle on a regular basis.

“In that case, did you perhaps bring any Ahrensbach books with you when moving here?” I asked eagerly. “I have a particular fondness for stories. Dunkelfelger has many tales about strong knights, but what of Ahrensbach? If you know of any, I would love to hear them.”

Aurelia tilted her head. “If you are asking about famous knight stories, then tales about the slaying of sea feybeasts are quite popular.”

“Oh my. There are such tales in Ahrensbach?” Elvira interjected. “I would very much like to hear one.”

“This one is very widely known, but if you do not mind...”

Aurelia went on to tell us the story of a knight who slew a massive feybeast of the sea. It may have been a common tale in her home duchy, but it was tantalizingly unique here in Ehrenfest. Philine was desperately writing it down behind me.

Aurelia mentioned various sea creatures in her story, so I was sure I could secure some dried seaweed or something of the like by getting on good terms with her. My excitement rose through the roof despite having been so thoroughly quashed before.

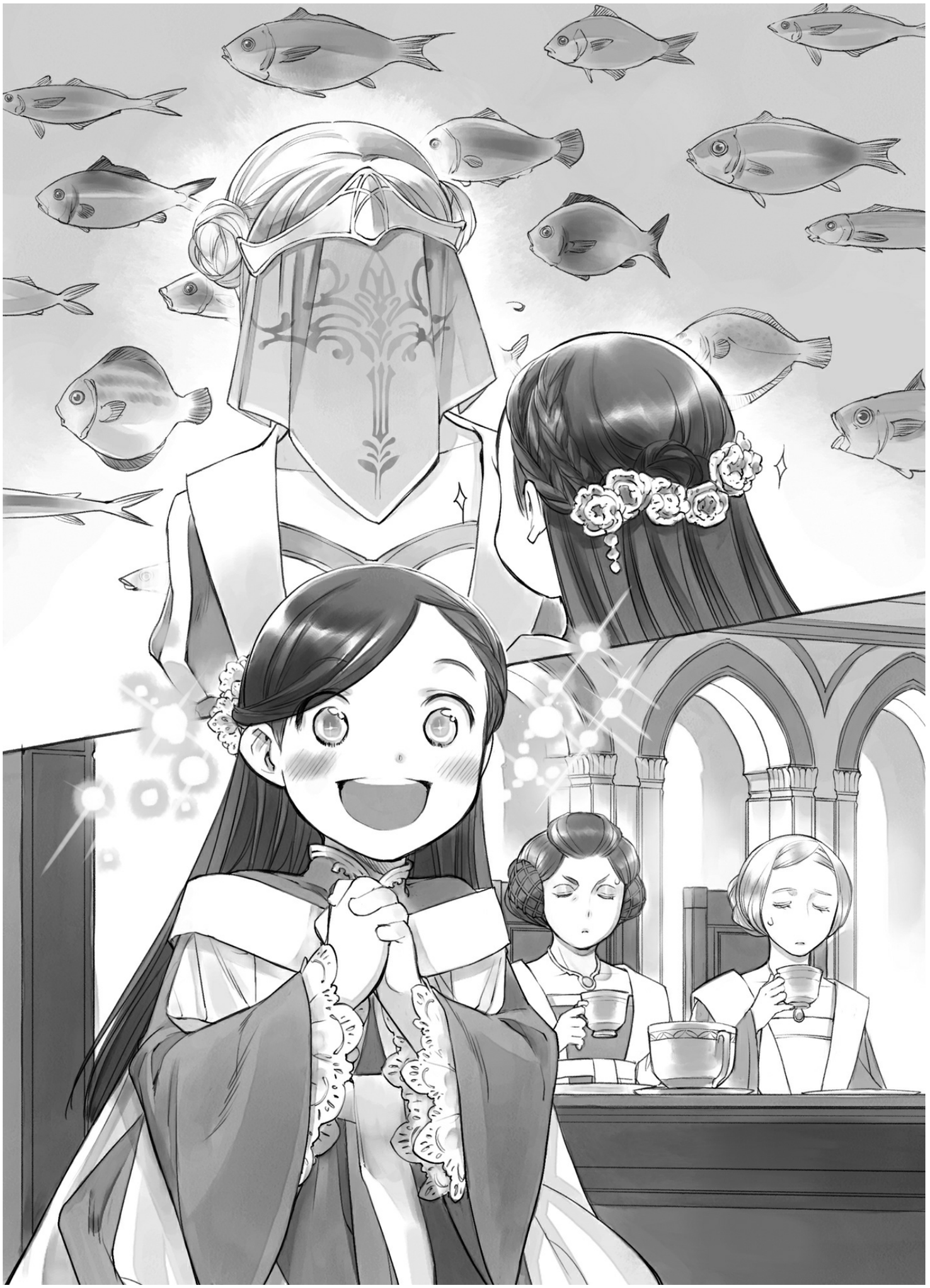
Fish! Seafood! Yahoo!

As my mind swam with thoughts of delicious new meals, the complex design

on Aurelia's veil started to look increasingly like a school of appetizing fish.

"I learned during my geography lessons that Ahrensbach, unlike Ehrenfest, borders an ocean. What types of sea creatures can be caught there? Are they tasty? Are they delicious?" I asked, squeezing my hands together and gazing up at Aurelia with hopeful eyes.

She trembled slightly in fear.



“I... believe Ehrenfest food is more delicious,” Aurelia replied, trembling slightly under the intensity of my stare. “I do enjoy Ahrensbach food, as it is the food of my homeland, but...”

“Here in Ehrenfest, eating fish is something of an unrealistic dream...” I said, expressing my sadness that she didn’t have any for me. Aurelia likewise slumped her shoulders.

“I do have some in a time-stopping magic tool that I brought with me from Ahrensbach, but they are not edible.”

“Why not?!”

“Unfortunately, there is nothing in there that I am able to prepare.”

Aurelia had intended to bring prepared meals with her so that she could eat them whenever she grew homesick, but in the end, she had only been given raw ingredients. A proper archnoble lady did not cook for herself—such work was delegated to her chefs—and so she was unable to do anything with them, no matter how fresh they were or how much she longed to eat them. For now, she found Ehrenfest food—or rather, the food served at Karstedt’s estate—delicious and intriguing enough that she had not needed to touch the contents of her magic tool.

“Since the mana expenditure for running the time-stopping magic tool is so great, I am planning to dispose of the fish,” Aurelia said. “I will not be eating them either way.”

“Wait a moment. I implore you to reconsider! If you are going to dispose of them regardless, I ask that you at least give them to me.”

“Lady Rozemyne, asking for things in that manner is simply shameless.” Elvira chastised me, grimacing alongside Brunhilde, but disguising my desires here simply wasn’t an option. If all that valuable fish were so wastefully thrown away, I would feel enough regret to kill me a thousand times over.

Fish. Seafood. Must eat. Must eat so much. I’ll even take plain, grilled fish. Just... please. I need it.

“Aurelia, I shall have my personal chefs cook the fish. The flavor will not be

exactly as you remember, since the seasoning will differ, but I can certainly create new dishes with it," I said.

"New dishes...?" Aurelia repeated. Elvira's eyebrows twitched.

"If a married couple does not respect one another's cultures, everything will fall apart," I said. "It is unfair that one should endure while the other lives freely, Aurelia, and it is only natural that you would feel sentimental about your home duchy. One never forgets the meals one grew up with. However, if you have only the ingredients, why not try making them with Ehrenfest seasoning? This, too, is interduchy diplomacy."

It wasn't as though I had married Aurelia myself, and I was aware that I was basically spewing nonsense in the hope that nobody paid too much attention to the actual words coming out of my mouth. But that wasn't important. What mattered was whether I could exploit her marriage to secure myself some seafood.

"If the food you are accustomed to grows popular in Ehrenfest, will your life not become more comfortable?" I asked. "It certainly will. If you would allow me, I believe it is necessary for Ehrenfest chefs to work with Ahrensbach ingredients and create something new entirely! By doing this, we will not just break the ice, but melt it completely, and the resulting flood of our new trend will wash all across the country! Aurelia, let us join hands and work together, for a brighter future."

"I-If you insist..."

Through sheer force alone, I was able to squeeze a promise out of Aurelia, thereby ensuring that she wouldn't throw away her fish under any circumstances. I had secured some new ingredients, but at a price—in the end, I was unable to identify which piece of cloth on the wall was Mom's. I only managed to narrow it down to three candidates before running out of time. In other words, I was unable to pick my personal Renaissance.

In the end, I allowed Brunhilde to pick the cloth for my winter outfit, under the condition that we would use the design Tuuli had come up with. She selected a piece with a slight gradient going from dark red to bright crimson, covered with flowers of various thickness that could have been made by

repeatedly dyeing the cloth over and over.

I failed... The strength of my love simply wasn't enough.

Post-Competition and the Harvest Festival

The next day, I was due to be measured and order my new outfit. Otto soon arrived, this time accompanied by Corinna and her seamstresses so that they could prepare the cloth we had chosen. It was sad that I hadn't been able to secure Mom as my personal dyer, but at the very least, I wanted to use the style of dress that Tuuli had designed for me.

"Lady Rozemyne, we thank you from the bottom of our hearts," Corinna said.

The dyeing competition yesterday had apparently been a huge success. Noblewomen had started placing orders with workshops and craftspeople through their exclusive merchants, earning them high praise from not only the large stores who had feared the Gilberta Company monopolizing everything, but also from the Dyeing Guild, the dyeing workshops, and the craftspeople themselves.

The cloth that the craftspeople had worked so hard to dye now had the approval of archnobles, meaning the new dyeing methods were cemented into Ehrenfest culture. The craftsmen who had earned the title of "Renaissance" from Florencia and Charlotte were looked upon with envy, and many burned with a passion to secure the title for themselves next time.

"As you did not decide upon a Renaissance, Lady Rozemyne, the craftspeople have shifted their focus to next season," Corinna continued. "I am told that there are young craftspeople who have begun to study art on the basis of the cloth you selected."

Prior to my new techniques, dyers had focused on learning to dye cloth a perfectly even color, tolerating no blemishes whatsoever. Now that resist-dyeing was becoming more widespread, however, people were needing to work on their artistic skills as well.

"There are some craftspeople who used their own art, but there are others who hired art workshops to draw the flowers and such for them. Those who had seamstresses apparently relied on embroidery and such to create their

designs. Indeed, the field of dyeing is changing dramatically as we speak," Corinna concluded.

It seemed the craftspeople were all collectively challenging the new dyeing techniques. That was nice to hear, and I certainly appreciated their efforts, but...

"Do warn the Dyeing Guild that single-color cloth is still going to be necessary in Ehrenfest," I said. "Remind them to be wary of repeating the mistakes of those who came before us by allowing currently existing techniques to be forgotten."

I wouldn't want this new trend to make everyone forget the techniques they currently used. There was no point in repeating what had happened when Gabriele of Ahrensbach made single-color dyeing trendy.

"I will ensure they are warned," Corinna said, nodding her understanding as she busily measured me. I made sure to listen carefully as she spoke to her aides, and it was then that I realized the numbers were a little greater than before. In a shocking twist, I was actually growing a bit.

Heck yes! I've grown a very tiny amount over the past year!

I could feel my excitement bubbling up within me, but I made sure to keep it from showing on my face.

Corinna gave a meaningful smile while placing the cloth that Brunhilde had selected against me. "You truly have sharp eyes, Lady Rozemyne," she said.

"Hm?"

"The piece of cloth you selected is the one that Effa dyed. Even when no names were provided, you were able to identify her work so easily. Otto could scarcely believe it."

No... It wasn't me. It... It really wasn't.

I had narrowed it down to a select few candidates, but Brunhilde was the one who had made the final choice.

Brunhilde succeeded where the strength of my love failed... Brunhilde, I kneel before your greatness!

Had I known this was Mom's cloth, I would have granted her the "Renaissance" title. I had already announced that I hadn't selected anyone, however, and it was too late to backpedal. I was disappointed that I hadn't managed to identify it on my own, but I was still genuinely glad to be using Mom's cloth for my winter outfit.

"I quite liked my summer outfit and would appreciate something similar for winter," I said.

Corinna nodded with a knowing smile. I had already told Elvira and Florencia that I wanted to establish bubble skirts as a trend, and Charlotte had called them cute and expressed interest in having her own made, so they were pretty much set in stone.

"Furthermore, do instruct Tuuli to create a hairpin to match this outfit."

"As you wish."

Once the measuring was done and my outfit and the hairpin were ordered, I prepared to depart for the temple; the Harvest Festival was fast approaching. Upon my return, I reported to Ferdinand what had happened during the dyeing competition. I also mentioned that I had spoken to Aurelia and wanted to make new recipes with Ahrensbach ingredients, at which point he began to shake his head.

"It is simple for you to say that you wish to make new recipes, but the chefs will struggle a great deal with your request," he began. To summarize the list of points he bombarded me with, my personal chefs wouldn't know how to handle the bizarre ingredients from Ahrensbach, and this inexperience was considered dangerous. Unknown ingredients were pretty much treated as explosives.

I suppose that's fair enough. I seem to recall there being quite a few ingredients that needed special treatment back in my lower city days.

There was the faux garlic one had to crush ahead of time, mushrooms that one had to burn to stop them from dancing... Ferdinand was right that it was unwise for the chefs to try to use these new Ahrensbach ingredients without knowing how to deal with their quirks.

"In the past, southern nobles would at times offer Ahrensbach ingredients to

the castle, so court chefs and those serving nobles of the former Veronica faction might be familiar with them," Ferdinand said. "But we cannot trust Aurelia enough to simply use ingredients she has brought with her."

At this rate, his lack of trust in Aurelia was going to delay my chance of eating seafood. I needed to do something, and fast.

"Aurelia is by no means a bad person," I said. "In fact, she was so timid that she could not even remove her veil."

"Fool. This is why you are called narrow-sighted. Think not just of Aurelia, but also of those around her," Ferdinand shot back. I almost wanted to cry.

The fish are within my reach! They're so close I could touch them! Unless I can eat them soon, I'm literally going to die!

"Ferdinand. We need to research these Ahrensbach ingredients, not just for the sake of adjusting Aurelia to Ehrenfest, but also in the interest of preparing new trends. Indeed, I absolutely... I... I really want to eat fish. I'm even willing to accept it plain, grilled with nothing but salt. The more complex flavoring can come with time. I just... I need fish. Now."

Perhaps I could squeeze some citrus juice over the cooked fish to add some seasonal flavors. Either way, I just wanted to eat some seafood. Anything would do.

Ferdinand started rubbing his temples. "You attempted to obfuscate your goals with lofty claims of wishing to help Aurelia and producing new trends, but you could not even finish your point before you revealed that you care only for satiating this apparent lust for food. Good grief... You truly never change. It seems as if educating you has been a complete waste of my time."

"Actually, your education has helped me change quite a bit. If not for your guidance, I would have barged into Aurelia's home with Hugo and Ella that very same day. We would not be having this conversation, because my mouth would already be filled with fish."

I was going through the appropriate procedure here. Some might have argued this was the absolute minimum expected of me, but as far as I was concerned, it showed just how far I had come. As I puffed out my chest and started bragging

about my growth, however, Ferdinand scolded me and said that there was still much more for me to learn.

Well... Yeah, okay. That's fair.

"I will consult Sylvester to see whether any of the castle chefs are familiar with Ahrensbach ingredients," Ferdinand said. "You remain in the temple. I feel as though you will wander out on your own if you are not placed under supervision. You would no doubt make convenient detours while traveling between the temple and castle, tempt gourmands for their political support, and..."

Ferdinand went on to describe all the things he thought I might do, counting them off on his fingers one by one. I could now travel between the temple and castle without him, since I had adult noble retainers with me, and it was absolutely true that I was thinking about sneaking away during one of the journeys to further my fishy agenda. He had seen right through me.

This isn't good. I'm like an open book to him. Can he read minds or something?

I awkwardly glanced up at Ferdinand, who grimaced slightly in response. "I simply listed the past actions of a certain archduke with escapist tendencies, but I see that some rang a bell for you," he said.

CURSE YOU, SYLVESTER!

"Furthermore, your thoughts are written on your face. Are you not excessively lowering your guard due to the fact we are in the temple?"

"Nghhh..."

He was right again; I always relaxed when I was in the temple. I rubbed my cheeks and tried putting on a more noble-like expression, only for Ferdinand to let out an exasperated sigh.

"You seem to have forgotten this because it inconveniences you, but you are forbidden from contacting Aurelia. You were allowed to meet during the dyeing competition under Elvira's supervision, but that was an exception, if you would recall."

I had completely forgotten due to our friendly conversation at the tea party, but I had indeed been told not to contact her. I couldn't see why, though. She didn't seem dangerous at all... and I really wanted some fish.

Hm... I can't contact her without supervision. So I can *contact her* with *supervision.*

I slapped my cheeks, straightened my back, and put on a noble smile. "I would very much like to prepare offerings to Cuococalura the God of Cooking before all the lives of this land are blanketed in the harsh winter brought about by Ewigeliebe the God of Life's frigid emotions. Let us satisfy Cuococalura with offerings made by the joint wisdom of Ahrensbach and Ehrenfest. Lord Ferdinand, would you take the time to join us in this endeavor?"

"If rumors spread that Aurelia is attempting to spread Ahrensbach cooking throughout Ehrenfest, the former Veronica faction will take it as an opportunity to leap to her side. Do not give Elvira even more work to deal with," Ferdinand said, dismissing my suggestion with a harsh glare. It seemed that the fish would need to wait until the former Veronica faction settled down.

And so, my fish dream fades away. My fish... My fiiish...

I spent the next few days trying again and again to convince Ferdinand, engaging in hopeless trial and error, approaching the situation from every possible angle, until an ordonnanz from Elvira finally interrupted my efforts. She informed me that a paper-making workshop had been established in Reunwalt, and that Wilfried had completed his final checks.

Since we were only having the paper-making workshops produce the most basic form of paper, teaching them the process only took about a month. We could easily be back in time for the Harvest Festival.

Four gray priests from the Rozemyne Workshop climbed into Lessy alongside those from the Plantin Company who needed to establish a Plant Paper Guild, then we headed to the province in question. The instructors were made up of gray priests with experience staying in Illgner, and gray priests who had socialized with the commoners in Hasse. There were leherls from the Plantin Company as well, so I wouldn't need to worry. I simply needed to emphasize that the gray priests were not to be treated poorly or as though they were

property.

Aside from the trip to the paper-making workshop, I needed to select priests to swap out with those at Hasse, organize winter preparations, and check over the printing industry. I was kept so busy that the Harvest Festival seemed to come around in the blink of an eye.

There wasn't actually much ground for me to cover this year, since Wilfried and Charlotte were helping as well. Ferdinand said that we could just go to the same places we had gone for Spring Prayer, so our roles were settled without much discussion at all.

On top of my Harvest Festival duties, I was also going to be visiting Groschel to fetch the Gutenbergs. Justus was not accompanying me as my tax official this year; instead, another archnoble was taking his place. This archscholar was Hartmut's uncle, who had also been his superior before Hartmut became my retainer.

"Lady Rozemyne, will you be traveling by highbeast?" he asked.

It was normal for carriages to be used when traveling with blue priests; the long nature of the journey and the necessity of bringing luggage meant they were essential even to nobles. The scholar seemingly wanted to confirm that highbeasts were actually used in the temple. I explained that I would send my luggage and attendants ahead via carriage, while we traveled by highbeast. It was a system designed with my health in mind. I told the scholar that he was welcome to use a carriage, but he replied that he would rather use a highbeast as well.

I can't blame him. Highbeasts are faster and more comfortable than carriages.

After a brief meeting, we prepared to depart. Since the Harvest Festival was a religious ceremony and was being held outside of the castle, only Damuel and Angelica were accompanying me; the underage apprentices were having to stay behind. Upon being told this, Judithe shot Damuel a vexed glare and grumbled about being stuck without work again.

"Come on, Judithe. It isn't my fault this time..." Damuel said, scratching his cheek. Angelica nodded in agreement.

“Right. Rather than envying Damuel, you should work hard so that you can serve Lady Rozemyne properly when it’s your turn to guard her. I should ask Master to train you while we’re gone...”

Judithe shook her head. “I’ve already been told to improve my accuracy, so I’ll focus on that instead.”

The last thing I needed to do was delegate work to be done in my absence. The apprentice knights generally spent each day working on their coordination. This doubled as training for the hunting tournament for the castle’s winter preparations, which took place during the Harvest Festival.

“Shine so brightly that even the adult knights pale in comparison,” I said.

“Yes, my lady! Your wish is my command.”

“Hartmut, Philine—please continue transcribing our book from Dunkelfelger.”

“As you wish.”

“And as for my attendants, I ask that you complete the embroidery. Lord Ferdinand is going to be looking it over when he returns from the Harvest Festival.”

“Understood.”

As I continued to delegate work, my eyes fell on Brunhilde. “You suggested that all girls wear hairpins at the Royal Academy’s advancement ceremony and fellowship gatherings, correct?” I asked. “Summon the Gilberta Company and have them prepare hairpins for this year’s female students at the cost of a small silver each.”

“One small silver?” Brunhilde repeated, her brow furrowed. “Such hairpins would only be suitable for laynobles and mednobles. They are beneath you, Lady Rozemyne.”

“I intend to wear it double with my usual hairpin, and the archnobles may mimic this. I do not want laynobles to find themselves struggling for money because they have been forced to purchase something at my order.”

Brunhilde seemed to find my answer satisfactory; she began categorizing everyone’s hair colors and choosing which hairpins would suit them best.

So, now my castle retainers won't be lacking work while I'm at the Harvest Festival, right? Assigning suitable tasks to everyone is surprisingly difficult.

During the Harvest Festival, I was going to be traveling by highbeast with Fran and Angelica, while Monika, Hugo, Ella, and Rosina were going to be traveling by carriage. Those going to Hasse's monastery were going to be guarded, as per usual, with Dad at the front. I gazed across all the gathered soldiers.

"I saw with my own eyes when visiting the Italian restaurant that the beauty and cleanliness of the lower city has been maintained," I said. "During my meeting there, the large store owners of the Merchant's Guild reported just how hard all of you soldiers have been working. You have my utmost gratitude, and the archduke is extremely pleased with this result. I am looking forward to hearing tales of your efforts over dinner tonight, at the monastery."

"As you wish. It will be my pleasure," Gunther said. He rapped the left side of his chest twice with his fist, and the soldiers behind him mimicked the motion with proud grins. I returned the gesture and then watched as the carriages departed.

It was afternoon when I arrived in Hasse, and the Harvest Festival immediately began. The farmers welcomed me with jubilation, pleased that the year had given them another bountiful harvest. I performed the baptism, coming-of-age, and Starbinding ceremonies while the archscholar who had accompanied me discussed taxes and the dead with the mayor, Richt.

Once the ceremonies were over, it was time for the warf tournament. The townspeople were as passionate about it as ever. I felt a little bad for the poor warf getting kicked around, but nobody else seemed even the slightest bit bothered.

Even though this was Hasse's Harvest Festival, I decided to leave midway through, as I would have done anywhere else. The tax official was still at the winter mansion when I made my way to the monastery.

"Lady Rozemyne!"

Upon my arrival, I was greeted not only by the gray priests, but by the soldiers as well, who were in such a fervor that one would think alcohol was being

served. I changed from my ceremonial robes to my usual robes and then headed to the dining hall.

“The monastery’s fields were bountiful as well. It must be because the earth is still overflowing with your mana,” Thore said, gleefully showing me the vegetables he had harvested. They looked tastier and much larger than the ones I was used to from my commoner days.

Rick smiled with Thore and pointed at a box in the corner of the dining hall. “We prepared the best vegetables to be sent to the temple for you to eat,” he said. “Greens go bad easily, so they’re soaked in oil or heavily salted, but we plan to get the root crops first thing tomorrow morning. Please do share them throughout the temple orphanage.”

Perhaps because they had spent so long doing farmwork, the monastery’s gray priests looked healthier and more tanned than the gray priests who had just arrived from the Ehrenfest orphanage.

“It must have been hard for the gray priests to learn Hasse’s ways, considering that they arrived without any farming experience,” I observed.

“It was, but the hard work allowed us to produce such delicious vegetables,” one of the gray priests replied. “Seeing the fruits of our labor lined up before us is infinitely more joyous than sitting and waiting to be given morsels.”

The loss of so many blue priests had meant that food shortages were once commonplace in the Ehrenfest orphanage. Only by providing for themselves had those living there managed to avoid going hungry. The gray priest smiled to himself, no doubt amused about how much they had once struggled to do something that now appeared so simple. He exuded the happiness of someone who had forged a new path for themselves, and that made me happy too.

After praising the gray priests, I walked over to the soldiers. It was a rare opportunity for me to properly speak with commoners. I paid close attention to their thrilling tales of running around the city before the entwickeln and then asked about how things were faring with all the merchants from other duchies visiting.

“I have heard the thoughts of the Plantin Company and the guildmaster, but I would like to know your perspectives as well,” I said. “Has the peace of the city

been at all affected, or have any non-merchants attempted to exploit the situation for personal gain? How does the situation seem to you soldiers?”

From a merchant’s perspective, there had been a whirlwind of activity following the arrival of the outsider merchants, but the huge spike in profits more than made up for it. There was much room for improvement, but with the lower city still clean and the Italian restaurant’s introduction system proving very effective, the consensus was that things had gone successfully overall.

The soldiers went right to telling me their thoughts.

“Prices have gone up, since there’re so many people buying so many things,” one said. “But in return, we have more work and we’re getting paid more. It was a bit rough before that raise got approved.”

“It was summer, so we were able to avoid starving by gathering in the forest, but we’re bound to struggle a lot more if this happens every year.”

“The eateries and taverns were completely packed for days on end. I’ve never seen so many people in the city at once.”

I noticed that Fran was frantically trying to write down all of the soldiers’ responses in his diptych. I took out my own diptych and did the same.

Considering that the merchants also brought servants with them, quite a flood of people had entered the city. There were even merchants who trawled the Craftsman’s Alley in the southern part of the city to see what people were making. Few were actually allowed into workshops, however, since nobody recognized them.

“The craftspeople said these wandering merchants were acting suspiciously. Furthermore, everyone was so busy trying to complete their orders that they weren’t particularly welcoming of outsiders wanting to chat.”

“The main street from the east gate to the west gate was constantly packed with people and more lively than it’s ever been. Unfortunately, fights at eateries and taverns became a lot more common, and we were frequently called to deal with them, so the east gate in particular was very busy.”

Even so, overall impressions were positive. I was relieved to know that their reports weren’t much different from those of the merchants.

“It is thanks to all of your efforts that the lower city remains so clean and its residents have adjusted to their new lifestyles so well,” I said. “You even ensured that minor fights were the only problems of note, despite so many outsider merchants flooding the city. I thank you ever so much, and I look forward to your continued service.”

“If not for your sage advice, Lady Rozemyne, we would not have patrolled the city so thoroughly or put quite so much work into warning the others,” Dad said. “It is very likely that the lower city would have ended up being demolished entirely. Our job as soldiers is to protect the city, so please do contact us if something like this happens again,” he concluded, once again tapping his chest twice in salute.

Good. Sounds like I managed to keep everyone safe.

Groschel and the Harvest Festival

It was a relief to know that the lower city was fine after all, but from what I could tell, it had reached its limit accommodating the merchants this year. Its current capacity wasn't enough to manage trade with any additional duchies, and there was no way we could prepare enough high-class inns and workers in time for all the new merchants who would presumably be coming in a year's time.

It might be time to consider selling how to make rinsham and hairpins...

The gray priests woke up first thing in the morning the next day to gather vegetables from the fields for us to bring back to the temple. I ate breakfast in the meantime.

Today's menu was soup and salad made with the fresh vegetables from the monastery's own produce, paired with some bacon brought in from Ehrenfest. We also had some bread slathered with jam made from honey and viorebes, the latter of which closely resembled the black currants found on Earth. The shrine maidens here had gathered the ingredients from Hasse's forest, which had then been prepared specially for my visit. The sour viorebe contrasted nicely with the sweet, thick honey, making for a truly delicious spread.

"The soup and jam were both delicious," I said. "I am sure we can thank the fruit and vegetables you have all grown together."

"The area around this monastery is brimming with your mana, so there is much more to gather in the forest," Thore said. It seemed that the land around the monastery was even richer than the land surrounding Hasse's river. I poured an extra amount of mana into the chapel feystone so that they could enjoy delicious fruits next year as well.

After finishing my breakfast, I saw off the carriages heading back to Ehrenfest. Inside were the gray priests who had switched places with new priests and were now going back to the orphanage. Being transported along with them were the vegetables that Thore and the others had farmed, the printed books from

Hasse, and the monastery's budgetary documents.

Dad and the soldiers lined up before me, as they had now done several times before, waiting for me to pay them and see them off as well.

"I imagine that disposing of one's waste is going to be quite the ordeal once the snow begins," I said, "and that is precisely why I ask that you help ensure the lower city does not regress by spring."

"Of course. They are currently making roofs so that waste can be disposed of even when the weather worsens. From there, everyone will simply need to work together. Rest assured, we will continue keeping an eye on things; we soldiers work no matter the weather."

I nodded, remembering that Dad would work even through snow. It was safe to entrust the lower city to him and the others. The soldiers saluted me, I returned the gesture, and then the carriages started on their return journey.

Once the carriages had disappeared into the distance, it was time for me to go too. I still needed to head to Hasse's winter mansion and check things with the tax scholar. Monika and Rosina took care of preparing for the departure, while the gray priests and shrine maidens cleaned up from breakfast. I moved to speak to Nora while watching Hugo and Ella deliver boxed lunches to Fran.

"Nora, has the monastery finished its winter preparations?"

"Yes. We now work in cooperation with the people of Hasse. We could not continue to rely on the Plantin Company forever," she replied.

In the past, those of the monastery had gotten through winter only with the Plantin Company's help. Now, the monastery had formed a cooperative relationship with the city of Hasse by providing both money and manpower. I would need to thank Richt later and encourage this collaboration to continue.

"Lady Rozemyne," Fran said. "Everything is ready."

I nodded. "If you'll excuse us then, Nora. I entrust the rest to all of you. The monastery is changing slowly but surely, which will no doubt trouble the new priests we have brought here from Ehrenfest. Please help them adjust to life here, while at the same time reevaluating yourselves, such that you do not depart too thoroughly from temple life. Too much change will cause chaos

when it is time for you to visit the Ehrenfest orphanage.”

“Understood.”

I headed for Hasse’s winter mansion with Fran and Angelica, walking my Pandabus beside the carriages that were transporting Monika and the others. I reunited with the tax official’s attendants at the winter mansion and then moved to his quarters; I would be double-checking his work while traveling by highbeast.

“Monika, let us meet later.”

“Yes, Lady Rozemyne.”

After watching Monika and the others go, Richt guided me around the plaza. I watched the tax official teleporting harvested crops to the castle, as was his duty. The magic circle-adorned cloth that had been put on yesterday’s stage was now spread out wide. A new set of taxed goods was placed atop it; the tax official touched the circle, making it light up; and then the goods disappeared. A portion of said goods were going to me.

“Richt, I’m told the people of Hasse are assisting the monastery with their winter preparations,” I said. “The gray priests were raised in the temple and know little of the world, so you are doing them a great service by providing them the tools to survive.”

“It is nothing. They are paying for our services and allowing us to gather near the monastery,” Richt replied, returning a smile that seemed to say that everyone needed to stick together. The forest around the monastery was so rich with my mana that it produced rather large fruit, which in turn attracted various animals. It was even a perfect place for hunting.

“I very much hope this cooperation between Hasse and the monastery continues,” Richt said.

“Indeed. As do we,” I replied. We smiled at each other, and it was about then that the tax official completed his work.

“Lady Rozemyne, let us head to the next city,” he said.

We flew to the next winter mansion by highbeast, I performed the necessary

rituals, and then we departed the next morning once the tax official was done with his work. He and I mostly spoke about this year's harvest or Hartmut as we traveled. He said that Hartmut had once been an exceedingly uncaring child but that he was now brimming with devotion to the Saint of Ehrenfest. This change apparently came as both heartwarming and concerning to him.

Honestly, I'm concerned too... It's scary because he's just that skilled at what he does. He even said that researching me is his life's work...

"Hartmut will obey his lady's orders, so please do keep a tight rein on him," the tax official had said to me. I seemed to recall Ottilie telling me the same thing.

"He is quite skilled," the tax official said, "so I believe he will prove quite a useful retainer to keep at your side."

"His mind is quite open as well. He adjusted to temple work in the blink of an eye," I replied. This news made the tax official stare at me in surprise.

"Hartmut, the infamously stubborn boy who changes his mind for no one, appears open-minded to you?" he asked. "His desire to serve you well must be compelling him to hide his true feelings."

It seemed that Hartmut was far more devoted than I expected. The term "religious fanatic" popped into my mind for a second, but it carried such negative connotations that I quickly swallowed it back down.

Maybe it's about time I reward him somehow...

Hartmut had been jealous of everyone's diptychs, so maybe giving a matching set to my retainers was a wise idea. I continued pondering the issue and eventually finished my part in the Central District's Harvest Festival, having collapsed and ended up bedridden only a single time.

Of course, I ended up bedridden again soon after my return to the temple.

I was the last one to complete my duties, due to my collapsing incident. Wilfried and Charlotte had narrowly made it back in time to participate in the hunting tournament.

"Ferdinand," I said. "I am going to Groschel next, as I recall."

“Contact Elvira first. You are going there not just for the Harvest Festival, but also to retrieve the Gutenbergs and observe the efficacy of their fledgling printing industry, are you not?” Ferdinand asked.

I clapped my hands together in realization. I had been planning to visit Groschel as the High Bishop, stay in the side building for the ceremony, and then grab the Gutenbergs and go, but I was most likely going to have to meet with the giebe as well. Brunhilde’s father was a purebred noble, and it would be a genuine problem if nobody was there to speak with him. Elvira and Brunhilde were essential for filling that role.

“This is Rozemyne. I am thinking of going to Groschel now that the Central District’s Harvest Festival is complete,” I said, contacting Elvira by ordonnanz. Her reply came an instant later: she needed to make various preparations and wanted to bring along some scholars, so we would be leaving three days from now.

With the date decided, I asked Brunhilde whether she would like to come with us. She was underage but that wasn’t a problem, since Groschel was her home province.

“Ferdinand, may I bring Hartmut and Philine with me too, even though I am attending the Harvest Festival as the High Bishop?” I asked. “I brought them with me before so that they could see the printing industry.”

My castle retainers didn’t need to be present for religious ceremonies, but I was going to be operating as a noble and a member of the archducal family, so it was absolutely preferable to have them there. My unusual double life sure was a pain in the neck.

“Yes, it would be wise to bring them with you just in case,” Ferdinand replied. “They may not be needed in the Central District, but we do not know what might be expected of you in Groschel.”

And so, I decided to bring my castle retainers with me. Fran, Monika, and Hugo were also going to be accompanying me. The noble mansion already had chefs, but I would need my own one too, assuming I was staying in the side building as the High Bishop.

As promised, preparations for the ceremony were completed three days later, and we promptly departed for Groschel. The province was like a second Ehrenfest; out of consideration for Gabriele of Ahrensbach, it had been given the portion of the Central District with the highest population and a perfect location alongside the primary trade route in and out of Ehrenfest. And since the city was built to her specifications, the tiny Noble's Quarter was strictly separated from the commoners' lower city. There was no winter mansion in sight, and unlike in Illgner, the Harvest Festival was held near the archduke's estate where commoners did not gather. From the sky, it was hard to tell where the ceremony was even due to take place.

I came here for Spring Prayer when I was an apprentice blue shrine maiden, but back then, I only handed over the chalices...

Not to mention, since Ferdinand had swiftly finished the customary greetings at the mansion, I had barely even been involved.

"Do you know where the ceremony is being held?" I asked the tax official.

"I do not. The taxes are taken at the giebe's mansion, so I know nothing of the ceremony."

In the provinces ruled by giebes, priests would simply take the registered medals and teleport the selected goods, since the local giebe would do their taxes themselves. Tax officials were therefore able to complete their job without even leaving the giebe's mansion. Having no other choice, I decided to ask upon landing once the necessary introductions had taken place.

"Giebe Groschel, where is the ceremony going to take place? I would ask that you take me there. This is my first time visiting this province for the Harvest Festival," I said.

Unfortunately, Count Groschel didn't know either. He rubbed his chin for a moment before gesturing over an attendant and whispering something into their ear. Not long after, someone who seemed to be a layscholar rushed in and announced that he would guide us there.

"I must attend the ceremony as the High Bishop, but you all may focus on the printing industry," I said to Elvira and the others. "My attendants and scholars may likewise enter the mansion, as you need not involve yourselves with the

ceremony.”

The scholars here for the printing industry nodded and went inside, but Hartmut alone asked to accompany me to the ceremony, an unmistakable sparkle in his orange eyes.

“I am forbidden from entering the temple chapel, Lady Rozemyne, so I seldom have the opportunity to see your blessings with my own eyes. Here in Groschel, however, there is no temple for me to be denied entry to.”

He was so invested in the idea that I couldn’t even muster the energy to turn him down. I simply gave up and allowed him to accompany Fran, Angelica, and me to the ceremony. Most nobles would do everything in their power to avoid the lower city, but he seemed excited enough that I stopped giving it any thought.

“My chef Hugo must be allowed to begin work,” I said to the laynoble before heading to the side building. The Gutenbergs were supposed to be living here, but the interior was completely empty. The blood drained from my face as I looked around and realized that nobody had lived here for a very long time.

“Where are my Gutenbergs?” I asked, shooting the laynoble a sharp glare.

“Th-They are living in the lower city. They... They asked to move there,” he answered nervously. He stammered so incessantly that I struggled to understand him, but the Gutenbergs had apparently asked for quarters closer to the workshop, since having to walk there every day was a waste of precious time and energy. “W-We did not force them to move, nor have we harmed them.”

“Very well. Take me to where the ceremony is being held. Hugo, begin preparing food. Monika, prepare the chambers to be used.”

The Gutenbergs may have moved to the lower city, but Fran and Monika needed to sleep here as a priest and a shrine maiden, respectively. They also needed time to cook and clean.

I climbed into Lessy with Angelica, Fran, and Hartmut and followed after our guide’s highbeast as he took us to the ceremony. Damuel took up the position of rear guard. After a short journey, we arrived at Groschel’s equivalent of a

central plaza.

“There certainly aren’t many people here, are there?”

The Harvest Festival was normally attended by all those who wanted to participate in the baptism ceremony, the coming-of-age ceremony, and the Starbind Ceremony. Groschel had a larger population than the other areas we had visited and yet only a few people were gathered. I could guess that only the participants and their families were here, which was a stark contrast to what I was used to from other places, where it seemed as though the entire city was in a festive mood. Still, thanks to there being so few people, I easily found the Gutenbergs among the crowd. They seemed to be doing okay, so all of the anxiety inside of me vanished.

“If you would excuse me...” the laynoble said. He left almost immediately after we arrived, as if he couldn’t bear to remain in the lower city for a moment longer. The foul stench and general filth no doubt appalled him. Even I scrunched up my face without thinking. It had been quite a while since I smelled the horrid stench of the lower city. There was no avoiding the odor, no matter how much one tried to get used to it.

“Hartmut, stand with Angelica,” I said. “And do not interfere with the ceremony.”

“May I assist Fran?” Hartmut asked. He gestured to Fran, who had his hands full registering the medals of the baptized children and checking those here for the coming-of-age ceremony and the Starbind Ceremony.

“Erm... I would not dare trouble you with this, Lord Hartmut...” Fran replied.

“I am an apprentice scholar. I know how to use the medals, and as is natural for a retainer of Lady Rozemyne, I spoke with Wilma and learned the processes for every ceremony,” Hartmut said, now standing beside Fran. He began registering medals without the slightest hesitation, so I signaled with my eyes for Fran to let him have his fun. Two people were faster than one, after all.

The registering and checking were progressing smoothly now that Fran was accepting Hartmut’s assistance, so I started reading a picture book bible to the children. Once I finished telling the story of the gods, I offered a prayer.

“O Schutzaria, Goddess of Wind, please hear my prayer. We offer thee our thoughts, prayers, and gratitude, so that thou might bless these newly born children and grant them thy divine protection.”

A light the divine color of Schutzaria shot out of my ring before raining down on the children. Blessings had become a normal sight to those of the Central District and me, but the same was not true for the people of Groschel.

“Whoa, the heck?! What is this?!”

“Ooh! Something’s shining!”



Their reactions made me realize that this was in fact the first time I was giving a blessing in Groschel. The nearby families watched with their mouths agape as the yellow light slowly came down. Gil, meanwhile, stepped forward from the group of Gutenbergs and puffed out his chest.

"Told ya, didn't I? I'm no liar. Lady Rozemyne's a saint who gives real blessings, and I'm her attendant," he declared. His language was crude again, perhaps because he had spent so much time in the province's lower city. I thought it was a heartwarming display, but Fran seemed to think otherwise—he grimaced, muttering his disbelief that Gil would identify himself as my attendant while speaking in such a manner.

Rest in peace, Gil. You're going to get lectured when we get back.

Either due to the awed cries of the children or Gil's loud bragging, a sizable peanut gallery began to form. By the time I had given the blessings for the coming-of-age ceremony and the Starbind Ceremony, quite a large crowd was watching.

"With this, the Saint of Ehrenfest's legend has spread further," Hartmut said, an almost drunken look of satisfaction on his face. It seemed that he was exceedingly overjoyed to be present for this moment. I simply did not understand it.

"I haven't done anything particularly special," I replied. The blessings used in ceremonies like these didn't require much mana. It wasn't too much different from lighting up a ring during noble greetings.

Hartmut, however, shook his head. "It is quite something to use one's own mana to bless commoners who are incapable of blessing one back," he said. Once again, I was finding out just how wide of a gap there was between myself and other nobles.

Although the event was called the Harvest Festival, Groschel was similar to Ehrenfest's lower city in that there was no actual harvest for everyone to celebrate. There were feasts held among neighbors after the ceremonies, and as the excitement faded, people gradually dispersed in groups of two or three until everyone was gone.

I gestured for the Gutenbergs to approach as the crowd continued to thin. Gil was the first one to run over. “You called, Lady Rozemyne?!” he exclaimed. It seemed that he had not entirely forgotten how to speak properly. I decided that I would put in a good word for him if Fran actually did try to scold him, although the thought alone made me chuckle.

“Please spend tonight in the side building. I would very much like to hear about your stay here,” I said.

“We have carriages prepared, since we knew you would be coming for the Harvest Festival,” he replied.

“Let us go to them by highbeast, then.”

I climbed inside Lessy, ready to go to the places where the Gutenbergs were staying to fetch the others, but the gray priests refused to get inside with me.

“We must cleanse ourselves and change clothes so that we are presentable enough to be seen with you, Lady Rozemyne. Riding inside your highbeast would simply be...”

The gray priests had been fine with living in the lower city, but now that I was here, they couldn’t help but be self-conscious.

“There is not much time,” I said. “I will cleanse all of you at once.”

“Erm...”

I had everyone gather into one spot after putting their things into Lessy. Lutz, Gil, Zack, Johann, Josef, and the others looked around nervously, not sure what was about to happen.

“Everyone, please hold your noses and close your eyes,” I said, whipping out my schtappe and filling it with mana.

“Lady Rozemyne, please know your strength,” Damuel hurriedly warned me before grabbing his nose, prepared to get wrapped up in the spell even from where he was standing behind me. The Gutenbergs followed suit upon seeing how quickly he had moved.

“*Waschen*.”

This time, everything seemed to go well. A wall of water appeared only

around the Gutenbergs and then disappeared a few seconds later. A few began to splutter, having opened their eyes and mouth in surprise at being so suddenly submerged in water, but everyone was now clean. As a bonus, the ground where the waschen had touched was now spotless as well.

"There we go. That should do it," I said. "Now, we ride."

The Gutenbergs climbed into Lessy with disconcerted expressions. I heard Lutz mutter about that spell being what must have cleaned the lower city.

Astute as ever, Lutz.

Once we were back in the side building, the Gutenbergs changed their clothes and then began speaking about where they were going to sleep tonight and such. I had Monika change me out of my ceremonial robes and into my noble robes. I could just send an ordonnanz to Brunhilde once I was done talking to the Gutenbergs.

"How has life been here in Groschel?" I asked.

They replied that it was not much different from life in Ehrenfest's lower city. They had endured very little contact with nobles, and thanks to the threatening look I had given the craftspeople of Groschel during our initial arrival, business had progressed smoothly.

"There were no problems in particular," Gil said.

Lutz nodded. "The gray priests were just a bit overwhelmed..."

The craftspeople had been fine here, since they were used to living in the filth that had once been everywhere in Ehrenfest's lower city. The gray priests, however, had been raised in the temple, so they had found it especially challenging to adjust to the foul smells and general uncleanliness.

"The smell in Illgner was not particularly bad, since there were few people and waste was used for agriculture, but here it has been quite something..." one of the gray priests said, sounding somewhat unhappy. "We have grown more used to it, though."

I found it a lot easier to understand the gray priests' thoughts and feelings now, perhaps because they had spent so long in the lower city, where one

needed to be more direct for others to understand them.

“Just as those in Haldenzel struggled, the smiths here failed to earn Johann’s approval for their letter types,” Zack said.

“But they were close, and we discussed them staying in our workshop over the winter,” Johann added. “Could you acquire the giebe’s approval for this, Lady Rozemyne?”

I gave a curt nod. It seemed that Johann had successfully formed a relationship of trust with the smiths. His experiences in Haldenzel had prompted him to speak more often, and Zack had apparently arbitrated between them.

“I’ve taught the carpentry workshop how to make a printing press. They’ll need to work with a smithy going forward, but there shouldn’t be any problems,” Ingo said. The workshop had successfully built two new printing presses. They had smoothly established which kinds of wood to use, how to cut them, and then how to put them together.

“What about the ink workshop?” I asked.

“Me! Me! I can answer thi—!” Heidi shot her hand up, eager to speak, but when Josef saw that I had Hartmut with me, he immediately clamped a hand over her mouth.

“Heidi, I’m begging you. Shut up...” Josef muttered. He then turned to me and cleared his throat. “*Ahem*... The ink workshop had no problems producing black ink, but the colored ink we know requires materials that cannot be gathered in this area. Instead, they have begun to experiment with ingredients local to Groschel.”

“Thank you, Josef.”

It seemed that, because of the black ink they had successfully produced, the printing itself was able to proceed without a hitch. Now, they simply needed to figure out what other ingredients would make the colored ink they wanted.

“And the paper-making workshop?” I asked.

“It didn’t go very well...” Lutz said, his shoulders slumped. Gil and the gray

priests exchanged looks, then they sighed and took out a few sheets of the paper made in Groschel. It certainly appeared to be of a lower quality than I was used to. At first glance, it looked like straw paper.

"Why is that?" I asked.

"The water here is filthy. It affected the paper."

In Ehrenfest, the wide river to the west of the city was pretty filthy, but the streams running through the forest were naturally clean and provided water that was suitable for paper-making. In Illgner, the water was clean in general, probably because the province was located in the countryside. This was our first time encountering such a problem.

"They must either import clean water or clean their current sources," I said. "Then again, I suppose this is not an issue that mere craftspeople can solve. I will speak to Giebe Groschel."

And with that, our discussion came to an end.

I was looking over Hartmut's notes on the meeting when I noticed Lutz and Gil exchanging looks. They grinned at each other and then both started walking over to me.

"We would like to offer you this gift, Lady Rozemyne."

"This is a book made here in Groschel to demonstrate the printing process. It does not contain much, and it will not sell to nobles, but we believe it will suit your tastes."

They had used paper from Ehrenfest, so the quality wasn't bad. It was very similar to the books I was used to, aside from being a considerable deal thinner. I started thumbing through it, wondering why they had said it wouldn't sell, and the contents immediately took me by surprise. I gazed up at Lutz and Gil, speechless, and saw that they were both watching me with proud smiles.

"By collecting stories as we establish the printing industry, we can gather tales from a variety of provinces," Lutz said.

Indeed, the book was filled with stories Gil and Lutz had gathered from the craftspeople of Groschel. They certainly weren't the kind of tales that would

inspire a noble to loosen their purse strings, but to me, the mastermind who had attempted to execute Operation Grimm, this book was a precious gift and a pleasant surprise.

“You dream of a future where even commoners are able to read books freely, no?” Lutz asked with a grin. Hartmut was present, so he couldn’t say it outright, but I could tell that he was referring to our old conversations. Gil was standing beside him proudly, having known that I would appreciate their work.

“Lutz! Gil! This truly is a wonderful gift!” I exclaimed, unable to hide my excitement. They knew exactly how to raise my spirits, as they had proved time and time again.

“We will need to charge you a small fee for the stories, but we will only ask for half of what it cost us to gather them, since the Plantin Company will one day be printing the books,” Lutz said. I nodded in response.

Sure! You can have as much money as you need. Just bring me more stories!

Groschel Nobles and the Printing Industry

That evening, we had dinner at the giebe's estate. The soup had a proper umami flavor, which was probably the result of Count Groschel purchasing my recipe book and getting his chefs to master its dishes. I had to admit, though, Hugo's food remained overwhelmingly more delicious.

I wish I was eating with everyone in the side building right now...

Even if casually chatting with the Gutenbergs was no longer an option, I could at least enjoy the atmosphere of the lower city by sitting back and listening as Lutz and the others talked. Here, the printing industry remained the topic of conversation even as we ate, and the abundance of noble euphemisms and constant probing from both sides was tiring, to say the least. I wished they would at least give me some respite from thinking during meals so that I could enjoy the food.

Once we finished our meal, it was time for the local scholars assigned by Count Groschel to report to me on the province's printing and paper-making industries. I sipped my tea as they began.

"The printing industry has been established without any problems of note," one scholar said. "A book was printed to test the process, and we found it was no different from the ones sold in the castle."

"That means the craftspeople of Groschel are quite skilled indeed," Elvira remarked. She sounded rather impressed, since she knew that the smiths in Haldenzel had repeatedly failed to meet Johann's requirements, but this report seemed to contrast with what the Gutenbergs had told me.

Hmm? Didn't they say there were a lot of problems to work on...?

I couldn't help but blink in confusion, and it was then that Hartmut, who was sitting beside me, looked down at his notes and gave a short sigh. "That is not what the Gutenbergs noted in their report," he said.

"What is the meaning of this?" Count Groschel asked, his eyes narrowing as

he looked between Hartmut and the scholar.

Using his own notes as reference, Hartmut concisely listed the Gutenbergs' comments. "Just as in Haldenzel, the smiths were unable to produce suitable letter types," he said. "The materials we use for colored ink could not be gathered in this region, so research into an alternate recipe needs to be done. Furthermore, due to the low quality of the water here in Groschel, paper can be made, but its quality leaves much to be desired."

Count Groschel grimaced. "So our commoners are incompetent, then?"

Nah, nah, nah. Your scholar is the incompetent one for giving such a false report.

I wanted to shoot back at the giebe, but I settled on responding in my head; as the archduke's adopted daughter, such a comment would end up being a veritable death sentence for the incompetent scholar. He would no longer have a future here, that was for sure. I needed to tread carefully.

Okay. What can I say instead, to properly bridge the gap between the commoners and the nobility? At this rate, the nobles are going to blame every single problem on the commoners, and nothing will get fixed.

"Giebe Groschel. The commoners of your province are no less competent than the commoners of any other province," I said.

Everyone understood the significance of my position, so all eyes gathered on me at once. Some looked at me in astonishment, surprised to see that I was defending the commoners, while others seemed to plead with me not to throw the meeting into chaos.

"Your commoners are on track to be successful; they simply need more time. My Gutenbergs have proposed bringing some of your smiths to Ehrenfest to train them over the winter. You would need to pay the costs of their stay, Giebe Groschel, but if given the proper time and guidance, the smiths will return more than capable of doing their jobs."

"You would ask me to spend yet more money on commoners...?" Giebe Groschel asked, his brows tightly knit.

I knew better than anyone just how expensive it was to get the printing

industry started in a new location, and while I understood his desire to avoid spending any more money, walking away now would mean wasting everything he had already invested.

"Letter types degrade much faster than you might imagine," I replied. "If you do not have smiths capable of producing them, you will need to rely entirely on imports. In the long term, you are much better off paying for Groschel smiths to learn to make them, but the decision is ultimately yours to make, Giebe Groschel." By giving him a choice of what to spend money on, I was subtly removing the option of simply placing all the blame on the craftspeople.

"Hmm..."

"As for the paper-making industry, I believe you will need to either bring water to the workshop on a regular basis or resolve the pollution issue here in Groschel. I must note, however, that neither solution can be done by commoners. Ferdinand maintains that putting a magic tool in place is necessary to purify water on such a large scale, and this can only be carried out by nobles."

Giebe Groschel was deep in thought. I speedily made it clear that the problems facing the paper-making industry were not the commoners' fault either, before he demanded unreasonable results from them as well.

"How your province approaches the future will depend on your thoughts, Giebe Groschel, so I will say no more on the matter," I concluded, taking care not to be too pushy while nonetheless providing the commoners with my support. I still wasn't entirely sure which turns of phrase would crush another noble's pride.

I wish I was, though. I'd say something like, "Groschel is your *land, so stop sitting around in your mansion, blaming everything on the commoners! Get out there and actually fix things!" Or maybe, "How about you take lessons from Illgner and Haldenzel and actually learn to communicate with your people?!"*

As I made my way back to my guest room, I instructed Hartmut to organize the reports we had received from the Gutenbergs. We needed Elvira to understand the situation so that she could properly manage things here without offending the local nobility. I wasn't known for my restraint, so it seemed much

wiser to have her handle it.

“Understood,” Hartmut said.

Upon arriving at my room, I started on my usual preparations for bed. Brunhilde helped me bathe, then she dried and gingerly combed my hair while I sat in front of a mirror. She looked a little tense, as though she were psyching herself up for something, and then she finally seemed to steel her resolve.

“Lady Rozemyne,” she said, “I understand that your temple upbringing has afforded you rather unique perspectives, but I must ask you—why do you protect commoners so? Is it not clear that the report of a noble scholar should be valued more than that of the Gutenbergs, a collection of commoners?”

I could see her amber eyes through the mirror, and the genuine confusion in her expression that made it clear she genuinely believed she was correct. There was much I had refrained from saying during dinner, and the few things I had said were doused in sunshine and glitter to avoid wounding the giebe’s pride. Even so, to a normal noble, my behavior had been bizarre and incomprehensible from the moment I started prioritizing the Gutenbergs’ report over that of the scholar.

“I dispatched the Gutenbergs here to make the printing industry a success, and the decisions I made during dinner were intended to aid that goal,” I explained. “The Gutenbergs worked in Groschel’s lower city firsthand, while the scholar who spoke refused to go there at all... Is it not obvious which report would be more trustworthy?”

“But the Gutenbergs are commoners, are they not?”

“They are, but they are my arms and legs; they are the ones who spread the printing and paper-making industries in Illgner and in Haldenzel.”

Illgner was a peaceful country province where the commoners and nobles lived hand in hand, and this cooperation had aided them in inventing one new kind of paper after another. Giebe Haldenzel had similarly made his industries a success despite being an archnoble. My assumption had been that we would always see progress in giebe-ruled provinces, even if the nobles of the Noble’s Quarters didn’t understand these things, but it seemed that wasn’t the case.

Ah, screw it... My industries just don't suit the provincial culture here.

"If your attitude is standard in Groschel, Brunhilde, then it may be wise to forgo attempting to establish printing and paper-making industries here entirely," I said. "My mindset as one raised in the temple simply does not suit this place."

Sure, they could probably manage for a while by giving up on the paper-making industry and buying the tools they needed for printing rather than making everything themselves, but that would make their operation costs skyrocket compared to the provinces that hadn't taken the easy way out. Groschel would no doubt abandon printing entirely once more provinces adopted the industry and started contributing to the market, and the commoners would be lambasted as useless—or in the worst-case scenario, executed on false accusations of incompetence.

I may need to think of a plan to minimize the punishment they receive...

As I pondered the situation, considering the worst-case scenario, Brunhilde set down her comb with a clink and got onto her knees. "Lady Rozemyne, do you not see a bright future for printing here in Groschel?" she asked. "Why is that? How does my home differ from Illgner or Haldenzel? I pray that you might share your thoughts."

I wished I could, but if speaking my mind were an option, I would have done it during my discussion with Giebe Groschel. All of my hard work smoothing things over at dinner would have been for nothing if I spoke bluntly now.

"It is very likely that my honest thoughts will wound and offend you," I said. "As a Groschel noble, Brunhilde, you would surely not like to hear them."

"I do not wish for Groschel to be the first failed attempt in Ehrenfest. If we still have time to remedy things, please, tell me how," Brunhilde said, staring at me intently. I could sense the desperation in her voice, as though she felt she needed to make the province's printing industry succeed, no matter what. We had started this endeavor because Brunhilde was my retainer and Groschel was on good terms with Haldenzel, which gave them an advantage; for them to fail despite all this would wound their noble pride.

Well... There are some things you can only learn with the help of other people.

It was hard to notice the disparities between oneself and one's surroundings, and in that regard, some guidance from a third party was sometimes required. Putting aside whether the person in question would accept what they were being told, they couldn't begin to change unless they knew what needed to be changed. I happened to be an expert on this subject, since I was so used to people telling me I didn't understand even the most basic things about the nobility.

"Compared to the nobles of other provinces, I feel that the nobles of Groschel do not care for their commoners," I said.

"That is not the case," Brunhilde protested. "Father—"

"Giebe Groschel does not consider it his duty to protect his province's commoners. He does not consider them people to live alongside. Am I wrong?"

"Well, they *are* commoners. It is only natural that we would not live alongside them," Brunhilde replied, speaking as though this were the most obvious thing in the world.

I sighed. "In both Illgner and Haldenzel, the nobility celebrated Spring Prayer and the Harvest Festival together with the commoners. The giebes rested their pride as landowning nobles on their ability to protect those who live in their domain. However, I feel no such sentiment from Giebe Groschel. He seems less like a giebe protecting the land entrusted to him by the aub, and more like the nobles of the Noble's Quarter."

"But we are all nobles..." Brunhilde muttered, sounding bewildered. She failed to understand the difference between giebes ruling provinces and the nobles living in the Noble's Quarter.

"I have been told that nobles who own land are different from the nobles of the Noble's Quarter," I explained, "and so I asked for the scholars in charge of each branch of the printing industry to be from the province where it was established. Mother said to me that the scholars would take their duties more seriously, to bring wealth to their province and guide their people."

The expectation had been for the scholars to be selected based on their experience working with commoners and whether they would dedicate themselves to developing their province.

“And yet, the scholars here in Groschel display none of these attributes,” I continued. “They do not have a solid grasp on the business, they do not go to the lower city to see matters for themselves, and when any problems arise, they push the blame onto the commoners.”

“But commoners are...”

“Indeed. Commoners are unable to complain no matter how nobles treat them. They must endure no matter how unreasonable their workload is. They must stay silent even when they are accused of wrongs they did not commit. Nobles are not even aware they are being unreasonable to the commoners, because this is simply the way of the world to them.”

Brunhilde nodded. She seemed a little relieved to hear that I understood the distinction between nobles and commoners, but that relief would not last very long.

“However, that attitude will prevent the printing and paper-making industries from ever succeeding here in Groschel. They will inevitably fail.”

Brunhilde looked at me with wide eyes, making her utter lack of understanding more than clear, and then blinked several times. After a pause, she spoke up in a quiet voice, her face a bit paler than before.

“Why is that...?”

“Do you truly not understand, Brunhilde?”

She offered no answer. Instead, she gave me a troubled look, pressing her lips tightly together.

“Who makes the paper?” I asked. “Who makes the ink, or the metal letter types, or the printing presses? Who prints the books? Who *sells* the books? The answer to all these questions is the same: commoners. In this place where nobles make no attempt to observe or learn about the lower city and the printing industry, and where the commoners are blamed for any and all problems despite carrying out their roles with aplomb, the printing industry will never, ever succeed. You are a purebred noble to your core, Brunhilde, so I do not blame you for failing to understand how commoners feel. However, it is simply reality that the industries will not succeed if nobles turn up their noses at

the lower city and make no attempt to understand it."

Brunhilde quivered each time I stated that the industry wasn't going to succeed. The fear—or terror, even—on her face was something I remembered well.

Aah, I get it. For a noble, the failure to adopt a new industry would serve as a stain on their reputation. And this failure would affect not just a single noble, but all of Groschel.

With that in mind, Brunhilde's desperation made more sense. And on second thought, even when considering how desperate those from Illgner had been to revitalize their province, it was impressive that they had dared risk attempting to adopt the paper-making industry when they had not known how likely it was to succeed.

"During dinner, I offered Giebe Groschel solutions to the problems that the printing and paper-making industries are facing. Whether he listens to my advice or continues down the same path is up to him."

Brunhilde stood up, her fists clenched. "Your perspective has been very helpful," she said. "I thank you ever so much for speaking your thoughts."

I climbed into bed, and even as Brunhilde made the final preparations for me to sleep, I could tell she was pondering all manner of things. I could see through her amber eyes that she was lost in a sea of thought.

"I can see that you are striving to protect your dignity as a noble and the pride of Groschel's nobles from the wounds of a failed endeavor," I said. "Your dedication is quite admirable, and something I am fond of myself... but one day, I would like for you to be dedicated to protecting not just the nobles of Groschel, but the land and the people who live there as well."

Morning soon came. My schedule for the day was to check up on the tax official and, assuming there were no problems, bring the Gutenbergs back to Ehrenfest with me. Observing the tax official was part of my duties as the High Bishop, so I was only bringing Monika, Fran, and two guard knights. The Gutenbergs were getting their things together.

The tax official was checking the goods already brought to Groschel's winter mansion as servants piled them onto the teleportation magic circle. I watched the goods be teleported away until Damuel, who had been observing our surroundings, spoke up.

"Lady Rozemyne, Giebe Groschel has arrived," he said.

I turned to see Count Groschel and Brunhilde coming this way, accompanied by Elvira and Hartmut. Count Groschel wore a resolved expression, and when he reached me, he knelt down.

"Lady Rozemyne," the giebe said, "I would be honored if you would train my province's smiths. We cannot afford for the printing industry to fail."

Behind him, I saw Brunhilde, Elvira, and Hartmut all drop their shoulders a little, as though the tension had immediately disappeared from their bodies. They had all no doubt fought to convince Count Groschel. I was unsure what decision he had made or how he intended to change things moving forward, but it was clear that he wanted the printing industry to succeed, in which case I was more than glad to provide any assistance I could.

"Certainly. I shall ensure that the smiths return to Groschel capable of creating metal letter types," I replied. I left telling Johann about the giebe's decision to Fran; preparations would need to be made soon if we were going to bring the smiths back to Ehrenfest with the Gutenbergs.

As I watched the tax official work, I began listing to Count Groschel what he would need to do to make the printing and paper-making industries a success.

"It may be wise to begin by cleaning the lower city so that nobles are not repulsed by the very prospect of going there. You might even be able to develop Groschel into a commercial town, as more merchants from other duchies are now visiting and traveling along the principal trade route which passes through the province. It is possible that you could make Groschel richer than any other province, but it all depends on your skill as a giebe."

I had decided to add my last piece of advice free of charge, and Count Groschel blinked at me, evidently having not expected it. We did not have enough cities that could support merchants, and given that Brunhilde's family wanted to spread trends, I would certainly like for them to do their best

cleaning up and developing their lower city.

“Now then, begin loading the luggage.”

After lunch, I brought out Lessy in front of the side building and told the Gutenbergs to start putting their things inside. They moved smoothly and without hesitation, showing how experienced they now were with the process.

“We’ve brought them, Lady Rozemyne!” Johann called out. He had gone to the lower city smithies and returned with two smiths, who were now walking behind him.

“Fine work, Johann,” I replied. “Everyone, climb inside my highbeast. We may now return to Ehrenfest.”

Johann was used to riding in my Pandabus now, so he grinned as he watched the two young smiths nervously climb inside. As we headed up into the air, I heard Zack chuckle at the role reversal in the back seat.

The Library Plan and Completed Outfits

Upon returning to the temple, my normal daily life resumed at once. I practiced music and dedication whirling, helped Ferdinand, gave instructions for the temple and orphanage's winter preparations, and maintained communications with the Plantin and Gilberta Companies. We hadn't entirely finished transcribing our book from Dunkelfelger either.

"You certainly are busier in the temple than in the castle, Lady Rozemyne," Philine noted, sounding impressed. She was now coming to the temple pretty much every day to serve as an apprentice scholar and assist me.

"It is all for the sake of spreading the printing industry," I replied. "Everything I have exists for the sake of creating more books."

I thought back on all the progress we had made so far. My humble paper-making efforts with Lutz had turned into the Rozemyne Workshop, spread to Hasse's monastery, blossomed into the multitude of paper-making workshops owned and run by Benno, earned the archduke's support, and made its way to Illgner where new kinds of paper were being made. By this point, it was on its way to spreading all throughout Ehrenfest.

Similarly, the printing industry had gone from being localized entirely within the temple's workshop to being run wholly by the archduke. If the printing industry caught on in Groschel like it had in Haldenzel, it would only be a matter of time before it spread even further, since several other giebes were expressing interest as well. The production rate of books in this world would no doubt grow exponentially in the coming years.

Although I was still involved in the printing industry, there wasn't much more I could actually do myself. We had reached the point where I was not just leaving work to craftspeople but leaving even the operation of workshops to others.

"Once the printing industry finds its footing in Groschel, it may be time to move on to the next phase of my plan..." I muttered. Hartmut must have

overheard me, because he immediately shot me a dubious look.

“Lady Rozemyne, what do you mean by that?” he asked. “What next phase?”

There was no going back now that he had heard me, and as my retainer, Hartmut was going to be involved with the printing industry for the rest of his life either way. I saw no issue with sharing my dark plots with him.

“I plan to construct a library next,” I declared, puffing out my chest. In a world soon to be filled with books, there was nothing one needed more.

“Lady Rozemyne... If you’ll forgive my rudeness, I cannot connect the Groschel printing industry to the need to construct a library,” Hartmut said. He looked confused, but also like he was eager to learn. The problem was, I wasn’t sure what it was he didn’t understand.

“Is it not simple, Hartmut? The spread of the printing industry will result in more books, and we will require a place to store them, no? The need for a library is more than clear.”

The book room in Ehrenfest’s castle wasn’t particularly large; it was able to house several hundred books, but it certainly didn’t have enough room for a copy of every book about to be printed. The space available to me right now was simply too limited.

“Once I have learned creation magic from the archduke candidate course, I plan to construct a library much like how the High Priest constructed the monastery in Hasse,” I said.

Creation magic would allow me to create a library of Rozemyne, by Rozemyne, and for Rozemyne, the very thought of which sent my heart aflutter. The magic tools that existed in this world were entirely unlike anything on Earth, so I was sure I could create a library that was more impressive, more phenomenal, more *perfect* than any I had seen in my previous life. I saw no reason not to build the largest library in all of Yurgenschmidt.

“In the meantime, I intend to find out more about the libraries of other duchies so I can create the perfect library of my own,” I said. But my words were met with a barrage of questions.

“You wish to research libraries?”

“Are they not merely places for storing documents?”

“Won’t any room with bookshelves do?”

Hartmut and Philine exchanged glances as they took turns interrogating me. I shook my head violently in response, firmly rejecting their heresy.

“Libraries are certainly *not* just rooms for storing documents! First of all, their noble objective is to collect as much written material as possible, organize it for easy access, keep it safe, and create an optimal experience for any visitors. I will thoroughly investigate how the libraries in other duchies—particularly in the Sovereignty—are managed, and from there, I will create one that is absolutely perfect. Ehrenfest shall be blessed to serve as the foundation upon which I build the Rozemyne Library, a wonder of the modern world that will beat out whichever library in the Sovereignty surely holds the most books!”

Philine nodded with a completely serious expression. “Our first course of action should be to secure permission from Lord Ferdinand, then,” she said.

Nooo! This first hurdle is already impossible to overcome! I’m beaten!

My head cooled down in an instant. To achieve the impossible and secure permission from Ferdinand, I would need to learn everything there was to learn about the history and operation of the libraries in this world. I needed to come up with an argument so indisputable that not even he could refuse me.

For now, I shall keep my ambition a secret. Let your plans be as dark and impenetrable as the night, and when you strike, strike like a lightning bolt!

And so, I began happily plotting out how to obtain my library, brimming with motivation and generally having the time of my life.

I’ll definitely want magic tools like Schwartz and Weiss. They can work at the counter, instantly detect anyone removing books without permission, protect me from danger... And if all that wasn’t amazing enough already, they’re super cute too!

Ferdinand and Hirschur were both in the process of researching them, so I was sure they would be able to make similar magic tools soon. I grinned at the thought of shumils of all different colors hopping around and working in my library.

Since magic exists and this is a fantasy world, I might as well make the library a magical wonderland. I could add some kind of native growing function that adds more floors as more books are added! Fancy, huh? This isn't exactly what Ranganathan—blessed be his name—meant with his teachings, but I think there's something deeply appealing about a library that develops alongside its collection. You'll never run out of space, and you can welcome all texts without having to be selective.

Not to mention, I think magic tools can be used to add functions to books as well. Like, making them automatically return to their shelf according to their serial number or activating a magic circle on their due date that makes them teleport back to the library. Ooh, maybe a light that activates when someone is searching for it... Gosh! This is so much fun that I can't stop thinking about it!

But it was just as I was wiggling with glee and coming up with my perfect library schematics that I experienced a shocking betrayal: Philine, Hartmut, and Fran all informed Ferdinand of my plot the moment we went to help him with his work.

"Rozemyne."

"Eep."

"You seem to be quite enthralled with forming this interesting plot of yours," he said, staring down at me with sharply narrowed eyes, "but I have received no reports on it. Just what are you planning?"

"N-Nothing at all. Really. I simply thought it would be nice to research libraries across the country so that I may one day build the most incredible library in Yurgenschmidt, that's all. I intended to give you a report once I had a proper plan in mind."

Fran sighed and shook his head. "Lady Rozemyne, you need to discuss these matters with the High Priest *before* forming any plans."

"I could never do that, Fran. I need to do my research and construct the perfect pitch first. Ferdinand would eat me alive were I to try convincing him without having made the proper preparations. Discussing matters can come after that."

“In other words, you intentionally kept this from me?” Ferdinand asked. I could feel the temperature drop to match his frigid tone, as though a sudden blizzard had swept through the room.

“Not at all!” I exclaimed, hurriedly shaking my head. “Did you not teach me that preparations and forward thinking are necessary for success? I am simply doing my best to behave like a noble. I-I mean, without any preparations, what would there even be to report?”

I didn’t want my dreams to be crushed here, of all places, so I worked my brain to full capacity, trying to figure out how to calm Ferdinand and protect my future library. And to my surprise, either due to my clear desperation or his awareness that nothing he could say would make me budge on the matter, he did indeed calm down.

Ferdinand tapped his finger on the desk. “I would rather you behave like a noble as a matter of course, rather than only when doing so furthers your book-related endeavors, but... Give me a simple explanation of what you wish to do. If you are talking about improving the book room’s collection, it would not be unthinkable for me to provide my assistance, depending on your goals and the circumstances.”

I can’t believe it... Ferdinand is actively and willingly helping me!

If he became my ally rather than my greatest obstacle, I would be unstoppable. I was so moved by the prospect that I decided to tell him all about my library. I explained how valuable libraries were on the whole, how I wanted mine to be, and even all the different kinds of magic tools I wanted set up inside. The words flowed out of me like water from a faucet.

“And that’s the kind of library I want to make!” I concluded.

Ferdinand, who had been listening to my passionate speech while tapping his temples, let out a long sigh. “You truly are a fool,” he said. “At least make your plans realistic.”

“Um, Ferdinand... What parts of my plan weren’t realistic?” I asked. We lived in a world where creation magic could remodel a city in less than a minute, so I was unsure what he meant, and my confusion only worsened when I saw that Philine and Hartmut were just as taken aback. It seemed that they agreed with

Ferdinand.

B-But why...?

As I sat there, perturbed by everyone's reactions, Ferdinand started rubbing his temples. "First of all, the size," he muttered in a weary voice. "You do not need a library of that scale."

"Hm? I absolutely do. The future will bring with it an infinite number of books, so an infinitely growing library is going to be crucial. Creation magic can achieve this, no?"

"You misunderstand creation magic. You would not be expanding the library but reconstructing it," Ferdinand explained, "and each reconstruction would require an immense amount of mana."

"In other words, I just need to ensure I have enough mana?" I asked. For the sake of my future library, I was more than willing to chug even Ferdinand's ultra-nasty potion. My resolve was made of steel.

"There is far more to this than having enough mana. Just where do you think you will find the time and manpower required to remove all of the documents and shelves from within the building each time you remodel it?"

The entwickeln we had performed in the lower city had only messed with the underground parts that weren't touching any buildings, so nobody had needed to take out any of their things, and none of the wooden stories had collapsed. On careful reconsideration, however, I remembered that Bonifatius had mentioned nobles having to put their furniture in the gardens when the Noble's Quarter was remodeled to include the toilet slimes.

"Eep. So, um... Is there a simpler way to add to the building after it has been made?" I asked, using my hands to visualize stacking floors on top of one another.

Despite all my hopes, Ferdinand promptly shot down the idea. Creating a growing library was too much of an ordeal even with creation magic.

"Very well. I shall settle on making new side buildings whenever my library needs more space," I conceded. If expanding vertically wasn't an option, I would simply need to take a more horizontal approach. As far as I was

concerned, this idea would solve the problem of needing to take out all of the books, but it was likewise rejected.

"It would require an exorbitant amount of mana to produce a library on that scale," Ferdinand said. "It cannot be done."

"I can manage," I declared, my fists tightly clenched. "I can simply chug more potions to make it happen."

Ferdinand glared at me and then shook his head. "It does not matter how hard you try. It requires mana to preserve structures made with creation magic, and it is impossible to say whether your descendants will have enough mana to maintain them. If they cannot, your library will crumble to dust. That will prevent it from accomplishing the goal of preservation, which you stated was essential for libraries."

Come again?!

"When using creation magic, the most important consideration is whether the constructions can be maintained moving forward. That is precisely why the archduke cannot carelessly expand the city. Tell me, who in the world would be able to preserve a library that you were able to construct only through the extensive use of rejuvenation potions?"

"My descendants will surely treasure the library!"

The children of a bookworm will themselves be bookworms! It's fate! And I'll raise them to love the library more than anything!

Sadly, Ferdinand remained unmoved. "Do you love what your predecessors left behind more than books?" he asked, fixing me with an exceptionally cold stare.

"No."

"Naturally. Do not expect from others what you have not even done yourself."

His logic was as airtight as it was obvious. I slumped my shoulders, defeated, at which point Ferdinand struck me with even more cold, hard truths.

"You also mentioned that you desire shumil-shaped librarians like the ones in

the Royal Academy, but you know how much mana they require to function. Ehrenfest does not have enough to spare that many nobles on preserving a library. That is what I mean when I describe your plan as unrealistic."

Ngh... If there's not enough mana, I'll just have to make more.

I was teaching people my compression method specifically so that Ehrenfest would have more mana. We could use the new excess to preserve the library.

"Are we not in the middle of providing Ehrenfest with more available mana?" I asked. "That was our exact reasoning for teaching others my mana compression method."

"At the very least, such mana is not to be wasted on operating an utterly unrealistic library."

"Th-That's just awful, Ferdinand..." I was so shocked at his merciless rejection that my fragile heart could hardly take it, but he made no move to console me. Instead, he kept up his attack.

"The only awful thing here is your foolish plan. Rethink it from the ground up, and make it possible to create this time."

"Aw..."

I couldn't believe it—the library of my dreams had been utterly rejected. I was so disappointed that I didn't feel like doing anything ever again.

Aah, my library... My precious library...

"Rozemyne, now is not the time to mope. Our current book rooms will suffice. There are far more important matters to consider first."

"You're right..." I said, finally snapping back to reality. The castle's book room would do for now, so I was better off focusing my efforts elsewhere. "Before I can construct a library, I need to overwhelm the castle's book room, which means making more and more books. To this end, I must not only secure and transcribe more books from other duchies, but also increase the number of authors and people capable of producing scripts. That said... given the limited size of the noble population, relying on nobles alone will not be enough. I suppose it is about time to focus on raising the literacy rate of commoners."

But as I started thinking about starting lessons in the temple alongside Operation Grimm, Ferdinand rubbed his temples. “Hold on. That is not what I meant,” he said.

“Hm?”

“Your focus should be not on this unworkable library of yours but on the Royal Academy.”

“The Royal Academy? But I’ve already started transcribing the books available there.”

“No! Forget about libraries entirely. You are going to be a second-year come this winter, correct? You must prepare for that first.”

That wasn’t something I had expected to hear—was there anything in particular I needed to prepare for before my return to the Royal Academy? Nothing came to mind.

“How are the clothes for the magic tools?” Ferdinand inquired. “I have not yet been asked to inspect the magic circles. They are going to be seen by Sovereign nobles and those of greater duchies alike, so our checks must be thorough.” He then went on to list off everything else I would need to do before my return to student life. I was going to have to prepare potions to drink and discuss what trends we would be spreading this year, among various other things.

Blegh. I’d much rather be planning out my library.

I sighed, which spurred Ferdinand to pinch my cheek. “Rozemyne, are you taking this seriously?” he asked.

“I always take everything seriously,” I replied. *At least, everything that affects my dream of reading forevermore.*

After lunch, I prepared to send an ordonnanz to Lieseleta. I needed to ask her for an update on Schwartz’s and Weiss’s outfits.

“Lieseleta, this is Rozemyne. How much progress has been made with the embroidery? Ferdinand is wanting to inspect it.”

“This is Lieseleta,” came an almost immediate response, spoken in a bright

and cheerful tone. “The embroidery is already complete. I can bring it to the temple at your earliest convenience. I would like for Lord Ferdinand to perform his checks such that we may finish the outfits as soon as possible.”

I widened my eyes. Lieseleta’s demeanor was usually cold and utterly calm, so it was surprising to hear her being so upbeat. Angelica noticed my reaction and, as her older sister, started to explain.

“Lieseleta is always like this outside of work. Right now, she must feel more like she’s engaging in a hobby than carrying out a duty. You also aren’t there with her, which probably makes her feel even more at ease.”

“She certainly knows how to manage her public and private demeanors, doesn’t she?”

“People say that about my sister and me all the time. They say Lieseleta is a master at keeping her public and private lives strictly separated, while I dedicate myself only to the things I care about.”

You were gazing heroically into the distance as you said that, but they’re really not praising you...

As I tried to figure out how to break the news to Angelica, Damuel gave me a helping hand and changed the subject. “When you are away, Lady Rozemyne, Lieseleta speaks with Judithe and Philine about all manner of things. They sometimes chastise me for not understanding the hearts of women in the least... Those girls are just too much for me,” he chuckled.

I could hardly imagine Lieseleta telling Damuel off. I glanced over at Hartmut and Philine for confirmation.

“From what I can tell, she is teasing more than chastising him,” Hartmut said. “Damuel is very easy to speak with and a great conversationalist. I believe they are all quite fond of him.”

It seemed that Hartmut had also seen Lieseleta happily chatting away. I had never witnessed it myself, but perhaps that was just how things had to be, considering her position as my attendant. It still made me a little upset, though.

“Since Lieseleta is going to be coming here, I think it would be best to assign her some guard knights,” I said. “How is the apprentices’ schedule looking? I

would be concerned about her traveling alone.”

“Lord Bonifatius normally trains the apprentice guard knights in the morning,” Philine replied without missing a beat.

I sent out an ordonnanz telling Lieseleta to have some apprentice guard knights accompany her, and she followed my instructions faithfully. She and Brunhilde arrived with Cornelius, Judithe, and Leonore, who carried the cloth with the finished embroidery.

“This is for Weiss’s apron, and this is for Schwartz’s vest,” Lieseleta explained proudly as she spread the embroidered cloth across a table in the High Bishop’s chambers. The complex magic circles were decorated with extraneous lines and patterns of various colors to make them harder to identify. There were flowers, vine-like plants... Just looking at it all made my head spin. I could hardly believe they had spent day after day doing such precise work.

Brunhilde gave a refined giggle upon seeing the awe in my expression. “We have finished embroidering the most important parts and are now working on the outfits themselves,” she said. “Schwartz’s shirt and pants are already complete.”

“We also added some embroidery to Schwartz’s pants. Our plan is to add the same design to Weiss’s skirt, and we are in the process of doing that now,” Lieseleta added. She spoke in a calm voice completely unlike the cheery one I had heard through the ordonnanz, but her dark-green eyes were still gleaming with excitement.

She must really love shumils—and making clothes for them, for that matter.

Lieseleta had gone through the trouble of embroidering such intricate designs, all out of passion. Surely a knight should just marry her at this point.

“In any case, I will be taking these embroidered pieces of cloth,” I said. “If they earn Lord Ferdinand’s approval, you may proceed to make them into the apron and vest.”

“Understood.”

I had Fran report that the embroidered pieces of cloth had arrived; Ferdinand seemed pretty invested in them, after all. He returned with a message saying to

come to his workshop, so I stopped my transcribing and went there at once.

“Nobody else can enter your workshop, right?” I asked. Not even Eckhart was able to, from what I remembered. My retainers had tried to follow me, but there was only so far they would have been able to come.

“Meeting in your workshop would be unideal,” Ferdinand said as he opened the door to his hidden room. “I have something to give you.”

After taking the package from Fran, I followed Ferdinand into his workshop, which was as messy and cluttered as always. “Ferdinand, is it not rather scandalous for an engaged woman to be in the hidden room of a man without her attendants?” I asked.

“It is, but I have no choice. Your disappearing ink must be kept a secret. This would not have been necessary had you simply done your embroidery as you were asked,” he retorted.

Ferdinand apparently wanted to investigate the disappearing ink some more, and he thought my attendants would only get in the way. He cleared various devices from one side of his table and then unwrapped the pieces of cloth.

“Oho. This is quite good...” Ferdinand muttered upon seeing the embroidery in full. He then narrowed his eyes and began tracing a finger along the thread, checking to ensure there were no problems with the magic circles. Once he had confirmed that the embroidery wasn’t unfinished or incorrect anywhere, he had me touch where the magic ink was to make sure they would actually function.

I had studied magic circles a little, so I recognized several of the patterns. On the cloth were a number of smaller magic circles related to wind, and some more complex, overlapping ones related to fire. I didn’t really know what any of them did, though.

“Do they pass?” I asked.

“Yes. The ink shines faintly when you touch the cloth, but the embroidery on top means it does not particularly stand out. Having two layers of magic circles may strengthen the output, but stronger magic is nothing to be concerned about here.”

“That’s a surprisingly half-baked answer...” I muttered without really thinking.

“These are dangerous magics to research, you understand.”

The magic circles that had initially been woven into Schwartz’s and Weiss’s outfits automatically reflected attacks back at the attacker. Ferdinand had tested it and the improved version by having Eckhart actually attack them while he measured the results.

Ferdinand raised an eyebrow. “Even lighter attacks are consistently reflected,” he said. “Trying to determine just how much stronger the circle has become would be backbreaking.”

Does he mean that literally, perhaps...?

“We needed only to confirm that the circles did indeed return attacks with consistency,” Ferdinand continued. “As long as they are not weaker than before, they will suffice. Any fool who would attack these magic tools would be marked as a traitor to the king regardless.”

“Agreed. They should be ready to die the moment they attack the library.” I had no sympathy or mercy in my heart for any heretic who would dare attack the library or my shumils. Their deaths would mean nothing to me.

“You certainly become monstrous whenever the library or books are involved,” Ferdinand noted.

“I am always prepared to hold a bloody carnival for the sake of protecting my library and my books,” I replied. “That said, I don’t want to be called ‘monstrous’ by the person who made these monstrous magic circles.”

“I am rather used to the term,” Ferdinand said, unfazed. He had apparently been called cruel, monstrous, and even “the Lord of Evil” during his ditter days. That last one had come from him being as strong as one of the seasonal feybeast Lords, which was a truly frightening reveal. “Furthermore, here. This is a protection charm with one such *monstrous* magic circle.”

As it turned out, Ferdinand had improved his own charms while thoroughly investigating Schwartz’s and Weiss’s outfits.

“I thank you ever so much.”

“Perhaps someone will activate it and make all of my effort worthwhile...”

Ferdinand muttered. It was a scary statement on its own, but what made it even scarier was the way he said it with a completely flat, emotionless expression. I inhaled sharply.

"No thank you. Why would you wish for something so dangerous to happen?!"

"I do not *wish* for it to happen. I simply would not see its occurrence as an issue."

"I know there's nobody else here, but still! You're letting your true colors show too much!" I exclaimed, but Ferdinand merely dismissed me with a scoff. It seemed that he had no intention of changing anytime soon.

I mean, I know the hidden room is the one place nobles are supposed to be able to show their true selves, but come on! I don't want to hear terrifying internal monologues like that!

"Incidentally, where are the magic circles you embroidered?" Ferdinand asked.

"Um... Here. The pocket parts." I started setting them down on the table and named who had made which ones. Charlotte here, Philine there...

"And the others?" Ferdinand pressed, his brow furrowed.

"There aren't any others. You told me to embroider one, so I did exactly that. One of my attendants is responsible for most of what you see there. Lieseleta truly is amazing."

As I boasted about Lieseleta's hard work, however, Ferdinand jabbed a finger against my forehead. "You cannot rest on the laurels of your attendants," he scolded. "Forget not that you are already engaged; it is your duty as a bride to learn embroidery."

"Whaaat? But things are already shaping up. I don't need to do anything else. As they say, time spent on embroidery is time wasted. Transcribing books is much more important to me. It's not like embroidery is going to bring more books into the world. Of course, if you were to tell me to embroider sound-blocking magic circles into carpets for my library, I would start on that in a heartbeat."

“Good grief... And you said *I* was over-revealing my true colors...”

Three short days after Ferdinand approved the embroidery, Lieseleta completed Schwartz’s and Weiss’s outfits to perfection.

The Start of Winter Socializing (Second Year)

Days after Schwartz's and Weiss's outfits were completed, a letter arrived from the Gilberta Company; they wanted to know whether they should deliver my winter hairpin and my armbands to the temple or the castle. I asked for them to be delivered to the temple alongside Johann's safety pins.

I'll get to see Tuuli again...

I informed Fran that I had a meeting with the Gilberta Company, and upon hearing the news, Philine gave me a curious look. "Would it not be better for them to bring these items to the castle?" she asked. It certainly was the less troublesome option, but it would prevent me from being able to see Tuuli.

"My hairpin craftsperson is not yet able to enter the castle. For that reason, I will accept my goods here, as per usual, and order my spring hairpin at the same time. I much prefer to order my hairpins myself."

Philine nodded, accepting my answer. The truth was, because my retainers were now coming to the temple, I needed to keep my relationship with Tuuli even more of a secret than before. Ferdinand had instructed Gil and Wilma to make up a cover story to explain my relationship with Lutz and Tuuli, which all the adult priests and shrine maidens needed to read.

Wilma had included this cover story among the information she had compiled about me for Hartmut. She had shown it to me first, in part because she wanted to get my approval, but also because she wanted to give me a warning of what to expect. Just reading through some of the notes she had put together made me feel dizzy with disbelief.

My new cover story was as follows: My attendants had been assigned to me by my guardians, but I wanted to select my own. During this process, I learned of the orphanage and stealthily went to see what it was like. There, I realized what a terrible state it had fallen into following the exodus of the blue priests and shrine maidens and started fighting to save the suffering orphans. It was then that I had ordered the merchants I gave my exclusive business to—that is,

those of the Gilberta Company—to establish the Rozemyne Workshop.

From there, the Gilberta Company had sent Lutz and Tuuli to work in the newly established workshop, and I was so moved by their passionate efforts to save the orphans that I gave them each a valuable piece of knowledge. Lutz was taught how to make a printing press, while Tuuli was shown how to make hairpins. Benno, another merchant of the Gilberta Company, had then created a new type of paper and asked to create a store specifically for books, so I granted him a name, leading to the birth of the Plantin Company.

It's not entirely untrue, but, well... Something about it just doesn't sit right with me.

In Wilma's tale, I was the quintessential saint, granting food and opportunity to the orphans, teaching them to work for themselves rather than rely on divine gifts, all while hearing the gods speak to me in my dreams, which led to me creating strange new inventions.

Whatever happened to objectivity in storytelling?!

The subjective parts were so twisted that I had asked her to rewrite them, but that had only inspired her to put me on an even higher pedestal. She was apparently detailing "the evident truths of the world," to use her own words, and these "restrained" expressions had ended up deeply moving Hartmut. I didn't even want to think about how this might affect his already intense desire to research me.

During times when Tuuli accompanied the Gilberta Company, we held our meetings in the orphanage director's chambers. I didn't need any scholars to accompany me for something as simple as the purchase and ordering of some hairpins, but Hartmut had insisted on coming nonetheless. He seemed to quite enjoy it here, since legends of my sainthood were supposedly around every corner.

That reminded me—Hartmut would sometimes leave in the afternoon to visit Ferdinand's chambers, as if attending secret meetings behind my back. He was apparently taking on a veritable mountain of work in return for various stories about me, but he seemed satisfied enough, so I saw no reason to intervene.

Soon enough, Otto, Theo, and Tuuli arrived from the Gilberta Company. We exchanged our long greetings, then I asked Tuuli to show me the hairpin.

“Now then, Tuuli... May I see the hairpin?”

“I made this to match the winter outfit you ordered, Lady Rozemyne,” she noted.

The hairpin was decorated with flowers the divine color of winter, a majestic red on the outer edges of the petals that slowly transitioned into a deep crimson near the center, perfectly matching the gradient of the cloth Mom had dyed for me. A single glance was enough to confirm that the hairpin was indeed made to match the outfit.

Mom must have dyed the threads, which means they made it together... I could feel their love just from looking at the hairpin, and my smile immediately softened.

“Splendid. You have gotten even better, Tuuli.”

“I am honored to receive your praise,” Tuuli replied with a pleased grin. I asked her to help me put it on, as always, before showing it to Philine.

“How does it look, Philine?” I asked.

“It suits you perfectly, Lady Rozemyne. There is no mistaking that it was made specially for you,” she assured me. Having secured her praise, I could safely accept this as my winter hairpin and order a new one for spring.

“Tuuli, please make a hairpin that gives thoughts of sprouting leaves,” I said. “Remember that green is the divine color of spring.”

“Have you decided upon the cloth for it yet, my lady?” Tuuli asked.

“I will leave the colors and other such details to you. You have not disappointed me yet,” I replied with a smile. A small part of me wanted to double-check I wasn’t asking too much of her, and the unfaltering smile she returned seemed to say, *“Here you go, putting a ton of pressure on me again!”*

Despite her true thoughts, Tuuli offered a courteous response. “I shall strive to meet your expectations, Lady Rozemyne.”

Once the hairpin business was settled, Tuuli glanced over at Otto. He

hesitated for a moment before addressing me.

“Lady Rozemyne, we received an order of over thirty hairpins from one of your attendants. May I be so bold as to confirm this is correct?”

“Certainly. It has been decided that every girl attending the Royal Academy shall wear a hairpin, and so I instructed my attendant to order enough for everyone, and in colors that will complement their hair. This order does indeed come from me,” I said. It seemed that Brunhilde had remembered to place the order while I was away for the Harvest Festival.

Upon hearing my response, Otto appeared to relax. “I see,” he said. “In that case, we will deliver them to the castle alongside your winter clothing. Furthermore, we have the armbands you ordered, my lady. Are these what you wanted...?”

He held out the differently colored armbands while giving me a look that seemed to question why anybody would ever want them. There were four in total: two for Hannelore and me and another two for Schwartz and Weiss. Each one was embroidered with the words “Library Committee Member” in kanji that only I could read. Beside them, Otto set down a tiny wooden box filled with safety pins. I had heard that Johann’s disciple Danilo had made them, but Johann had overseen his work, so they were all flawless.

“Yes, these are exactly what I had in mind. They’re perfect.”

I started wrapping one of the armbands around my left arm, giddy with excitement, and then instructed Philine to secure it in place with a safety pin. Seeing the embroidered words made me so overjoyed, partly because it was written in actual Japanese, much like it had been back on Earth.


書委員
図書館
図書館

I'm officially a library committee member!

I was extending and withdrawing my arm with an impressed hum when Hartmut leaned forward with a start and rested his hands on my shoulders. "Lady Rozemyne, please do calm down. Your ring..." he said, gesturing with his eyes.

Upon realizing that my ring had started to glow, I hurriedly contained my mana to avoid shooting out a blessing.

"Gilberta Company, this meeting is over," Hartmut said.

"Hartmut, I am quite alright."

"No, it would be best not to risk it." He speedily gave out orders before concluding today's meeting. Tuuli shot a worried glance over her shoulder as she exited the room.

Fran instructed Monika to fetch a divine instrument from the chapel, then picked me up and rushed me back to the High Bishop's chambers. It all seemed a bit unnecessary to me, since I was keeping my mana contained just fine, but I nonetheless offered up my mana to the divine instrument Monika brought me —albeit with a sigh.

"Still, Hartmut... I'm impressed you noticed that," I said.

"Lord Ferdinand and Lord Justus have taught me much about you, Lady Rozemyne. I am glad their teachings have already proven useful."

Um, wait... Excuse me? What exactly are they teaching you?

Hartmut went on to describe everything he had learned. "This will be necessary to contain your chaos within the Royal Academy, Lady Rozemyne," he eventually concluded. I had no choice but to reflect on my own deeds and weep.

Did you have to tell him EVERYTHING, and in that much detail?! Stupid, stupid Ferdinand! Stupid, stupid Justus!

After getting the hairpin and my armbands from the Gilberta Company, we finished the temple and orphanage's winter preparations. As for the Dedication

Ritual, by this point, we could entrust all of the preparations to Kampfer and Frietack without worry.

“I shall return for the Dedication Ritual,” I said. “Everything else I leave in your hands.”

“Understood. We shall await your safe return.”

I put my ceremonial robes for the castle’s winter baptism ceremony and such inside Lessy and then headed off. Winter socializing was fast approaching, and it would be some time before I saw Fran and the others again. Our next reunion would be when I returned to the temple for the Dedication Ritual.

The day after I returned to the castle, my winter outfit and the hairpins for the female students arrived from the Gilberta Company, speeding along preparations for winter socializing and my second year at the Royal Academy. In the midst of all this, Elvira informed me that Aurelia had asked what she was to do about the fish. That reminded me—she had said the time-stopping magic tool required an exorbitant amount of mana to maintain, and she did not want to keep it running.

“Ferdinand, my fish are in danger of being thrown away! My precious, precious fish! Even if we can’t cook them right now, please let me look after them, at the very least. You can at least let me have this, can’t you?!” I wept into an ordonnanz. His reply came swiftly.

“No. You cannot look after the fish yourself. I can imagine infinite scenarios where it would go wrong. Perhaps you contact Aurelia, or you stealthily attempt to cook the fish in secret, or Sylvester gets involved... No. I will contact Elvira and look after the fish myself. You are not to get involved.”

My fish were going to be given to Ferdinand, since he wanted to avoid any potential problems. Of course, it was exceptionally unwise for him to meet with and receive a gift from Aurelia, so it was instead gifted to Elvira, who would then give a portion of the rare goods to Ferdinand.

Noble business was always a pain, but this saved my fish from getting tossed out, and Elvira was overjoyed to have Ferdinand contacting her, so... Eh, whatever. I received a report when the fish had arrived safely with Ferdinand, and by that time, nobles had started returning to the Noble’s Quarter for winter

socializing.

Winter socializing began with the winter baptism ceremony and debuts, which then led into the gifting ceremony where new first-years were given their capes and brooches, which in turn led into lunch. I was going to be performing the ceremonies as High Bishop this year, so I entered the grand hall with Ferdinand, who was naturally in attendance as the High Priest. I had no contact with any of the nobles and would only be speaking with them in the afternoon.

There's Giebe Illgner and Brigitte over there. Oh, Giebe Haldenzel and Giebe Groschel are talking. I can see Count Leisegang too, so that must be where all the Leisegang nobles gather.

I could see plenty of nobles I recognized from the printing and paper-making industries as I stood on the stage where I would be performing the ceremonies.

I sure have accomplished a lot in a single year, huh?

Incidentally, one person I recognized at a glance despite never having seen their face before was Aurelia, who was at the front with the archnobles. She was wearing a veil, as always, but this particular one had been made using Ehrenfest dyeing methods. Since it used the same cloth worn by Florencia and Charlotte on stage, alongside the archnoble wives of the Florencia faction, it was clear whose faction she was in. No longer could anyone claim she was making no attempt to adjust to Ehrenfest. She was certainly drawing extra attention due to her face being hidden, but there was no better way to market a new dyeing method.

Lamprecht was accompanying Wilfried as his guard knight, while Aurelia was sticking with Elvira. I was generally forbidden from making contact with Aurelia, but perhaps I could at least greet her while she was with Elvira.

Aurelia must really want to eat some familiar food... I'll need to apologize about the delay with the fish. Speaking of Aurelia, though, I wonder how the other bride is doing.

I looked around the hall in search of the other Ahrensbach bride, but she didn't seem to be wearing a veil, so I wasn't able to spot her.

The baptism ceremony and debut ended without incident. I wanted to watch

Charlotte receive her cape during the gifting ceremony, since she was now going to be a first-year, but I needed to get changed for lunch. For that reason, Ferdinand and I exited the hall as soon as the debut was over.

I climbed into Lessy and sped to my room, where Ottilie was already waiting for me, with Rihyarda and my guard knights speed-walking to keep up. After we arrived, Ottilie and Rihyarda worked together to strip me of my ceremonial robes and get me into my winter socializing outfit.

This particular outfit had been designed by Tuuli and was made from cloth that Mom had dyed for me. The torso was a pleasant shade of red that blended into a deep crimson for the skirt, which was decorated with floral print varying from light pink to purple. The long sleeves likewise grew darker the farther they draped down my arms.

To complement the divine color of winter, there was a circle of white flower ornaments around the circumference of my skirt, underneath which was a second white skirt decorated with fancy lace that reached down to my shins. And then, of course, there was my new hairpin that Tuuli had made specifically to match my outfit. Everything was perfect.

“How does it look?” I asked.

“Absolutely wonderful,” Rihyarda replied with a satisfied smile. I was just as pleased with it as she was.

After lunch, it was time for all the important socializing. Once again, Wilfried, Charlotte, and I went to the grand hall together. On the way, we talked about the same thing we had been discussing over lunch: the Royal Academy.

“At last, I am going to be joining the two of you in the Royal Academy,” Charlotte said. “I simply cannot wait. I was ever so lonely in the castle last year.”

Charlotte had similarly used cloth from the dyeing competition for her outfit, and she was wearing a bubble skirt that looked much like my own. Despite these similarities, however, our clothes were still refreshingly unique. Perhaps it was because Charlotte had opted for a rose color that suited her better or because we had different tastes.

“Sister, in the days before we leave for the Royal Academy, the new first-

years are going to be studying the textbooks you made last year, correct?" Charlotte asked. I nodded in response, which earned me a teasing look from Wilfried. He looked like he was on the verge of bursting into laughter.

"Rozemyne, you're planning to do the whole Better Grades Committee thing this year too, right?" he asked. "People are saying that giving the first-years your textbooks is like helping the enemy."

"Oh my. But all those in their second year and above have had time to study for the coming year, what with them having finished their classes early. Is it not reasonable that the first-years should have time to prepare also? There is no fun in a game that is not fair."

First-year written lessons didn't cover that much material, and the first-years had already learned everything aside from geography and history in the playroom. Giving them a few days to get a head start on these subjects they hadn't yet covered would simply make them more worthy opponents.

"My apologies to you both, Lord Wilfried, Lady Rozemyne, but the apprentice knights will be winning this year," Cornelius said with a smirk. "Under our guidance, even Angelica was able to graduate. We all banded together to teach her the materials, and now I am extremely confident that we will demolish the written lessons."

All those trying to help Angelica as part of the Raise Angelica's Grades Squadron had found themselves getting smarter too. This was because they had needed to master the material before they could summarize it in a way that Angelica would understand.

"Oh. I thought I was just being deadweight, but I guess I was being useful to everyone too. This year's apprentices sure are going to be smart," Angelica said, puffing out her chest. She was completely fearless now that she had already graduated, and it was true that the knights seemed more capable than before.

Hartmut shot Cornelius a taunting look. "We may have struggled to raise the grades of our layscholars last year, since they lacked good textbooks and paper on which to write their notes, but plant paper is now being distributed and archnobles are actively teaching their schoolmates. In other words, everyone's grades are on the rise. This is not like last year, when we had no time to prepare

and only the knights had access to good textbooks," he concluded. As a representative for the scholars, he was brimming with confidence.

Brunhilde nodded her agreement. "Likewise, we shared information in the Royal Academy last year and made our own textbooks out of study resources for each school year. We apprentice attendants shall emerge victorious."

"We must finish our classes with haste either way so that we may follow Lady Rozemyne in her charge to the library," Lieseleta said with a giggle. "She certainly challenges one's skills as a retainer."

I puffed out my chest with pride in the same way that Angelica had. "I see. So my visits to the library have been helping all of your grades as well."

"Lady Rozemyne, please do not copy my sister," Lieseleta chastised me. I averted my eyes and changed the subject.

"Speaking of which, now that we archduke candidates are all going to the Royal Academy together this year, how will the winter playroom fare?" I mused aloud. "Has Sylvester given you any information, Charlotte?"

"Professor Moritz will be teaching the children, and Wilfried's harspiel teacher is remaining behind to hold music lessons," Charlotte replied.

"Unlike you two, I won't need to hold any tea parties. For practice and emergencies, I can just borrow one of your teachers," Wilfried said. It was clear to everyone that studying in the winter playroom had a significant impact on our duchy's grades, which was why lessons were going to continue even in our absence. Moritz had four years of experience by this point, so it seemed safe to leave things with him.

"There won't always be children of the archduke in the playroom, and this is a good opportunity for them to figure out how to run things without us," I said.

As we arrived at the grand hall, we found that there were already a ton of people gathered. Wilfried and Charlotte were involved in the printing and paper-making industries too, so we all had a lot of nobles coming over to greet us.

The first to come were Brunhilde's parents, Count and Countess Groschel. Although they had established the printing and paper-making industries in their

province, they were experiencing many difficulties and were fighting hard to get on track.

"Giebe Groschel, how fare the printing and paper-making industries?" I asked.

"We have decided to buy paper and metal letter types for printing this year. The craftspeople are considering whether it would be best to abandon white paper and explore creating colored paper instead. We are also exploring the possibility of an entwickeln just for Groschel."

Magic tools for purifying water required a ridiculous amount of mana, even from Ferdinand's perspective, so it would take Groschel quite some time to implement one. In the meantime, they had decided to try tackling the pollution by cleaning their lower city as Ehrenfest had done.

"If you are to ask Aub Ehrenfest, I would suggest explaining that you wish to beautify the lower city not just for the paper-making industry, but also so that you might welcome merchants from other duchies," I said. "How we appear to foreign visitors is an issue affecting the entirety of Ehrenfest."

I had heard that the entwickeln performed on the city of Ehrenfest had used less mana than planned, since we had only altered the sewage pipes beneath the ground. I was sure we could use the mana we had to spare on Groschel instead.

If the giebe handles this well, Sylvester might even make an ally of him.

Sylvester had few allies among the nobility after punishing his mother and distancing himself from the former Veronica faction. He certainly needed more archnobles on his side, and my hope was that Count Groschel could serve as a hook to draw in further support. Once the archduke had one Leisegang archnoble on his side, the rest would follow much more willingly.

Of course, it was up to Sylvester whether he would use mana for the sake of Groschel, and I didn't know if they would actually end up as allies. Either way, this would prove an opportunity for Count Groschel and Sylvester to show off their socializing skills—how would Count Groschel make his request, how would Sylvester win his favor, and how would they both profit? Everything was in their hands.

“Your support will be quite encouraging indeed,” Brunhilde said with a smile. I smiled back and gave her an understanding nod.

Once Count Groschel departed, the next to come were Count and Countess Haldenzel. After we exchanged greetings, I asked how the province had coped with its early spring.

“Our harvest this year was exceptionally large due to being blessed with good weather and the snow melting early. I was rendered speechless. Never had it crossed my mind that Haldenzel might be capable of producing so much food,” he said. The usually late melting of the snow meant summers were short in Haldenzel, and the harvests there were generally expected to be poor as a result. Since spring had come right after Spring Prayer this year, however, they had received a much longer warm season and a harvest that was nearly twice as large as they were used to.

“I assume the early spring brought its own struggles as well, though,” I said. “Did anyone fall ill from the summer being too hot?”

“I feared that the early melting of the snow would result in an especially hot summer, but it seemed that my worries were unnecessary. It was merely as though spring lasted much longer than one would expect. Haldenzel has no men so weak that they would collapse from a few hot days. They would not have survived this long.”

I mean, I would get sick. I’m super weak to weather changes like that.

“That said,” the giebe continued, “perhaps due to the significant change in climate, some feyplants grew unusually fast, and some feybeasts appeared at different times than usual, which made hunting more problematic. These were mere trifles in the grand scheme of things, however. It is thanks to your becoming the High Bishop and teaching us of the bible’s ancient ways that we of Haldenzel can spend this winter in peace.”

Count Haldenzel knelt before me and took my hand, which caught the attention of almost every noble in eyeshot. As they watched in surprise, he pressed his forehead to the back of my hand, the greatest display of gratitude a noble could make.

“I speak for all of Haldenzel when I thank you for everything that you have

done, O Saint of Ehrenfest.”

A surge of people came to greet me after Giebe Haldenzel. I spoke to them all, one group after another, until eventually...

“Oh my. Giebe Illgner. How have things been?” I asked. “I would have liked to visit Illgner during the Harvest Festival, but I simply could not find the time...”

I had wanted to travel to Illgner to see how the paper-making industry was doing and meet Volk’s child, but Ferdinand had scolded me for trying to visit so many provinces all on my own. Nobody complained about how much work I did for Spring Prayer, since it was just giving mana and distributing chalices, but the Harvest Festival was responsible for a large portion of the blue priests’ income, so they were very much against me going to too many places. In the end, I had given up on going to Illgner, since visiting Groschel and the Gutenbergs had been my highest priorities this year.

“We know that you are always busy, Lady Rozemyne,” Brigitte said. “You are spreading the printing industry all across Ehrenfest; I imagine you are even busier now than when I served you.”

“In that case, Brigitte, will you tell me about Illgner?”

“I would be delighted to.”

Brigitte and Viktor, alongside Viscount and Viscountess Illgner, told me how they were striving to produce paper made from new resources and how they had sent craftspeople to the giebes of nearby provinces to teach them how to make paper. Illgner was a region filled with mountains and trees, and the water there was clean, unlike in Groschel, so its neighbors were naturally suited to the paper-making industry.

“Lady Rozemyne, please do allow me to greet you as well,” came Elvira’s voice during a break in my discussion with Brigitte. I turned to see that she was standing with Aurelia, who was still wearing her veil.

“I see that your new veil arrived, Aurelia.”

“It did. Wearing a veil dyed the same way as everyone else’s clothes, as per your suggestion, has softened the looks I receive from others,” Aurelia replied. She then lowered her voice to an embarrassed whisper. “I am also glad to have

used such cute cloth, which I have rarely had the opportunity to use before."

"If you are feeling even the slightest bit more comfortable here as a result, then I am pleased beyond words," I said. "But I must also apologize—my plan to cook the fish you brought from Ahrensbach has been delayed due to orders from above. I am sorry for not keeping my promise to you."

You must miss the food of your homeland, right? You probably want to eat some as soon as you can. Sorry about the wait...

My lower-city family had shown zero interest in fish, since they didn't offer much meat and it took forever to remove the stink of mud from them. The last time I had eaten some was when Lutz had fished some out for me and we had cooked it with salt. Back then, it had been too crusty to even pass as dried food, and he had rejected the idea of using it for broth. My lust for delicious seafood burned just as brightly now as it had back then, and Aurelia was no doubt feeling the same way. Any Japanese person in her situation would be dying for fish.

I mean, I just miss seafood so much! I truly understand how she feels!

"I will ensure the fish is prepared and cooked as soon as I return from the Royal Academy. I ask only that you wait until then," I said.

"I truly appreciate how considerate you are being for my sake, but you do not need to worry about me," Aurelia replied. "I am quite enjoying Ehrenfest food, so there is no particular rush."

Oh no...

I had intended to use Aurelia's homesickness to convince Ferdinand and Sylvester to teach me the cooking methods ASAP, but it seemed she wasn't in as much of a hurry as I was. In fact, she seemed to be completely fine with taking things slowly.

S-Strange... It feels like my chances of a fish dinner are getting even further away...

I gave Aurelia a quizzical look, but Wilfried tugged on my arm from behind and stepped forward. "Rozemyne, you should leave it at that. Their stares are starting to hurt," he said, discreetly gesturing to a group of nobles from the

former Veronica faction. They were probably trying to find an opportunity to speak with Aurelia but were struggling due to Elvira.

“Aurelia, I’ve heard about you from Lamprecht,” Wilfried continued. “Your life here might be a bit restrained, given the circumstances, but I intend to do anything I can to make things more comfortable for you.”

“I’m honored, Lord Wilfried. However, I do not feel particularly restrained. I have much more freedom here than I did in Ahrensbach,” she replied.

Aurelia was spending her days stuck in a side building, and her only visitors were people who had been carefully vetted by her husband’s family. I couldn’t see how that was “freedom” by any definition of the word, but I could tell from her voice that she really did mean it.

Geez... Just what kind of a life did she live in Ahrensbach?

Leaving for the Royal Academy

Once winter socializing began, the adults became busy with socializing—as one might expect. We spent the days leading up to our departure for the Royal Academy in the playroom, as per usual, where I was greeted by the children who had just been baptized. I then asked Hartmut to delegate the task of teaching them to play cards and such to the Royal Academy seniors.

“Have them tactfully lose at times so as to motivate the children,” I said. “The seniors will need to navigate working with crafty old nobles after they graduate, so I am sure they will manage to manipulate the feelings of newly baptized children with ease.”

“Putting it like that will certainly stir their pride as seniors,” Hartmut replied. As he went to carry out his new task, I asked Wilfried to take charge of the second-years and play games with those who already had some experience.

“Isn’t Charlotte better suited for that?” Wilfried asked. “She was here last year. I don’t know a lot of these kids.”

“Charlotte is busy studying with the other soon-to-be first-years,” I replied. “Furthermore, you are much better than Charlotte when it comes to riling up the students and making the games more exciting.”

Once it was decided that he would focus on motivating the students with sweets and the like, I went to speak with Moritz.

“Professor Moritz,” I said, “I ask that you teach the first-years history and geography today. Here are the textbooks we compiled last year.”

“I covered parts of those subjects last year,” Moritz replied.

“It is important that we place an even greater focus on them this year, so that the Better Grades Committee may remain fair and neutral.”

I had Charlotte gather the new first-years, whereupon I explained to them what the Better Grades Committee was doing in the Royal Academy and encouraged them to try their hardest, since the older students were already

making their moves.

The playroom's population decreased by the day as the students gradually departed for the Royal Academy. I passed the time by speaking with Moritz about what the playroom's lesson plan should cover in our absence, organizing requests for new teachers to cover topics that were lacking proper instructors, and reading new stories to the children.

The book we had received from Dunkelfelger, which I had now translated into modern vernacular, proved surprisingly popular with boys aiming to be knights. Who would have guessed that a hot-blooded tale about knights fighting tirelessly until they wrenched victory from the jaws of defeat would end up being so well received?

I should ask Lady Hannelore if she would mind me selling this book in Ehrenfest... I'd market it as being from Dunkelfelger, of course.

The dinners I had during this brief period turned into meetings with all of my guardians, since Ferdinand and Bonifatius were also in attendance. There were a lot of things that Wilfried and Charlotte had discussed that I was still completely in the dark about, so I used this time to ask questions and make requests.

"Understood," I said. "That will not be an issue, as I am once again bringing Ella and Hugo with me to serve as chefs. Hugo can be ready tomorrow, while Ella will travel with me, as she did last year. And, incidentally, Sylvester... Are there any court chefs who know how to cook fish?"

"I've already heard about all this from Ferdinand," Sylvester replied. "I don't mind having the court chefs teach your chefs how to prepare and cook fish, once we make sure the stuff you're getting from Aurelia isn't poisoned or anything. It's about time I pay you back for all the recipes your chefs taught mine last year."

I could sense that he was urging me to teach his chefs even more recipes this year, which reminded me of all the dishes Ella and Hugo were coming up with themselves. There were no magic contracts restricting the distribution of these recipes, so I saw no issue with giving them away. Some of them would spread regardless as Ella and Hugo cooked in the Royal Academy kitchens with the

other chefs.

“That said, though—this’ll need to wait until after you come back from the Royal Academy,” Sylvester noted.

“Quite.”

“Anyway,” Sylvester said, moving the topic of conversation swiftly along. “Thanks to all your hard work raising our duchy’s grades and spreading trends last year, we have more of a budget to use at the Royal Academy.”

Doing business with other duchies had increased the amount of wealth coming into Ehrenfest, which in turn meant we had more money to spend. Sylvester was taking the opportunity to reinvest in the Royal Academy, since our efforts there were the reason for the new business agreements being made in the first place.

“Use this wealth to continue improving the students’ grades, spreading trends, and locking existing trends into place,” Sylvester said. “Or at least, that’s what I said to Wilfried and Charlotte. Rozemyne, what’s your plan? You’re not gonna use the whole budget on the Interduchy Tournament, right?”

“I plan to distribute ink and paper to the laynobles,” I replied.

Just as Damuel had said, laynobles would generally write on wooden boards during lectures, then shave away their notes so that the boards could be reused. The writing was sometimes lost for good, depending on how the students went about the shaving process, and as time passed, the boards became harder and harder to repair.

“I would like for them to have paper, such that the details of their lessons may be preserved,” I said. “To raise the grades of not just individual students, but all those from Ehrenfest, it is essential that we strengthen our weakest links.”

Archnobles were likely to secure good grades even without my assistance, since their pride was on the line. They were unlikely to slack off, and they could prepare plenty of parchment and ink for themselves. They also had the luxury of being able to preserve their written material, so many archnobles were able to use lecture notes given to them by their parents or older siblings.

“The laynobles need the most help precisely because they are less able to pass down records of their studies,” I explained. “Of course, I will continue personally paying for the transcriptions I am requesting of other duchies.”

It was important that I personally buy the transcriptions so that I could claim ownership of them. This was not something I was willing to budge on.

The concept of spending the increased budget to pick up our weakest members made Charlotte blink her indigo eyes curiously. “Sister, what about aid for the archnobles?” she asked. “Would it not be unfair to assist only the laynobles?”

“I will provide aid equally. I fully intend to give paper to all those who ask, whether they be archnobles or laynobles. It only comes across as unfair in practice because no archnoble would dare ask for help and give off the impression they are too poor to afford their own stationery.”

To be frank, I saw no need to waste any of our budget on archnobles; they were rich enough without our help.

“Furthermore, Sylvester,” I continued, “I intend to bring with me other printed goods—that is, nonacademic knight stories, romance stories, sheet music, and the like. Is that acceptable?”

“Won’t next year’s Archduke Conference be a mess if people learn about printing?” Sylvester replied.

“We will only bring one copy of each outside of the Ehrenfest Dormitory. To other duchies, they will seem to be very neatly written materials and nothing more. I don’t believe knowledge of the printing industry will spread at all.”

There was also the fact that mimeograph printing had been used for some of the books. To an outsider, they looked entirely handwritten.

“I wish to casually introduce these materials as new styles of books made with Ehrenfest paper and use them to get more bookworm allies,” I said. “I am investing in our future customer base.”

Now that we had more printing workshops at our disposal, there would be increasingly more printed goods within Ehrenfest. That was why I needed to start lending out books and making note of who took the bait. By doing this, I

could secure more potential consumers while encouraging prospective authors. If one wanted books for nobles, it was best to have nobles write them; I had learned that at the cost of sacrificing my own romance novel.

"'Casually introduce'?" Ferdinand repeated. "I find it hard to imagine you doing anything but raving about them until you turn blue in the face and drop unconscious. Perhaps someone else should introduce the books in your stead."

"I'm with Uncle," Wilfried added with a nod, reinforcing the verbal attack on my suggestion. "Nobody is going to take an interest in books if the person distributing them passes out in the process. You wouldn't want to make Lady Hannelore cry again, would you?"

The absolute last thing I wanted was for Hannelore to associate our book-lending with something negative. I wanted her to be my friend forevermore.

"In that case, I will write introductions for the books and leave my involvement at that," I conceded. "Wilfried, Charlotte, I ask you to do the rest."

"Excellent," Ferdinand said with a nod. Wilfried and Charlotte exchanged glances before nodding as well.

I couldn't help but purse my lips, which elicited a chuckle from Sylvester. "Don't get so down, Rozemyne," he said. "I managed to look into your requests and have approved a new bookcase for the dorm. Cheer up."

"A new bookcase?" I asked. "I suddenly feel so much better."

I had said that it was unthinkable for a place of learning like the Royal Academy dormitory to be so utterly devoid of bookcases, and in that regard, I had asked for some to be made and a little reading corner to be established. As it turned out, my words had not fallen on deaf ears.

"We need to have textbooks in places where everyone can read them, and we'll also need to make sure we have copies of the books we've printed here in Ehrenfest," I said. "In other words, we need to fill those shelves with as many books as we can!"

I'll have them add more and more bookcases until, before they know it, the reading corner has evolved into a full-on library!

“You can have your bookcase, but I’m refusing that request you made to put a Goddess of Wisdom statue in the castle’s book room,” Sylvester said.

Professor Solange had told us that praying to the statue of Mestionora the Goddess of Wisdom would encourage books to gather there. There was supposedly a statue in the royal palace’s library as well, so I had asked for one to be put in the castle’s book room, thinking that daily prayer would help us to secure more reading material.

“Getting books matters more than the goddess statue, right?”

“In that case, Sylvester, please dedicate a portion of our increased budget to the purchase of new books,” I said.

Sylvester grimaced. “How much do you think a single book costs? We don’t have that much to spare. Just have faith in your new legal deposit system and the book room will fill up on its own in no time.”

Long live the legal deposit system! I’m a genius for making sure it was implemented. I’m so excited for there to be more printed books.

“Now that we have a reading corner, and with how hard everyone worked to make textbooks, I believe you can expect great things from the Ehrenfest students,” I said. “Our grades will be even higher than they were last year.”

We were already acing our written lessons, and if we kept it up, we were bound to be in the highest ranks before long. Our plan now was to switch our focus to the practical lessons. It was true that we were already increasing the amount of mana we had available, but I had no idea how much the students were growing on an individual level. There was also the fact that having a lot of mana was entirely separate from being able to effectively use it, so I didn’t really know how our grades were going to be impacted.

Now, as for the other areas that still need some improvement... Ditter is the main one that comes to mind.

I wanted to know how the apprentices’ training was holding up, so I turned my attention to Bonifatius. He was listening to our conversation with a grin while he ate.

“Grandfather, have the apprentices grown any better at coordinating?”

Bonifatius instantly leaned forward, as though he had been waiting for me to ask just that. “I’ve trained the heck out of them, Rozemyne. Just like you asked. They’ve still got plenty of room to improve, but compared to last year, they’re doing a little better.”

“Oh my!” I exclaimed. “I thank you ever so much. That should help us improve our ditter ranking.”

Last year, our apprentices had proven that they didn’t even know what the word “strategy” meant, but now they could formulate and execute strategies right from the start of the year. If they could get enough practice done and used the boosted mana of the archducal apprentice guard knights effectively, there was an excellent chance that we would reach a higher ranking.

“Has anyone in particular stood out to you, Grandfather?”

“Hmm... The archducal family’s apprentice guard knights are getting more mana faster than anyone, as you’d expect, and so are the others who learned your method. It’s not making those from the other factions any happier, though.”

The children of the former Veronica faction were struggling to keep up no matter how hard they worked, and mana had a big impact on one’s strength.

“Sylvester, I recall there being a discussion about rewarding a select few with the mana compression method, but what conclusion did you come to?” I asked, still uncertain how the children of the former Veronica faction were going to be thanked for warning us about the ambush planned for Lamprecht and Aurelia’s wedding. I needed to keep my question vague, since I wasn’t sure how many people knew the exact details of the planned attack, but Sylvester understood nonetheless.

“I praised them for their deeds, compensated them for the intelligence, and told them that you wish to teach them the mana compression method,” Sylvester said. He lowered his dark-green eyes for a second, then looked up and faced me directly. “I also gave them a condition for learning the method.”

“And what might that condition be?”

“They must name-swear themselves to the archducal family first.”

There came a gasp, and then a few heavy swallows. Everyone looked at Sylvester with wide eyes while I alone blinked in confusion.

“Erm... I don’t think I’m familiar with the term,” I admitted.

“It’s the process of sealing your name into a feystone and then offering it to someone, thereby giving them your life and swearing complete loyalty to them.”

“Um...”

“In fact, there are people in this very room who are name-sworn,” Sylvester said, acknowledging my surprise. He gestured to Justus and Eckhart, who were standing behind Ferdinand. “Those two pledged their allegiance to Ferdinand. That’s why they were treated as his retainers even after he joined the temple.”

Justus and Eckhart had apparently been called fools for name-swearing themselves to a man so intensely scorned by Veronica while she was still in power. Apparently, by swearing your name to someone, you gave them complete control over your very life—you lived or died according to their whims, and you could not serve another without first getting permission from them.

That sounds a bit too extreme for me, but when Ferdinand was surrounded by enemies, I can see why he would value such indisputable loyalty.

There certainly wouldn’t be a problem with teaching my mana compression method to someone loyal enough to entrust their life to the archducal family, but such a severe form of expressing loyalty would no doubt be hard on laynobles and mednobles, who generally survived by switching factions depending on who had more power.

As thoughts of name-swearing swam through my mind, the day of my departure for the Royal Academy seemed to come overnight.

“We have clothes for Schwartz and Weiss, as well as our book from Dunkelfelger,” I said, running through my mental checklist. “There’s also a book printed in Ehrenfest to lend to Lady Hannelore. I don’t believe I’m forgetting anything...”

All of my retainers who were going to be attending school with me had gone to the academy on their respective days. Now, only my adult retainers remained—Ottilie, Rihyarda, Damuel, and Angelica. Once again, it was decided that Rihyarda would accompany me as my one adult attendant.

"What will you do while I am gone, Angelica?" I asked.

"Train. Master was training the apprentices again this year, so I didn't get much time with him. I'm hoping to remedy that," she replied, a gleam in her blue eyes. Meanwhile, Damuel stared vacantly into the distance and muttered something about another year of short-term, high-intensity training.

"Um, Angelica... Is there nothing else for you to do?" I said. "You are engaged now. Do you not need to socialize with Eckhart?"

"As his second wife, I would not be going to any social occasions with him. Aside from my training, I plan to embroider my cape and pour mana into Stenluke."

In short, she doesn't want to do anything but boost her battle capabilities.

An ordonnanz arrived when it was my turn to go to the Royal Academy, at which point I made my way to the teleportation room with my retainers. My belongings were going to be teleported first, so I said my farewells as the servants loaded my things onto the circle.

"Try to keep things peaceful this year," Sylvester said.

"My, my, Sylvester... I always strive for peace," I replied.

He responded with a doubting look, but it wasn't like I spent my days *trying* to cause chaos. I wanted to hide away in the library and spend all my time reading. Things just never seemed to go according to plan.

"Rozemyne," Ferdinand said, "I have given Hartmut several books to tide you over in the interim period between you finishing your lessons and your retainers finishing most of theirs. Spend that time in the dormitory."

"Why Hartmut?! Shouldn't you give them to me or Rihyarda?" I asked, my eyes wide.

He scoffed. "Were I to give *you* these books, you would not wait until you had

finished your lessons and would instead spend many a sleepless night reading through them. Then, you would no doubt charge to the library, desperate for more, thereby defeating the entire point. I elected to give them to Hartmut rather than Rihyarda because not even an archduke candidate can break tradition and enter the boys' rooms on the second floor."

"You're right about that, my boy. You know milady well," Rihyarda interjected with a nod.

Gaaah! My new books!

"I have given some empty feystones to Rihyarda, but feystones are limited, and your enthusiasm is boundless," Ferdinand continued. "Take care not to trouble Dunkelfelger's archduke candidate any further."

But, I mean... It's only natural to get excited when books are involved, right? What exactly should I be taking care not to do?

As I tilted my head curiously, Ferdinand gave me a thin smile. "Do not cause any incidents that would force me to forbid you from ever entering the library again," he said.

"Your wish is my command."

It seemed that all of my luggage had been prepared while Ferdinand was talking to me. Rihyarda urged me onto the circle.

"I will join you tomorrow, Sister," Charlotte called out.

"Indeed. I am looking forward to your arrival," I replied. "Farewell, everyone."

With that, the magic circle began to shine, and my vision started to contort.

Fealty and the Dormitory

Light brimming with black and gold mana clashed in front of me. I instinctively shut my eyes tight as my vision blurred, and a wave of nausea suddenly washed over me.

“Welcome to the Ehrenfest Dormitory, Lady Rozemyne,” came a voice.

I slowly opened my eyes to see two knights. As expected, I was in the dormitory’s teleportation hall. I needed to hurry off of the circle to make way for Wilfried, who was going to be arriving after me.

Upon leaving the room with Rihyarda, I found my other retainers waiting in the hall outside. Only Philine was absent, since she was in my grade and was in the process of preparing her room.

“Welcome, Lady Rozemyne.”

“Now then, milady. Spend some time relaxing. I will go and prepare your room,” Rihyarda said, directing my retainers with her eyes while watching the male servants carrying my luggage. I climbed into my highbeast and made my way to the common room with my retainers while Rihyarda leapt right into action.

“It’s been so long since I was last here, but I don’t feel particularly nostalgic...” I mused.

“That’s because our dormitory was made to look just like the castle,” Judithe said with a smile. “I don’t really feel like we’ve gone anywhere special either. That’s why first-years are able to adjust to the dorm so fast.”

Judithe’s parents were knights who served Giebe Kirnberger. She had been baptized in Kirnberger and then entered the castle for the first time for her winter debut.

“It was so different from the giebe’s summer mansion and so much bigger,” she continued. “I couldn’t believe what I was seeing! I was nervous enough already, and then there were so many nobles I didn’t recognize... But after

going to the winter playroom every day, I started to feel a lot more comfortable!”

Three winters in the winter playroom had made Judithe feel more at ease, and by the time she was old enough to attend the Royal Academy, she could enter the castle without any worries.

“At first, I worried that I was going to have to conquer my fears all over again at the Royal Academy, but the dormitory here is so similar to the castle, and I already knew so many of the other children from the playroom. In the end, adjusting to the new environment was easy.”

Judithe had only seen the seniors during the few days they spent in the playroom, but this meant she had at least recognized them when she came to the Royal Academy herself, which had done wonders to make her feel at ease. I was listening to her with great interest, having never realized that the playroom fulfilled such a role.

“I see the winter playroom plays an even more crucial role than I thought,” I said.

“This is especially true now, Lady Rozemyne. Ever since Lord Wilfried and you first came, there’ve been games and sweets to look forward to, and instructors to help us with our studies,” Judithe said.

I went into the common room, but unlike last year, there was basically nobody here. What caught my eye first was the new bookcase. There weren’t any books in it yet, but it towered imposingly in the corner of the room, making its presence known.

“That is the new bookcase, I see.”

I ran over to it at once, my heart swelling with excitement. It was a stocky, ornately carved bookcase fit for decorating an archduke-owned building such as the Ehrenfest Dormitory. A closer look revealed that it had a glossy finish and was polished to a sheen. It was so glossy, in fact, that I could actually see my face in the wood.

I gazed up at the sizable bookcase with an awed sigh as a delighted tingle shot through my body. It still didn’t have any books in it, though.

“We should fill these shelves as soon as possible,” I said. “There is nothing quite as wonderful as a bookcase packed from top to bottom with books, you know.”

“In that case, I shall help Rihyarda unpack and then bring our books here,” Lieseleta said, entrusting tea to Brunhilde and quietly stepping out of the common room. Brunhilde could probably tell that I was on the verge of rubbing my face against the polished wood, as she called out that the bookcase could be admired just as well from the tables.

I looked around the common room as I sipped my tea, although my attention was primarily focused on the bookcase. I could remember how busy things had been last year, with all the seniors coming to welcome the first-years, but now there was barely anyone here. An eerie quiet still blanketed the room.

“What are the students of the other years doing?” I asked.

“Preparing for their lectures,” Brunhilde answered. “Unlike first-years, the older students have much to prepare. Now that you and Lord Wilfried have arrived, they must go gathering.”

“What...?”

“They must gather the ingredients needed for their brewing lessons,” Leonore explained. “That should not take particularly long, though.”

Students would need to gather the herbs and feystones and such they were going to need for their practical lessons ahead of time, and the Royal Academy grounds were brimming with ingredients that were easy to use in brewing recipes, that were abundant in mana, and that contained numerous elements. Of course, the students also had the ingredients they had gathered in the castle’s forest back in Ehrenfest, but they would be using those for purposes other than classroom brewing. The ingredients used in lectures were standardized for the sake of convenience during lessons.

“Up until now, apprentice knights of the higher years would gather together, then sell their harvested goods... But this year, everyone is going together, so the knights can practice fighting while protecting others. I’ve been gathering for days as a sixth-year,” Cornelius said. It seemed that the third-years had gone yesterday, and today it was the second-years’ turn. The first-years didn’t have

brewing lessons and didn't need to gather, so the consecutive days of the knights going out to gather ended today.

"Lady Rozemyne, it must be because of all my training with Lord Bonifatius, but my aim is much better than it used to be," Judithe said, her violet eyes sparkling with excitement. "It's so much fun getting feystones now. I'm so much stronger."

"It was wonderful to see you working so hard to beat Damuel," Leonore giggled. "I am hoping to find a way to incorporate all of the strategies I've studied into future ditter games, but that seems easier said than done. The biggest challenge this year is going to be filling the power gap that Angelica has left in the wake of her graduation."

She may have been deadweight for the written lessons, but she was the apprentice knights' powerhouse when it came to practical lessons.

As we continued our conversation, Wilfried arrived in the common room. As he was being served tea by his retainers, I pointed to the new bookcase.

"Behold, dear brother—the new bookcase that Sylvester has prepared for us. What books shall we put on its shelves? If you have any requests, I would be more than glad to hear them."

Wilfried looked at me, then at our retainers, and then sighed. "Nobody cares about that bookcase as much as you do," he said. "Do whatever you want. I can't imagine anyone will try to stop you."

The joy of getting free rein over the bookcase warmed my soul, which almost seemed to sparkle with heavenly light. In my eyes, even Wilfried seemed to sparkle, as if divine rays were raining down upon him from the heavens. He had never seemed so heroic and cool in his life. Thank goodness I was engaged to someone who would allow me to do what I wanted with books.

"Wilfried... I thank you ever so much!" I said, so overcome with emotion that my body started to tremble. Everyone inhaled sharply, and Hartmut swiftly put his hands on my shoulders.

"Lady Rozemyne, please calm down. You are getting too excited."

"My apologies... I am just so overjoyed."

We moved on to discussing today's gatherings. As we talked, a second-year wearing highbeast riding gear and some warm-looking clothes came into the common hall. A short while later, another arrived as well. At the same time, an ordonnanz flew in from Rihyarda, informing me that my room was ready.

"Alright, Rozemyne," Wilfried said. "Go change into your riding gear. It's time to gather."

By the time I got changed and returned to the common room, all of the second-years and apprentice knights were gathered together. The second-years were dressed in layers upon layers of thick, fluffy clothing, while the apprentice knights wore only their full feystone armor and their capes.

Oh yeah. The armor knights wear protects them against the cold too, or something...

"Second-years, prioritize gathering. We shall stay on the lookout for any feybeasts," Cornelius said. The apprentice knights moved at his orders and exited the common room with the second-years sandwiched between them.

I was driving my single-person Pandabus, as usual.

Hm...?

We passed the entrance leading to the hall of the central building and moved farther into the dormitory. Apparently, there was another exit that we were going to use.

Although I had used the meeting rooms in this part of the dormitory before, never had I gone this far inside. We proceeded along a hallway and turned a corner, and there was another entrance hall.

Two apprentice knights opened a set of double doors to reveal a snow-covered forest; rather than being enchanted with teleportation magic, the doors simply led outside the dorm. As the falling snow was swept into my face and the cold wind pricked my cheeks, I instinctively wrapped my arms around myself.

"Take out your highbeasts in order," Cornelius instructed. "We're moving."

The apprentice knights took the lead, climbing onto their highbeasts before

flying up into the air. The second-years followed after them, in order. Philine was only a laynoble, but she was used to bringing out and traveling by highbeast due to commuting between the temple and castle so often. She was something of a natural, especially when compared to Roderick, a mednoble who wasn't used to using his.

Experience always matters most, huh?

Once we were high up in the air, I noticed a circular clearing among the trees near the dorm. I could see a faint pillar of yellow light, which would have been hidden among the snow had we been much farther away.

"That is Ehrenfest's gathering point," Leonore said from her highbeast beside mine, pointing at the glowing light. We started our descent, and for a moment, the area contorted, as if we were going through a magic mirror. For some reason, the faint yellow part now had a ton of plants growing throughout. Along the edge of the pillar were towering trees that bore fruit of some kind. It was like the season had changed in a heartbeat.

Upon seeing the sudden change in scenery, the second-years looked completely taken aback. "What's going on here...?" one asked.

"My brother Eckhart told me this clearing was originally where one would put one's treasure during games of treasure-stealing ditter," Cornelius explained with a slight smile. "Snow has been blocked from falling here to prevent the games from being affected."

As it turned out, every dorm had a good gathering spot where snow never fell. Feybeasts would come for the plants and fruit, which made them excellent places to hunt feystones too.

"Take care not to enter the gathering spots of other duchies, no matter what," Cornelius said. "There are measures in place—presumably from the days when these areas were used for treasure-stealing ditter—that will cut you down on sight. Like this." In an instant, he morphed his schtappe into a sword and sliced through a feybeast that had charged toward us. The feybeast started to melt until, soon enough, a gleaming feystone dropped to the ground.

"These plants are needed for rejuvenation potions. Also, be sure to pick up these yellow fruits."

The third-year guard knights taught us second-years what we were going to need for our brewing lessons, all while looking out for any threats. We took out our schtappes, chanted "*messer*," and then used our knives to start gathering.

"Judithe, eliminate the zantze on that branch. Traugott, there are two on the right. Be careful," Leonore said, having successfully learned to better her vision with enhancement magic. She kept a watchful eye on our surroundings, warning of any nearby feybeasts and giving instructions on who should hunt which one.

It was thanks to the apprentice knights that we were able to gather peacefully, and upon our return to the dorm, they started selling the feystones they had collected from defeated feybeasts to other students, who would need them for their lessons. Apparently, this was a valuable way for the apprentice knights to make money.

"So the ingredients we gathered today used to be part of your income as well," I observed.

"Yes," Cornelius replied, "but learning how to escort others is an important part of our training."

Cornelius was evidently fine with the new system, but he was a rich archnoble. It was important for apprentice scholars and attendants to experience gathering for themselves, and for apprentice knights to get experience fighting while protecting others; but if our current approach was depriving students of an important source of money, it probably wouldn't last long.

"Rozemyne, how about we pay the apprentice knights as much as they would have earned from the gathering, to cover their guard duty?" Wilfried asked. "This is important for everyone's grades, so surely the expanded budget can cover it."

"That's a good idea, Wilfried. I shall do the calculations," I said. He had made the suggestion before I could, and the faces of all the laynobles and mednobles lit up at once. As expected, it was important to them.

Not long after our return to the dormitory, it was time for dinner. I needed to get changed out of my highbeast riding clothes, so I returned to my room,

where Rihyarda and the others helped me get ready.

Over dinner, we discussed how we would welcome the new students coming to the Royal Academy tomorrow. The plan was to prepare sweets for them and ensure that all of the seniors were present for their arrival, but first and foremost, we needed to decide on the roles that Wilfried and I would play.

“I believe the archduke candidates should remain seated,” came a suggestion from Isidore, one of Wilfried’s apprentice attendants.

“That does indeed seem wise,” Brunhilde agreed. “Being served tea and sweets by archduke candidates would only scare the first-years stiff. Lady Rozemyne, Lord Wilfried, perhaps you could explain the rules of the dorm and the ways we spent our time last year.”

The rules of the dorm, hm? Maybe I should explain how the bookcase is meant to be used...

In this world, books were valuable enough to be chained to bookshelves. Their value had gone down a little in Ehrenfest due to the continued expansion of our printing industry, but they were still expensive; I didn’t want anyone taking and selling them without permission.

“So, Hartmut... Do you think I should make a list of rules and instructions for using the bookcase and its books?” I asked.

“I would even go as far as to call it necessary,” he replied. “The majority of the books are going to be your belongings, Lady Rozemyne, so it is important that you explain how they are to be used.”

To me, the rules were obvious—don’t take the books out of the common room, put them back where you found them, take extra care not to damage them... Even so, I needed to take extra precautions to ensure that everyone was properly taught how to treat the bookcase, and normalizing my rules was the first step to making them a universal culture.

I nodded to myself, certain that this was going to work.

The next day, the first-years teleported over with their respective attendants. The seniors accommodated them with aplomb, exchanged greetings with them, led them to their seats, and offered them sweets, all while explaining how to

use the dormitory's facilities, what time meals were served, and so on.

As an archduke candidate, Charlotte was the last first-year to arrive. She sipped from her teacup with her retainers surrounding her, and I used that opportunity to speedily explain the rules for using the bookcase and such.

"Sister," Charlotte began, setting down her cup and shaking her head at me slightly, "when hosting another, you must start with idle small talk, not lectures. You abruptly began your conversation with Aurelia during the dyeing competition by asking about how many books were in Ahrensbach's libraries or some such, no? That simply will not do. A normal person would not appreciate your sudden explanation of using a bookcase."

It seemed that I should have focused my initial conversation with Aurelia on dyeing or fashion trends, and my conversation here in the Royal Academy on lectures or the dormitory.

"But Charlotte, the bookcase is part of the dormitory. And is a discourse on books not equivalent to a friendly greeting?"

"No."

Charlotte shot me down in a heartbeat, but books really were the ideal conversation starter. For me, asking what books the other person had read lately or talking about new finds in the local library had often immediately followed any greetings back on Earth.

"I've never heard of any greetings like that," Wilfried said. "Who would you even say that to?"

"I'll use them when I meet with my bookworm friends."

"Talk about weird..." Wilfried remarked with a smirk. I pursed my lips; it seemed that my greetings were viewed as nonsensical in this world, since there were so few books here.

I'll normalize these as greetings one day! Just you wait and see!

"Oh, that reminds me. Wilfried, Charlotte, I have asked Rihyarda to prepare a meeting room so that I may extend my gratitude to the children of the former Veronica faction who warned us of the ambush," I said. In an instant, the smiles

on Wilfried's and Charlotte's faces turned into more serious expressions. "I had intended to thank them on my own, as they attempted to inform me specifically. However, if we are to use this opportunity to work on absorbing the children into our faction, it would be best for the three of us to go collectively. What do you think?"

"Naturally, I will attend," Charlotte said.

"Same here," Wilfried agreed.

I glanced at the corner where the children of the former Veronica faction were gathered. Their situation was a lot better than it had been at the start of last year, but it felt as though faction politics had once again erected walls within the dormitory.

"Milady, everything is ready."

"Thank you, Rihyarda."

As I stood up, Hartmut called across the room. "Matthias, Roderick, come with us to the meeting room, so that we may discuss what we talked about before."

Matthias and Roderick tensed up, their eyes scanning the crowd. The other kids nodded, no doubt having deduced the context from Hartmut's ambiguous hinting alone. We three archduke candidates left with our retainers, with all of the children following behind us being of the former Veronica faction. Those who were unaware of the circumstances merely watched us go with stunned looks on their faces.

Once we were inside the meeting room, I gestured to the provided seats, and everyone started sitting down with hard expressions. There were over ten children of the former Veronica faction, which was quite a lot. In the midst of them, I saw Roderick clenching his fists. There was so much intensity in his scorched-brown eyes that I could tell he was dying to say something.

"Thanks to your courageous actions, an attempted ambush ended in failure, and the Starbind Ceremony between Ahrensbach and Ehrenfest ended peacefully," I said. "You all have my gratitude. I thought it best to thank you here in the Royal Academy, as doing so back in Ehrenfest would certainly have

caused problems with your families.”

“Your gratitude honors us,” Matthias replied. His dark-purple hair swayed a little as he bowed his head. He was serving as a representative of the group, perhaps because he had inspired the others to act in the first place.

Matthias was the youngest son of Viscount Gerlach, a central figure in the Veronica faction. He was an apprentice medknight, and much like Traugott, he was frustrated about falling behind due to not knowing my mana compression method. He was also bothered by the fact that he was unable to choose his own faction until he came of age.

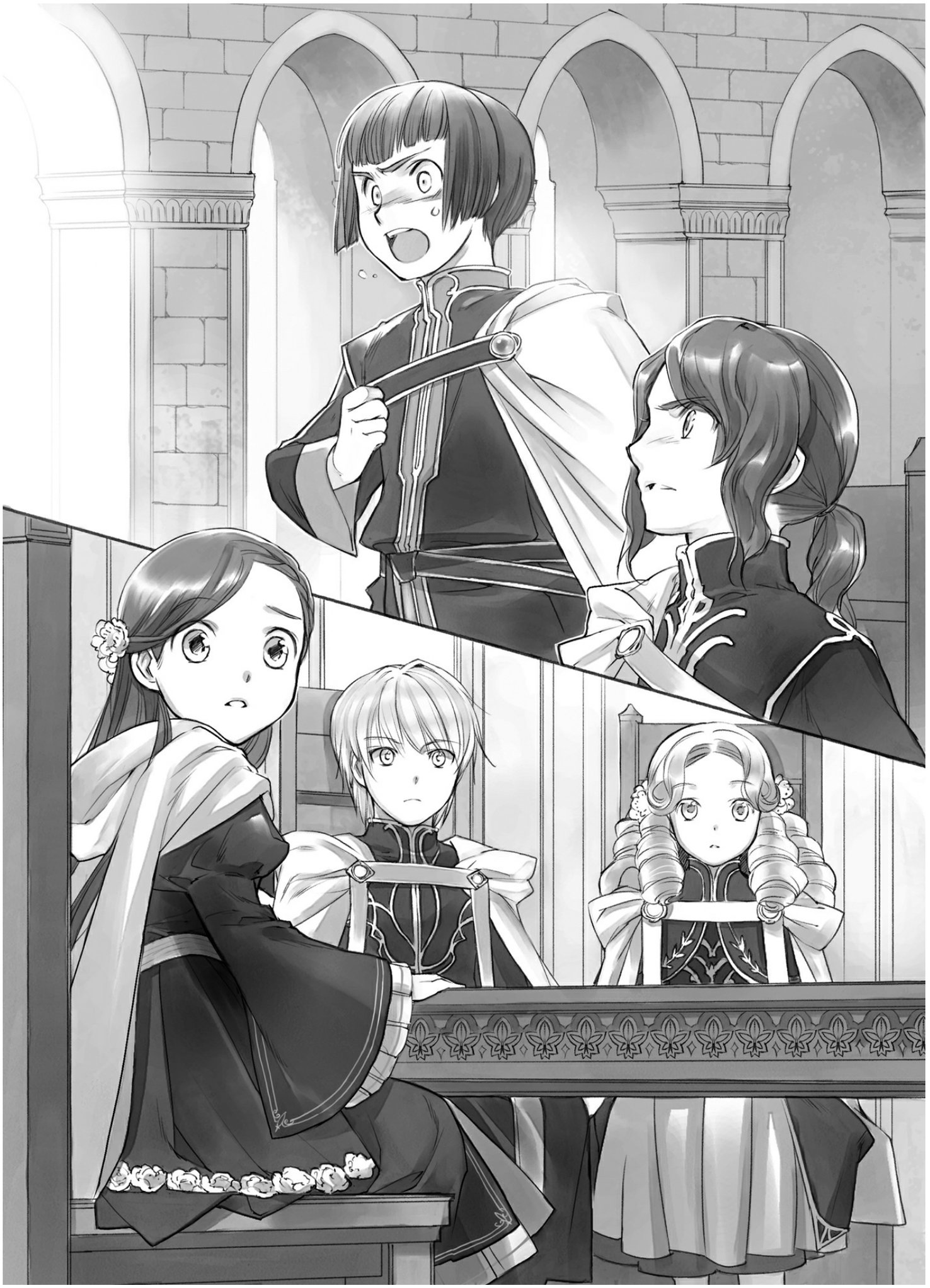
“Aub Ehrenfest informed us that you were even willing to teach us your mana compression method as a sign of your gratitude,” Matthias said.

“He informed me that he requires a severe condition for that to happen,” I replied. Giving one’s name to a member of the archducal family, thereby becoming name-sworn to them, was an extremely brutal demand. It was apparently rare for even the most loyal of retainers to name-swear themselves to their charge; Ferdinand was the weird one for having both Eckhart and Justus. “I apologize for not having the power to sway him.”

“There is no need to apologize. Aub Ehrenfest has graciously said that, as time passes, the severity of the condition may soften. We are only required to give our names if we wish to learn the method now, during our growth period,” Matthias said with a troubled smile.

All of a sudden, Roderick stood, his fists now trembling even more than before. His cheeks were flushed, but his eyes carried unmistakable resolve. Everyone present instantly knew what he was about to say.

“I... I want to give my name to you, Lady Rozemyne!”



“Roderick, please consider this carefully...” I said. “Becoming name-sworn is too grave of a decision to make on an impulse.”

Getting more mana was certainly important for nobles, but I didn’t think it was worth literally giving someone else control over your life—especially when that “someone else” was me.

“Lady Rozemyne is correct,” Matthias said. “This is not something to be decided so impulsively. Roderick, use your head a little.”

“Lord Matthias, I—”

“The moment we give our names to someone, we sever our ties with our parents for good. We’ve been in the Veronica faction our entire lives; even if you give your name and end up as Lady Rozemyne’s retainer, everyone will treat you as a traitor, and who knows how the factions are going to look in a few years’ time,” Matthias said, furrowing his brows in a pained expression. “There... was a man once. He was starstruck by one set to become the next aub, and his heart burned with the desire to serve them forever as a loyal giebe once they took the aub seat. But the situation changed. The person whom his heart was set on lost their running for the seat overnight.”

Someone in the crowd swallowed hard. That wasn’t an impossible scenario; Veronica had held power for decades, only to suddenly lose it all. Only a few years had passed since then, and it was entirely possible that the balance of power would flip once again.

“Lady Rozemyne attended the Royal Academy last year, and in the span of a single winter, she formed connections with royalty and many archduke candidates from the top-ranked duchies,” Matthias continued. “Considering that her influence will aid our duchy in ways that were once unthinkable, I can agree that becoming name-sworn to her is an honorable and worthwhile move, but...”

He paused.

“We still do not know whether that influence will ensure power. I would not be saying this if you were giving your name to Lord Sylvester or Lady Florencia, the archducal couple, but Lady Rozemyne, Lord Wilfried, and Lady Charlotte are

all underage, and we do not know what the future might hold. That is why we cannot afford to make such rash decisions, Roderick. We will lose our parents, and they're the only backing we have right now."

Roderick paled. His eyes were uneasy and flitted from Matthias to me, but I said nothing.

"Think carefully, okay...?" Matthias concluded, his voice tinged with bitterness. He had no doubt repeated those words many times already, and they carried a weight that made it sound entirely as though he was actually speaking to himself.

Hirschur's Visit and the Advancement Ceremony

After warning the children of the former Veronica faction to think carefully before making any extreme decisions, I had them disperse.

"I did not know about name-swearing until Aub Ehrenfest told me about it, so there is much I still wish to learn. Is it something one would generally want to do in return for securing more mana?" I asked, looking over my retainers. The children would be able to pick their own faction freely once they came of age, and I didn't know whether my mana compression method was important enough to warrant risking one's life.

Brunhilde shook her head. "I do not intend to give my name to anyone," she said with the dignified smile expected of a noble. "I wish to make my own decisions, and decide my own path through life. One can surely count the number of name-sworn nobles on one hand, and I believe that loyalty can be given even without making such a sacrifice."

Leonore agreed with this assessment. "I feel that name-swearing is best done not to show one's loyalty, but to express love to another—to give one's name to one's dearest and receive theirs in turn, thereby forming an eternal vow of everlasting love. However, that is hardly realistic. I do not believe it will ever happen for me."

Oh, neat. So name-swearing can be used romantically too, huh? I can understand that in the context of mutual love, but I would hate for someone I didn't have feelings for to attempt to force it on me.

"I saw with my own eyes the joy our brother Eckhart felt when he earned Lord Ferdinand's trust through giving his name, and the despair he felt when he sheltered in the temple," Cornelius said. "I don't think I could give my name to someone after seeing how low he was."

Right... He saw the consequences of someone giving their name up close.

Hartmut nodded in apparent agreement with Cornelius, but then he casually

said, “I would not mind giving my name to Lady Rozemyne, if she desired it.” Everyone seemed completely taken aback, at which point he smiled and added, “But she does not, of course.”

Ferdinand may have needed such an extreme display of devotion, but that was because he had been surrounded by enemies and had lacked anyone he could trust. I had my adoptive parents, my archnoble parents, and several guardians looking after me, on top of my retainers whom I got along well with.

“Lady Rozemyne does not require such fanatic loyalty in the least, nor does she understand the value of receiving a name,” Hartmut continued. “She also values the free will of others to such an extent that she allows even gray priests and shrine maidens to make their own decisions. It is hard to imagine that she would appreciate a display that stands for the complete opposite.”

Hartmut was explaining my mindset to my other retainers in simple terms. He was eerily accurate, as though he had somehow managed to dissect my thoughts, but he was right—I wouldn’t want anyone giving me their name.

“Wilfried, Charlotte, would you have accepted the children’s names?” I asked, aware that they were in the same position as me this time.

Wilfried nodded as though the correct response were obvious. “Of course,” he said. “It’s my duty as their lord. I’d consider it an honor to have people loyal enough to be willing to give their names to me,” he said flatly, noting that he would even accept children of the former Veronica faction.

“I would as well,” Charlotte added, also nodding in agreement. “In fact, I find it more peculiar that you wouldn’t, Sister. You accepted Philine, and you hold the lives of the orphans on your shoulders as the orphanage director. Would it not be easier to accept loyalty bound by name-swearing than loyalty based on words alone?”

It was as she said—I was protecting the lower-city commoners and supporting the lives of all those in the orphanage. It was also true that Philine was close to being in the position of a name-sworn already, considering that I was giving her such special treatment. She hadn’t actually offered me her name, however. She had chosen to serve as my retainer, but I had stuck my nose into her family problems of my own accord. Thus, I thought it was simply my responsibility to

look after her until she came of age and was able to be independent—or, if necessary, until she got married.

That said, I barely knew any of the children from the former Veronica faction, since faction politics discouraged us from socializing. Part of me suspected that this was just equivalent to them falling out with their parents and wanting to leech off of me instead. I didn't see how they wouldn't just cause problems.

To use an analogy, I was something of a company president, while the commoners and orphans were my employees. I was looking after Philine, the equivalent of a live-in employee who handled everything with her own wages. I needed to look after my employees equally so that everyone had jobs and nobody was being treated unfairly.

Meanwhile, the children of the former Veronica faction were like employees of an entirely separate company. By offering their names to me, they were cutting ahead of my live-in employees and asking me to adopt them into my family and give them assistance. I was sure that making such a request required a lot of resolve on their part, but there was much I would need to sacrifice to actually take them in.

"It's not quite so simple for me..." I said in response to Charlotte's question.

"I think you'd find them a lot more trustworthy after giving their names than if they simply asked to change factions," Wilfried noted. I could only respond with a noncommittal nod.

Now that all the first-years had moved in and the students of every year were gathered together, dinner today was a little fancier than yesterday's. We of the Better Grades Committee divided everyone into teams and announced the reward for this year's competition: the recipe for tarts. I had randomly selected a dish that wasn't in the recipe book we were selling.

"Just how many recipes does Lady Rozemyne have?!" one of the students exclaimed.

"We'll win this time for sure," said another. "I can guarantee it."

Upon seeing everyone getting as heated up about studying in the common

hall as they had done last year, I gave a relieved sigh. The heavy atmosphere from a moment ago had faded somewhat, and even the children of the former Veronica faction were getting into it...

Although I couldn't say for sure whether this was just one way that nobles masked their emotions.

The next day, as everyone promptly gathered into teams and started to study, Hirschur burst into the dormitory. "Lady Rozemyne, Lord Wilfried, the advancement ceremony and fellowship gathering are tomorrow, and yet I received no word that Ehrenfest's students have all arrived," she said sharply.

"Was anyone told to let her know...?" I asked with a tilt of my head.

Cornelius sighed. "It is not an explicit rule, but in past years, the most senior archnoble has always contacted Professor Hirschur. The highest-ranking individual is expected to do this, so we agreed on Lord Wilfried this year. Did we not, Ignaz?" he asked, glancing at an apprentice scholar standing behind Wilfried.

Ignaz gave a troubled smile. "I forgot to inform Lord Wilfried," he said. "My apologies."

"Ignaz, you..." Wilfried went to speak, but then he paused. "Forgive us, Professor Hirschur. It seems the fault lies with us today."

Something about Wilfried apologizing made me feel weird. It certainly was important for us to keep track of proper procedure and to be accountable when we failed, but it didn't feel right for Hirschur to be so critical when she hadn't been in the dormitory to begin with. I shot her a look just as she said, "Be more careful next time."

"Is the biggest problem not that our dormitory supervisor was not at the dormitory?" I asked. "Am I not right in saying that other supervisors remain in the dormitory from the moment the first students begin to arrive?"

"Oh, do you not know, Lady Rozemyne? Flutrane and Heilschmerz heal in their own ways," Hirschur replied with a smile. It was a euphemism that essentially meant "everyone has their own way of doing things," so I could

deduce that she had zero intention of changing her ways.

Unable to do much else, I merely shrugged.

“She certainly does resemble Lady Florencia...” Hirschur suddenly muttered, her eyes fixed on Charlotte. She then moved to the center of the common room and started to explain tomorrow’s schedule and the new nature of the dormitory to the fresh students. It was all the same as last year.

“...Furthermore, the advancement ceremony will be held at third bell tomorrow, and lunch will be served at the fellowship gatherings,” Hirschur noted, now coming to the end of her brisk speech. “Lessons begin the very next day. Ehrenfest is ranked tenth now, so take care to use the appropriately marked doors and rooms. You have all already made a great deal of progress in your studies, and I do not expect any of you to have issues in class, but do not forget to report your results. Are there any questions?”

A student opened their mouth, but before they could even speak, Hirschur continued. “Lady Rozemyne, I do have several questions for you. Would you care to accompany me?” she asked with a smile. Her purple eyes gleamed intensely like those of a carnivore focused on its prey.

Well, I know she probably wants to ask about Schwartz’s and Weiss’s outfits, and the research documents that Ferdinand gave me, but still...

It was easy to guess what Hirschur was going to say—or rather, it was hard to think of anything else she would want to know. And since I had some things from Ferdinand that I was meant to give to her, I nodded.

“I do not mind, but please do keep it brief,” I replied. “Unlike Ferdinand, I cannot spend all night discussing these matters with you.”

“My research would certainly suffer if I were as frail as you,” Hirschur said with a nod.

I’m jealous, if anything... I wish I could spend all night absorbed in what interests me like you can.

I gave Rihyarda an eye signal to fetch the documents that Ferdinand had told me to give to Hirschur first, and she promptly moved to do just that.

Incidentally, to have a large stock of resources with which to extract favors from Hirschur, I had documents of lower urgency organized into five stacks, to be doled out one by one as we needed more favors from her. This was all thanks to Justus, who, upon learning of the dormitory's situation, had asked Ferdinand for assistance in getting Hirschur's help when necessary.

"Now then—I would like to know what magic circles were used in the outfits, and how they were improved."

Hirschur wasted no time in beginning her interrogation, evidently too impatient to wait for the outfits to be brought to her, but I had left all of the research business to Ferdinand. In other words, there was very little that I could actually help her with. The only thing I could say in response to her deluge of questions was that she could accompany us when we went to change the shumils' clothes.

"Are you not interested in the research of magic circles, Lady Rozemyne?" Hirschur asked. "Are you not supposed to be Ferdinand's most prized disciple?"

"Ferdinand is my guardian, and although he does at times serve as an instructor, I would not say we have a master-student relationship when it comes to research," I replied, not wanting to be counted among the mad scientists of Ehrenfest. My interest was in reading rather than doing any actual research. Compilations of research documents and the like were certainly welcome, but I didn't feel any desire to produce such documents myself. "I do intend to become a librarian, however, so I will pour my all into researching magic tools and circles that might play a crucial role in the operation of a library. Which reminds me—Professor Hirschur, when should we bring the clothes to the library?"

"Why not simply ask by ordonnanz?" Hirschur suggested.

And so, I sent an ordonnanz to Solange, informing her that the new outfits were complete and that I wanted to supply the magic tools with mana. She replied that the library would open once classes began, noting that I could come at any time after that point.

"My apologies for the wait, milady."

Rihyarda soon returned with Schwartz's and Weiss's outfits. Hirschur picked

them up at once and started closely examining their magic circles, tracing them with her fingers and referencing the accompanying documents with an expression like the one Ferdinand would make while doing his own research.

Which means she's also forgotten I exist...

"Rihyarda, may I organize the bookcase?" I asked.

"Why not, I suppose. I imagine she will take quite some time."

I elected to organize the bookcase with Rihyarda while waiting for Hirschur to scratch her research itch. I dedicated separate shelves to first-years, second-years, apprentice knights, apprentice scholars, and apprentice attendants, ensuring that each one contained textbooks relevant to their respective subjects. This seemed to be the best approach in my eyes, since these books were going to be used the most. After that, I organized my own books while assigning decimal classifications to them. Ehrenfest had a huge bias for specific decimals due to most of the printed books being fiction, but my goal was to one day print copies of every book in Ehrenfest's book rooms.

Not even fourth bell was enough to make Hirschur budge. Even when I attempted to speak to her, she would immediately respond that she was busy, not even bothering to look up from her work.

In the end, we let Hirschur be and ate lunch. Some students were going to be gathering in the afternoon, while others would continue their studies, but I stayed in the common room and read so that someone would at least be there when she came back to reality.

"Milady, milady!" Rihyarda cried, tapping me on the shoulder and shutting my book. I glanced up with a start and saw Hirschur peering down at my hands with curious eyes. "Lady Rozemyne, what is that book?" she asked.

"A new kind made with Ehrenfest paper," I replied.

"May I see it?"

"You may read it for as long as you like, so long as you read it here. It is property of the common room, and I will not be lending it to your laboratory," I said, explaining the rules of the bookcase while handing over my copy of *Royal Academy Stories*. She flipped through it, an amused smile forming on her face.

“My, my... I might say all of the stories in this book are founded in fact. The years are disparate, but I can guess who told which fairly easily.”

“They are written based on rumors discussed over tea parties, so I imagine a professor such as yourself would know them. Incidentally... which stories came from whom?”

The names of the people involved were changed, as were the names of the duchies, so while someone who was present in the Royal Academy might recognize the stories, I had no way of knowing whose was whose. The only one I could identify was the one about Sylvester and Florencia.

“I would rather not say, as they chose anonymity for a reason, and these stories are not solely about Ehrenfest,” Hirschur said, cackling to herself as she set down the book. She then picked up the documents from Ferdinand and exited the room, looking especially satisfied.

Okay, now I’m curious... Is one of these stories about Ferdinand? I remember hearing that Eckhart told Mother much about him.

Once Hirschur was gone, it was time to prepare for the advancement ceremony and the fellowship gatherings. We gave hairpins to the girls, hoping to secure them as a trend and spread them further. They were the hairpins that Brunhilde had selected and ordered from the Gilberta Company.

“For marketing purposes, I ask that you wear these hairpins without fail during this year’s advancement ceremony,” I announced. “We will also be distributing rinsham, so be certain to clean your hair the day before.”

Brunhilde’s assessments had been sound; the multicolored hairpins in the box perfectly suited the hair colors and appearances of the girls. I was impressed she had such a firm grasp on the styles of so many students. I could understand knowing such information about those close to you, but anything more than that sounded impossible to me.

“Oh my, how adorable!”

“To think you could prepare so many hairpins at once, Lady Rozemyne.”

“This is all Brunhilde’s doing. She has quite a sharp eye when it comes to fashion,” I replied. “Now, Wilfried... We are going to be distributing some

rinsham to the boys as well."

"No need. I've secured some for them already," Wilfried said. Sylvester had apparently prepared rinsham for all the boys after attending the Archduke Conference. "I'm not a fan of it myself, since it makes my hair smell all sweet, but... there's no helping that."

"Oh, but not all kinds of rinsham smell sweet," I explained. He must have just not picked the more restrained scents we had available for men.

Wilfried grimaced a little. "I was told to use one with a stronger scent so that others are more likely to notice it. I'm not smelling like a girl by choice," he replied, waving the bottle of rinsham from side to side. I saw several other boys nodding in agreement.

It was the day of the advancement ceremony and fellowship gatherings. We needed to be at the auditorium by third bell, so after breakfast, we got dressed and put on our capes that displayed our duchy's color. We also put on our identification brooches, which was important, because we couldn't return to the dormitory without them.

"Lady Rozemyne," Brunhilde said. "Cornelius, Leonore, and Judithe are going to be your guard knights for the fellowship gathering. I shall accompany you as an attendant, and Hartmut as a scholar. Is this acceptable?"

I nodded. The fellowship gathering was going to be attended by royalty and archduke candidates, so my highest-status retainers were prioritized. Judithe, as the only mednoble accompanying me, seemed to be a little nervous about this. Her smile was unusually stiff.

"I will do my best to fill the void that Angelica left," Judithe said, her voice only a little shaky.

"There is nothing to worry about," I replied, trying to console her. "It is not as if any incidents will occur during the fellowship gathering."

I headed to the entrance hall to find everyone wearing mostly black outfits with their capes and brooches on. The girls were wearing differently colored hairpins, and some were wearing two at once, like I was.

“Everyone matches,” Philine said, touching her own hairpin with a slight smile. As well as her apprentice wages, I was paying her to transcribe and for her work helping Ferdinand alongside the others in his chambers, but even then, she struggled to support herself without any parents to depend on. She certainly didn’t have the funds to buy accessories for herself, but I had purchased these hairpins with my own money during the Harvest Festival. Apparently, Philine had even been able to pick the one she wanted.

“Although, in truth, I only picked one out of several that Brunhilde had selected for me. I never was allowed to buy accessories, even at home, so I don’t know how to judge what would look good on me,” Philine admitted, a hint of sadness clouding her smile.

“Good morning, Sister,” Charlotte said. She was likewise wearing her Ehrenfest cape and brooch atop her black outfit. She was also wearing two hairpins, and as her hair was lighter than mine, the dark-colored flowers were quite visible against it.

“Those look lovely on you, Charlotte. You are just adorable,” I said.

“Oh my, but you are much more adorable than I.”

Charlotte was growing at a faster rate than I, and the gap between us had possibly widened since last year. Well... it definitely had. I was simply in denial. She had to look down just to make eye contact with me now, and if we walked side by side, everyone would think Charlotte was the big sister, no doubt about it.

I could always stand up really straight... Maybe then people will think I’m the older sister.

I tried to stand tall in a way that wouldn’t seem too obvious, but it made my legs waver, and I soon struggled to keep myself steady. It became so bad that my retainers started to worry about my health, so I gave up and put my heels back on the ground again.

“Time to go,” Wilfried announced, opening the door and guiding the Ehrenfest students out. The number above our door certainly read “ten” now, and we were closer to the auditorium than last year. Back then, we had faced dark-green capes, so it was weird for them to be behind us now. Even inside the

auditorium, we were standing in a different place, much farther up than before.

“Ehrenfest sure has gone up in the rankings,” came a voice as we trudged into position.

“Seems like they’re all using rinsham...”

I sighed. Some of those muttering spoke in tones that could hardly be considered friendly. Just as Sylvester had predicted, the jealousy and bitterness over our rank going up was going to be even worse than it had been last year.

The advancement ceremony wasn’t particularly different from last year—a bigwig talked for a while, then the professors spoke their parts. Everything was pretty much the same as before, so I just stood quietly and waited for it to end. I would probably need to pay more attention next year when I became a third-year and entered my specialty courses, but as a second-year, I would be having practical lessons and lectures in the same places as last year, so I would be fine not listening.

The dreadfully boring advancement ceremony finally ended, which meant it was time for the much more stressful fellowship gathering, where no mistakes could be made whatsoever. I still didn’t know how our change in rank would impact things in full.

“You will now be moved to gatherings according to your status, but take care to stay close to members of your own duchy,” the speaker said. “Seniors of all statuses, take care of your juniors. Juniors, you know little, so take care and obey the wisdom of your seniors.”

Cornelius was a sixth-year, the oldest year of students, so he took a commanding position here. My retainers divided themselves into those who would be following the laynobles, the mednobles, the archnobles, and us archduke candidates.

We exited the auditorium and moved to the same halls we had gone to last time. I started making my way to the room known as the Small Hall, and Charlotte stretched her back with a somewhat tense expression as we walked.

“Fear not, Charlotte. I am here with you.”

Feel free to rely on me as much as you need. I am your big sister, after all.

I took Charlotte by the hand and smiled. She blinked in surprise a few times, then smiled for a second. “Quite. You are going to be attending this too,” she said. “I need to stay alert...”

After making this remark, Charlotte stepped forward, a firm light in her indigo eyes. I was glad to see that my comment had eased her tension.

“Lord Wilfried, Lady Rozemyne, and Lady Charlotte from Ehrenfest the Tenth have arrived,” a scholar standing by the door announced. And with that, we were guided into the Small Hall.

I noticed a small figure sitting at the large table at the end of the room, where Anastasius had been last year.

Is that Prince Anastasius’s younger brother, maybe?

The Second-Year Fellowship Gathering

Had the person sitting in the place of royalty at the end of the room been a Sovereign archnoble, he would have been much older. It seemed safe to conclude that he was indeed a prince.

Nobody told me a prince *was going to be in attendance, though.*

I cocked my head. If my guardians had known about this, I was sure they would have warned me or at least told me to be on guard.

Rather than wearing black as the Academy mandated, the small figure—the word “small” came unbidden to mind every time I saw him—was dressed in red and white, the divine colors of winter. He was at least wearing a black cape, to mark that he was from the Sovereignty, but he stuck out nonetheless. Even Anastasius had worn mostly black, so it hadn’t occurred to me that royals were allowed to break the dress code.

“Here are your seats,” a servant said.

Just like last year, the Small Hall had four-person tables arranged at equal distances apart. We were taken to the three tables for Ehrenfest, at which point Wilfried took his seat at the table to my left and Charlotte took hers at the one to my right. Brunhilde pulled back my seat for me before resuming her position, standing behind me with my guard knights. Hartmut, meanwhile, was seated beside me as my scholar.

“Hartmut, did you know that a member of royalty was attending this year?” I asked in a hushed voice. He discreetly shook his head.

“I did not, and it seems we are not the only ones. Many of the other duchies seem just as surprised, so we can assume that nobody was informed.”

It was nice to know I wasn’t alone in my ignorance. I always had the feeling that I was missing out on important information, since I didn’t spend much time in the castle, but that wasn’t the case here.

“However,” Hartmut continued, “I recall there being rumors in the Royal

Academy last year that a royal was going to be baptized. Word said it was the son of the king's third wife, the half-brother of Princes Sigiswald and Anastasius. If those rumors were true, he would only have been baptized this autumn."

"He was baptized this year?" I asked. "Someone must know about him, then."

"Nobles in Ehrenfest debut during winter society, but royals are officially debuted during the spring Archduke Conference. I expect that he has not had a formal debut yet."

That explained why he was so tiny. I had thought that maybe he just looked small because he was seated so far away, but this made a lot more sense.

That said, why is there a newly baptized prince here in the first place?

Hartmut had only confused me further. Thankfully, once the archduke candidates from all the duchies were seated, a Sovereign scholar introduced the small prince and explained the circumstances.

"This is Third Prince Hildebrand," the scholar said. "He was baptized this autumn and welcomed into the royal family. Under normal circumstances, he would be attending the Academy much later, but the king instructed him to attend this year as part of his royal duties."

To summarize, there was a rule that there must always be at least one member of the royal family attending the Royal Academy. If there was no one of proper age, a graduated adult would be sent instead. It would have been more proper for Anastasius to return, but it seemed that he was exceptionally busy with his duties as the second prince. He needed to fill with mana the land he had been given for his marriage and the royal magic tools that had fallen out of use.

In other words, Prince Anastasius is so eager to marry Lady Eglantine that he's putting his all into getting his land ready and refusing to return to the Royal Academy. That has to be it, right? I mean, reviving those old magic tools has to be a harder job than being stationed at the Academy.

Now that he was an adult, Anastasius had chosen to work hard over the winter rather than stay at the Royal Academy. Hildebrand was being thrown into the deep end as a result, having to attend the Academy so soon after his

baptism. He was merely here for political reasons, however; it wasn't as though he would actually be going to classes yet. He would presumably be spending most of his time in his own chambers.

I wonder why this rule was put into place... Is it for emergencies or something? Maybe to ensure someone's always there to settle disputes?

Last year, when Dunkelfelger had made a fuss over my bringing Schwartz and Weiss out of the library, Anastasius had been contacted and arrived almost instantly to arbitrate the dispute. He had also spoken to Solange and me later on to learn more about the situation.

There certainly are a lot of people here; who knows what kinds of problems might arise? Royals must have their hands full with this stuff. And for the royal family to be sending a literal seven-year-old to the Royal Academy, they must be in dire straits.

Once the scholar's announcement was over, everyone prepared to give their greetings, as they had done the year before. Again, Klassenberg was first. It seemed not to have any archduke candidates now that Eglantine had graduated, so an older-looking boy stood up and went to greet the prince instead.

The event continued as expected: the representatives of each duchy would stand up to greet the royal and then go down the side to greet every duchy of a higher rank than theirs. Dunkelfelger was the next to go up, then Drewanchel... Only after the ninth-placed duchy had greeted the prince was it our turn.

Wilfried and Charlotte stood up while I was helped down from my chair. Wilfried then looked at Charlotte and me.

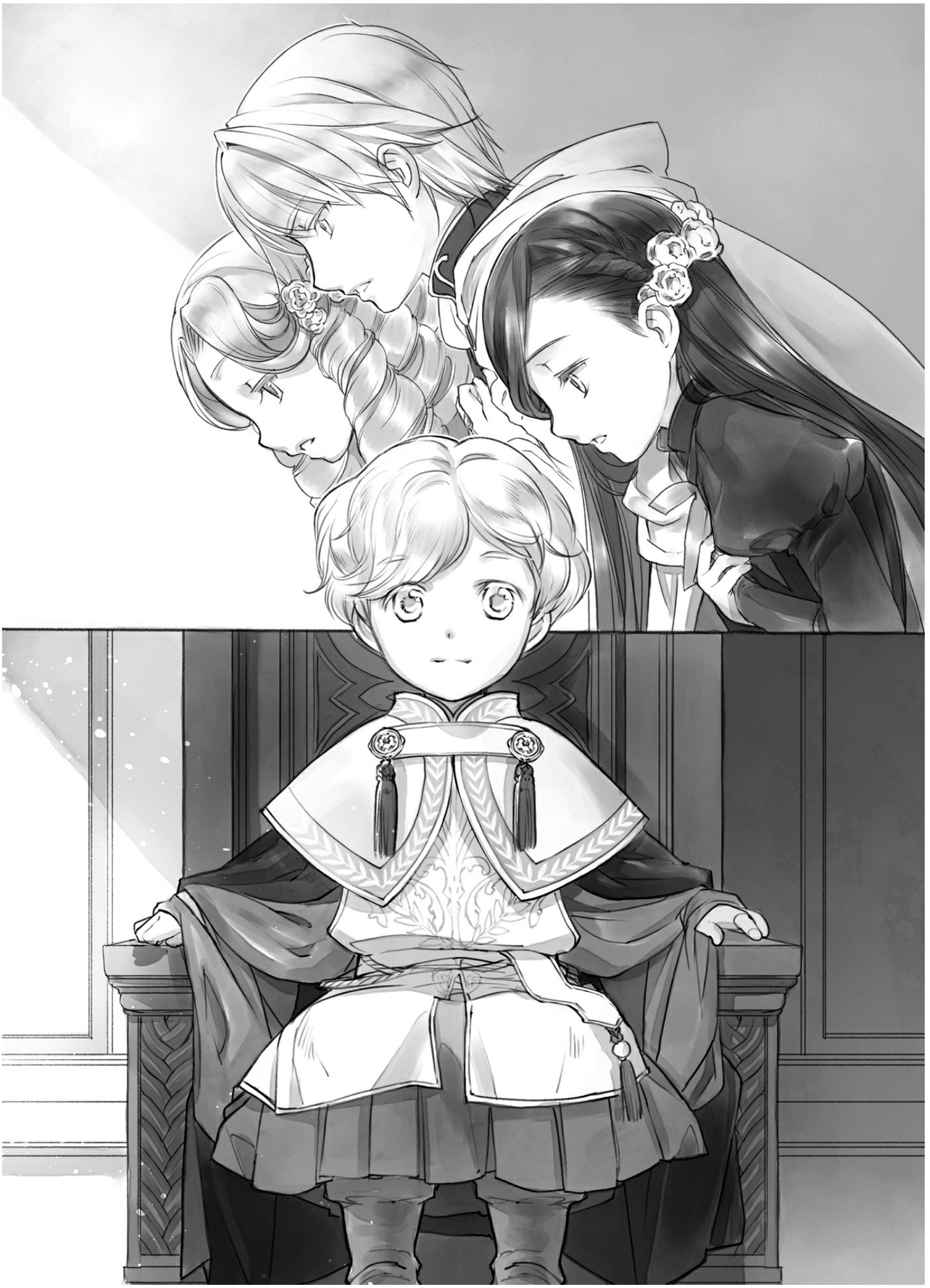
"Rozemyne. Charlotte. Let's go."

Wilfried escorted us to the prince's table at the far end of the hall, moving slowly enough for me to keep up. When we reached Hildebrand, we knelt down, crossed our arms, and bowed our heads.

"Prince Hildebrand, may we pray for a blessing in appreciation of this serendipitous meeting, ordained by the harsh judgment of Ewigeliebe the God of Life?"

“You may,” came a distinctly childlike voice.

Up close, I could see that Hildebrand had bright purple eyes and a faint blue tinge to his silver hair. He also had a cute face. Perhaps a boy wouldn’t much appreciate being called cute, but he looked especially young—as expected, considering that he had been sent to the Royal Academy so early. Not to mention, unlike the arrogant expression of royal dignity that Anastasius had so often worn, Hildebrand was wearing a bright smile that actually put me at ease. He was far from the archetype of the exceptionally manly man.



With the prince's permission, we poured mana into our rings and granted a blessing. I made sure to add just a sliver of mana, all the while eyeing Wilfried and Charlotte to make sure I didn't go overboard. Ferdinand had insisted that I not give in to my emotions and offer an excessive blessing like I had during the graduation ceremony.

Okay. Perfect.

I nodded to myself, having successfully managed to give a blessing as small as my siblings' ones. Hildebrand then said for us to raise our heads, at which point Wilfried continued the greeting.

"It is an honor to meet you, Prince Hildebrand. We are Wilfried, Rozemyne, and Charlotte of Ehrenfest, here to learn to become proper nobles fit to serve Yurgenschmidt. May the future be bright."

Hildebrand looked at each of us in order, although he seemed to regard Charlotte with particular interest. "I am told that Ehrenfest's archduke candidates are exceptional—that one came first-in-class and another achieved the rank of honor student, all while aiding their classmates in raising the overall grades of their duchy," he said briskly in his higher-pitched voice. "King Trauerqual has high hopes for all of you. Do continue your efforts."

I could sense that he was completely focused on repeating the exact words the adults had instructed him to say, and as someone who had memorized all sorts of phrases for ceremonies, I knew just how hard he must have worked to reach this point. I wanted to tell him how well he was doing and to keep up the good work, but that seemed rude to say to a prince. I decided to settle on an expression of gratitude instead.

"We thank you."

And so, our first meeting with Hildebrand ended without incident. It admittedly caught me a little off guard, since Anastasius had gotten all up in my face about me being a "fake saint" the year before, but we headed to the next table nonetheless—the table belonging to Klassenberg.

"Once again, Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time has woven our threads together and blessed us with a meeting. This is Charlotte, my youngest sister.

She is attending the Royal Academy as a first-year student," Wilfried said. "May our futures be bright."

Charlotte went on to give her first greetings. Wilfried hadn't introduced himself, and I had been told not to introduce myself either, so I could only assume we had already introduced ourselves to this person the year before. Perhaps they were an archduke candidate rather than an archnoble.

I can't exactly ask them which, so I'll just check with Hartmut later.

According to Hartmut, they were not an archnoble, but rather the son of Aub Klassenberg's second wife. He explained that I had greeted the boy last year, but I couldn't remember him at all, so I responded only with a simple smile.

I mean, how am I supposed to remember someone I've only ever greeted once? Especially when I never really expected to see them again.

"For Lady Eglantine to have not reintroduced you to him despite your friendly relationship, it may be the case that she did not interact with him either. It is not unusual for the child of a second wife to rarely socialize."

Oh, right. That reminds me... I've pretty much never spoken to Nikolaus.

Archnoble and archducal families generally took second wives to stabilize faction politics, compensate for a first wife unable to produce children, or simply increase their number of children. It wasn't uncommon for half-siblings to barely interact.

The next duchy for us to greet was Dunkelfelger. We headed over to Lestilaut's and Hannelore's tables, where Wilfried spoke to them as our representative and Charlotte performed the blessing given at first meetings.

"Lady Hannelore," I said, "thank you ever so much for the splendid Dunkelfelger book you lent me. Even the aub asked me to express his thanks to you."

I told her how stunned I had been to learn that Aub Dunkelfelger himself had delivered the book at the Archduke Conference, but at the same time, how grateful I was that it being sent so early meant I had a lot of time to read it.

Hannelore blinked several times. "It must have been heart-stopping to have

received a book from the aub himself. Father loves to surprise people, and, erm... I often find myself in a cold sweat after one of his tricks. I am relieved that he did not bother you," she said with a troubled smile, her light pink pigtails swinging as she shifted.

Aub Dunkelfelger had apparently proclaimed that he would deliver the book personally to surprise me. He sounded like someone who loved mischief, but for him to have lent us a book that might as well be considered a treasure of their duchy, he was probably a really good person too.

"The offering of a book could never bother me," I replied. "I had a splendid time with it, and as thanks, Lady Hannelore, I intend to let you borrow a book from Ehrenfest. I thought it would be nice for us to trade new books when returning the ones we have read."

"I thank you ever so much, Lady Rozemyne. I am quite looking forward to it."

Hannelore and I exchanged a smile, enjoying our fun conversation, at which point Lestilaut gave me a doubtful look. "Someone in Ehrenfest managed to read that book?" he asked.

"Yes. I was awestruck by the depth of your duchy's past," I replied. The fact that so many of their stories involved battle maniacs who kept on fighting until they won more or less explained why Professor Rauffen was so insistent on challenging us to ditter rematches—he had so much history at his back.

"Hmph. As you should be," Lestilaut snorted. "We are completely unlike Ehrenfest, a pitiful duchy with only a mere two hundred years of history."

"Brother!" Hannelore exclaimed and gave him a reprimanding tug on his sleeve. She then looked at me; her cute red eyes washed with worry. She was no doubt concerned that Lestilaut had offended me, but I just smiled at him and nodded.

"It is true that our duchy's history pales in comparison to yours and that our history books are thin in comparison," I said. "That is why I so appreciated the book I was graciously lent, and I would certainly love to read more of Dunkelfelger's splendid books."

My intention was to lead into a lengthy discussion, during which I could

review Dunkelfelger's book and get even more books from them, but Wilfried cut me off and Charlotte gave me a subtle pull on my sleeve.

"Perhaps this could be discussed when we come to lend Dunkelfelger our book," Wilfried said. "We should not tarry too long when others are waiting."

Oh, right... We're in the middle of greeting the duchies.

I was so excited about being reunited with Hannelore and so eager to speak with her that I had forgotten where I was. I promised to invite her to a tea party soon and then made my way over to Drewanchel's tables.

"Lord Wilfried, Lady Rozemyne, I congratulate you on your engagement," Adolphine said. "I doubted my ears when Father returned from the Archduke Conference with the news."

Adolphine was speaking as the duchy's representative, but also with her were my classmate Ortwin and two other archduke candidates. Her wine-red hair that flowed down to her chest in majestic waves had a pleasant sheen, almost as if she had used rinsham. A careful examination of the duchy's other students revealed that they all had glossy hair too.

Upon seeing my eyes move, Adolphine stroked her hair and smiled.

No, it couldn't be... I only gave them one bottle.

They must have analyzed the rinsham I had given them at the tea party. The actual process for making it was simple, so I had figured the production method would be exposed eventually, but this was much sooner than I had expected.

Drewanchel being a duchy of mad scientists might just make it a bit more terrifying than I expected.

I looked up at Adolphine and swallowed hard. Meanwhile, Wilfried and Ortwin seemed to be having a much more positive conversation, talking about the games they played for socializing.

"Here's to another good year, eh, Wilfried?"

"You can bet on it. I'll show you how much better I've gotten at gewinnen."

For some reason, Adolphine was giving me a meaningful smile. "Lady Rozemyne, the scholars that we sent to the Archduke Conference returned in

quite an excited frenzy," she said. "It seems that Ehrenfest has magic tools that even commoners can use—scraps of paper that move on their own, worming their way toward any larger pieces. Quite interesting. Even our scholars were taken aback by the concept."

"Oh, it is nothing that deserves so much attention," I replied with an evasive chuckle. I was starting to feel they would dissect anything they managed to get their hands on.

"I did not observe any such paper in the Royal Academy, and it was not presented at the Interduchy Tournament either, was it?" Adolphine asked. "Is there perhaps a reason for this?"

"Perhaps it is because our aub considered it unworthy of publicizing," I replied.

It wasn't at the Interduchy Tournament because commoners make it, and nobody in Ehrenfest really sees it as a magic tool. I can't say that, though!

"It is surprisingly difficult to grasp what is and isn't normal in one's duchy," Adolphine said. "This is something I have learned well since coming to the Royal Academy. Lady Rozemyne, I pray that we can spend much time together this year."

Or in other words, you want to wring information out of me? Okey dokey. Time to contact my guardians. That didn't take long.

"I share your prayers," I said with a smile, but I could feel my face stiffening. Adolphine's eyes turned to rest on Charlotte for a moment before looking comparatively at Ortwin.

"You are a first-year, are you not, Lady Charlotte?" Adolphine asked. "I foresee us being close friends as well."

"I would be honored."

It feels like someone extremely dangerous just targeted Charlotte for something! Aah! Ferdinand! HEEELP!

I moved to the next table, hoping to protect Charlotte from Adolphine's gaze. Once we had finished greeting the fourth and fifth duchies, it was time for us to

speak with Ahrensbach the Sixth. Only Detlinde was there as an archduke candidate. The small girl we had seen at Lamprecht's wedding wasn't present; she was about as tiny as me, so as expected, she wasn't old enough to attend the Academy this year.

"Too long has passed since our last reunion," Detlinde said. "You all seem to be doing well. How has Aurelia been faring in Ehrenfest? We have been ever so worried that she may not be fitting in, haven't we, Martina?" She turned her attention to a girl who looked a bit like Tuuli—her attendant, based on where she was standing.

"Lady Bettina seems to have been in contact, but we have heard nothing from my sister Aurelia. I've been so worried about her," Martina said, lowering her eyes sadly. She was similar enough to Tuuli that just seeing her upset made my heart ache.

"Aurelia is enjoying her life in Ehrenfest," I said. "She has prepared a new veil, and we have had tea together. Isn't that right, Charlotte?"

"Indeed," Charlotte agreed with a smile, having met Aurelia at the dyeing competition. "She is a sweet and positively delightful person."

Martina placed a hand on her chest in relief, while Detlinde blinked several times, her dark-green eyes betraying her astonishment. "Aurelia? Sweet?" she muttered to herself.

Why does that come as such a surprise? In what world is Aurelia not sweet?

I also blinked in confusion, sensing that the Aurelia we knew was somehow different from the one Detlinde was familiar with.

"On that note," Detlinde said, moving the conversation along swiftly, "I realize I did not properly congratulate your engagement at the Starbind Ceremony. Please, allow me to rectify that. Congratulations."

She spoke with a soft smile, which was weird, to say the least. It felt as though she was genuinely blessing our engagement, and she looked so friendly that I wanted to ask what all that nonsense last year was about. That she was even acknowledging me alongside Wilfried seemed incomprehensible, and in truth, it actually made me feel a little uncomfortable.

“All of you are my cousins in Ehrenfest,” she continued. “I hope that we can get along well.”

The seventh, eighth, and ninth duchies following Ahrensbach were visibly on guard against us, considering that our rank had risen so suddenly. They had scarcely even noticed us last year, but now they were shooting us warnings and insulting us through euphemisms.

Hate to break it to you, but Wilfried won’t pick up on those kinds of slights at all. And they won’t make me shrink back either!

We finished greeting the higher-ranking duchies, which meant it was time for the lower-ranking duchies to begin greeting us. This was annoying in its own sense. The eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth duchies were especially hostile toward us and spoke with empty smiles, since we had pushed them all down in our ascent. To translate a few of their insults:

“Luck and chance do not last forever.”

“Good times are but fragile illusions—they will shatter sooner or later.”

“Do you intend to speed through your classes once again? I only hope that your grades do not suffer as they have before.”

How pleasant.

Of course, we needed to protect our dignity and our reputations, so we offered responses that essentially meant, “Our success is not an illusion; we will ensure the good times continue.”

“We thank you for your encouragement,” I said to one of the students greeting us. “Please look forward to seeing our grades published; I believe you will find them quite impactful.”

After exchanging various other insults with smiles on our faces, it came time for us to speak with Frenbeltag. This was Charlotte’s first time meeting Rudiger. Her eyes widened in surprise, and she glanced several times between him and Wilfried, presumably noting how similar they looked.

However, since Charlotte had the same indigo eyes as Rudiger, she seemed to resemble him even more than he resembled Wilfried—at least from a color

perspective. I was sure she could easily pass herself off as his sister.

Not me, though. I don't share their blood.

Rudiger must have noticed the way Charlotte was looking at him because he offered a smile. He knelt down, crossed his arms, and then bowed his head. "Lord Wilfried, Lady Rozemyne. Once again, Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time has woven our threads together and blessed us with a meeting. And the same for you, Lady Charlotte. May I pray for a blessing in appreciation of this serendipitous meeting, ordained by the harsh judgment of Ewigeliebe the God of Life?"

"You may."

Rudiger gave Charlotte a blessing and exchanged greetings with her. Then, once that was done, he looked at Wilfried. "I heard about your duchy's archduke candidates taking the lead in Spring Prayer for the sake of the people and suggested we do the same in Frenbeltag. As a result, we were able to secure a larger harvest than usual," he said.

It had apparently taken Rudiger a lot of courage to tell his family that he wanted to go to the temple, but after hearing that Wilfried had done the same in Ehrenfest and with great results, the archducal couple had decided to try it—perhaps out of desperation, if nothing else.

Rudiger's mom is Sylvester's older sister, after all... I can see the similarities between them, at least a little.

Thanks to these new efforts, Frenbeltag had apparently seen a larger harvest, and the increased tax revenue had made things easier for the duchy.

"Hope has returned to the once bleak eyes of our nobles," Rudiger said with a slight, pleased smile. "It brings me more joy than anything. Your advice is much appreciated. Mother was overjoyed as well."

As a duchy on the losing side of the civil war, I knew that their archduke had been executed, but their duchy surely must have suffered in other ways as well. As one example, I was aware of Aurelia being treated unreasonably harshly in Ahrensbach due to her mother being from Frenbeltag. This had no doubt made bringing wives and husbands into the duchy that much harder.

In truth, it was impressive that they had managed to resign themselves to getting involved in religious ceremonies. I had charged eagerly into the temple to get my hands on books, but they had scorned it their entire lives. Sure, their decision to work with the temple despite their disdain was probably because they were so desperate—any port in a storm, as they say—but still.

“I hope that our friendship with Ehrenfest can remain so firm,” Rudiger said, carefully eyeing me for my response. He looked a lot like Wilfried when I had told him to test Frenbeltag at the tea party, before teaching them our methods.

“We are cousins and neighbors; a friendship is only natural,” I replied, causing both Rudiger and Wilfried to exhale in relief.

Once the greetings had finished, lunch began. The soup actually tasted good this year, perhaps because the chefs had adopted our recipes, but the sweets... Well, once again, they were no better than clumps of sugar.

Epilogue

Hildebrand stood in front of the teleportation door. Today, he would be going to the Royal Academy! He looked up, quaking with excitement, only for his head attendant Arthur to brush aside the bangs that had fallen onto the young prince's forehead.

"Do remember you are attending the Academy as royalty," Arthur stressed.

"I know. This is my first duty as prince, ordered to me by Father," Hildebrand replied. He tried to form a serious expression as he nodded his understanding, but he couldn't contain his curiosity for this new, unknown place he was heading to. Just what awaited him beyond that door?

"Now we may go," Arthur said.

The door opened before the prince's bright purple eyes. His retainers encouraged him forward, and when he took his first step, he found himself enveloped in silence. A hallway stretched into the distance, its walls lined equidistantly with doors with letters and numbers written above them. It was completely unlike anything he had seen in the villa where he and his mother had stayed prior to his baptism or the villa he lived in now.

But there were so many people when I first went to the royal palace...

As a child of the king's third wife, Hildebrand had been raised in his mother's villa, and he had not ventured outside its walls prior to his baptism. His mother's family had on occasion come to visit, but he was used to little more attention than that. Thus, he could remember the overwhelming crowds of people he had seen during his visit to the royal palace as though it had only been yesterday.

Hildebrand knew that the Royal Academy was a place for royal and noble children to learn from their tenth year to their coming-of-age, and he had implicitly assumed that everyone would greet him with enthusiasm. An empty hallway was completely unexpected.

“There’s nobody here...” he muttered.

“The advancement ceremony is under way, so the students and professors are all in the auditorium,” the guard knight taking the lead replied, making the prince realize he had spoken aloud. “This is a welcome respite for us guard knights, as there is less danger to fear.”

It seemed that everyone was gathered elsewhere. It was only logical that Hildebrand wouldn’t be attending the advancement ceremony, considering that he wasn’t a new student, but it was like he was being left out.

Feeling a little disappointed, Hildebrand walked down the murky hallway with the equally spaced doors until he reached another hallway, this one with windows. There was a lot of snow outside, much more than he was used to seeing outside his own villa. He pressed his lips together; the piling snow was almost like a metaphor, signifying that he was going to have far more duties here in the Royal Academy.

“Are you nervous?” Arthur asked, seeming worried for him. “You appear quite rigid.”

“I simply feel the weight of my responsibilities,” Hildebrand replied with a nod. “I am here as royalty even though I was only recently baptized.” He thought back to when the king—his father—had instructed him to attend the Royal Academy. It had been near the middle of autumn.

“It will be a heavy burden, but I ask that you oversee the Royal Academy as royalty.”

Hildebrand received this request from his parents, who were visiting the villa they had granted him. He knew not how to respond, so his head attendant Arthur spoke up in his place, albeit with a troubled tone.

“Prince Hildebrand has just been baptized. He has yet to even have his debut.”

After a child was baptized in the royal palace, it was standard procedure for them to be debuted as new royalty during the next Archduke Conference. There was no precedent for a royal carrying out public duties before their debut.

“In truth... I spent much time debating whether to send you or Anastasius,” the king said to his son. “However, Anastasius has much more important work to do than standing in position at the Royal Academy. I would like you to do this job for me, Hildebrand.”

If this was the conclusion the king had come to after a lengthy internal debate, there was no way that mere retainers could protest. They could only accept the order in silence and support their charge as best they could.

Though, in the end, I will mainly be restricted to my villa.

Hildebrand was told to avoid contact with the students as much as possible; he was too young to determine good or bad on his own, so it was possible the students would attempt to exploit him to some end or another. Royalty simply had that much authority to their name—not that Hildebrand fully understood this. He had spent his life in his mother’s villa and rarely interacted with the outside world, so he did not completely grasp the power he wielded.

It seems to me that Mother and my retainers have much more power than I do, but they say otherwise, so...

“This is the Small Hall,” Arthur told Hildebrand as they entered the room where the fellowship gathering was going to be held. There were tables all around, and the prince was led to the one nearest the back, where royalty sat.

“There are more tables than duchies...” Hildebrand observed.

“Indeed. That is because some duchies have more than one archduke candidate,” Arthur explained. There was one table per candidate. It was not uncommon for half-siblings to oppose each other and wish to hide information from one another, and this allowed each candidate to sit at their own table with their retainers.

“Will you be sitting beside me, Arthur?” Hildebrand asked his head attendant.

Arthur shook his head. “Much like when you have your meals, Prince Hildebrand, I will remain standing behind you. From there, I can offer advice and serve you your food.”

The guard knights weren’t going to be seated either, but perhaps the scholars

would. Hildebrand looked up at his scholar Dankmar, who answered that he would indeed be seated, but underneath the table. Apparently, this would allow him to discreetly provide information about the duchies and tell the prince what to say to the candidates.

"I already memorized the greetings and what to say to each duchy," Hildebrand said. He had been completely immersed in his studies ever since being baptized; he didn't need anyone hiding beneath the table, telling him what to say.

"I understand just how hard you have been working, Prince Hildebrand, but it is possible that your mind will go blank while you are actually carrying out your first public duty," Arthur said. "It would be best for the fellowship gathering to end without you needing Dankmar's assistance, but it is the job of retainers to formulate triple-layered plans to ensure that failure does not occur under any circumstances."

"Very well, Arthur," the prince replied. "Still, I will ensure that I finish the fellowship gathering without Dankmar's help."

Hildebrand steeled his resolve and started repeating his lines to himself until word eventually came that the advancement ceremony had concluded. Dankmar immediately got into position. He was an instructor who usually wore a strict frown, so seeing him hiding under the table was a source of great amusement. Hildebrand couldn't help but keep glancing down at him.

"Prince Hildebrand, face forward, not down at Dankmar," Arthur warned. "You will only embarrass yourself should the students discover his presence."

Hildebrand faced forward just as the door to the Small Hall opened.

"Lord Hensfen of Klassenberg the First has arrived."

People wearing black clothes and red capes entered the room. It was Klassenberg's archduke candidate and his attendants.

"Lord Lestilaut and Lady Hannelore of Dunkelfelger the Second have arrived."

After a brief moment, the blue-caped students from Dunkelfelger appeared. They had more people than the duchy they followed, likely because they had two archduke candidates.

The entering archduke candidates all widened their eyes upon seeing Hildebrand; it was likely that few duchies even knew he existed, since he hadn't yet been debuted. The stir of surprise only intensified as more people entered the room, and it showed no signs of calming. Hildebrand adjusted his posture, feeling a little uncomfortable, only to have Arthur immediately whisper in his ear. As the attending royal, he was not to move, since all eyes were on him.

I've been scolded, and the greetings haven't even started yet...

Hildebrand was stricken by worry over whether he actually would be able to perform the greetings properly, but fleeing was not an option. He just had to sit with as much royal grace as possible.

Once all of the duchies' representatives were seated, Hildebrand was introduced to them. The prince's circumstances were explained, and once the archduke candidates learned he was a royal who had not yet been debuted, their searching looks turned into ones of curiosity. Perhaps because they were young students, their gazes were much more direct and emotional than those of the Sovereign nobles—not that this made Hildebrand feel any less uncomfortable.

And so, the greetings began. The archduke candidate from Klassenberg, the highest-ranking duchy, was the first to stand and approach Hildebrand's table with his retainers.

"Prince Hildebrand, may I pray for a blessing in appreciation of this serendipitous meeting, ordained by the harsh judgment of Ewigeliebe the God of Life?"

"You may."

As the third prince, Hildebrand was used to being the one to receive rather than give blessings during first meetings. His replies were short and impossible to mistake, but he couldn't help but smile in relief when he delivered one properly.

"You may raise your head."

"It is an honor to meet you, Prince Hildebrand. I am Hensfen of Klassenberg, here to learn to become a proper noble fit to serve Yurgenschmidt. May the

future be bright.”

Right. Klassenberg is Lady Eglantine’s duchy.

Hildebrand had no issue recalling who Eglantine was—she was engaged to his half-brother Anastasius and had attended the third prince’s baptism. She was kind, beautiful, and positively exuded grace.

“Lady Eglantine participated in my baptism ceremony,” Hildebrand said. “I anticipate that Klassenberg will do its part as family of royalty and act with the responsibility that the first-ranked duchy must hold.”

“I am honored.”

The group of red-capes left, this time being replaced with blue-capes. Hildebrand’s mother had been born in Dunkelfelger the Second, and her family had at times visited the villa where he once lived, so the prince knew Lestilaut and Hannelore. They had likewise attended his baptism ceremony.

This was not a first meeting for them, so Lestilaut said the words for an entirely unexpected but nonetheless pleasant encounter: “I am overjoyed that our threads were woven together once again, despite Ewigeliebe the God of Life wielding such power.”

“I am surprised to see you in the Royal Academy, Prince Hildebrand,” Lestilaut continued. “We had not been informed of this.”

“I had not yet received Father’s orders at the time of my baptism ceremony,” the prince replied. “My mother has asked me to look first to my family for help, should anything happen.”

“Let us pray no such incidents occur.”

Hildebrand wasn’t particularly close to Lestilaut or Hannelore, but it came as somewhat of a relief to see people he had met before and considered family.

Next was Drewanchel the Third, and a group of emerald-green capes approached. This duchy had four archduke candidates, but Hildebrand only knew one of their names. Dankmar and the others had said that he only needed to remember Adolphine, the fiancée of his half-brother Sigiswald.

Still, I might actually need Dankmar this time!

Hildebrand swallowed nervously, but Adolphine was the one to step forward for the greeting. Dankmar did not need to provide any assistance.

"I am told we will meet quite regularly due to your engagement with my brother Sigiswald, Lady Adolphine," the prince said. "I imagine I will be in your care on many an occasion. May our threads be woven together."

"Indeed. May our threads be woven together," Adolphine replied with a smile. She then headed to the side of the hall with the other archduke candidates.

Students of the other duchies came up in groups, one after another. Hildebrand greeted the greater duchies and higher-ranking middle duchies without much effort due to their closer relationships with royalty, but over time, his knowledge became increasingly fuzzy. By the time the ninth duchy had come up, he needed Dankmar to provide some assistance from beneath the table, but he managed to give a royal greeting nonetheless.

Oh? There's a child about as old as me here...

Hildebrand blinked in surprise when the archduke candidates from Ehrenfest the Tenth stood up; one of their archduke candidates was a girl who looked as though she had been baptized last season, like he had. It was heartwarming to see her older brother and sister slow down to match her walking speed.

"What were Ehrenfest's years again?" Hildebrand asked.

"They have two second-years and one first-year," Dankmar replied. "The second-year female archduke candidate is the Lady Rozemyne we discussed."

Hildebrand thought back to what he knew about Ehrenfest. It was a duchy notable for having Rozemyne, known as a wild card figure of sorts. She had supposedly attacked a professor with her highbeast, revived the heirlooms of royalty, thrown the royal palace into chaos by guiding Anastasius and Eglantine into a relationship, and missed both the Interduchy Tournament and the graduation ceremony due to her abnormally poor health. Anastasius, the only royal who had met her personally, had even described her as "a dangerous individual who comes up with unthinkable ideas that cannot be dealt with normally." But underneath all this madness, she was extremely competent; she had come first-in-class the year before and was supposedly the source of all the

trends coming from Ehrenfest.

How bizarre...

Hildebrand had struggled to know how much he needed to remember when he was learning about other duchies with Dankmar and the others. Anastasius had given detailed reports on the incidents this Rozemyne had caused, but most of what he had written was in relation to his time with Eglantine, so the scholars hadn't known how trustworthy it really was.

I think Lady Eglantine's hairpin was made in Ehrenfest too.

Hildebrand recalled the unusual hairpin that Eglantine had worn at his baptism ceremony and looked over the Ehrenfest group. It was then that he realized all the girls were wearing hairpins, even the retainers.

The three archduke candidates knelt down, crossed their arms in front of their chests, and performed their first greeting. Hildebrand had been warned to stay on guard against Rozemyne's blessings, but nothing in particular happened. His attention was more drawn to how glossy their hair was.

That's another of their duchy's trends, as I remember.

Hildebrand recalled that, prior to his baptism, his mother had wanted this rinsham product and had instructed the Sovereign merchants heading to Ehrenfest to return with some before the end of summer. He smiled at the memory and instructed the three archduke candidates before him to raise their heads, after which the boy—Rozemyne's brother—spoke as their representative.

"It is an honor to meet you, Prince Hildebrand. We are Wilfried, Rozemyne, and Charlotte of Ehrenfest, here to learn to become proper nobles fit to serve Yurgenschmidt. May the future be bright."

This light-haired, indigo-eyed girl must be Rozemyne.

Hildebrand looked at the three Ehrenfest archduke candidates, deducing their names by order of their apparent ages. Both his parents had advised him to take care with the unusually influential Rozemyne of Ehrenfest, and Anastasius had warned him that it was possible she would reply to him with blatant hostility at their first meeting. If she did that, Anastasius had said for him to

settle things peacefully, if possible.

I wonder what I should say if she does seem hostile, though...

Despite his fears, Hildebrand put on as peaceful of a smile as he could, all while taking care not to stare specifically at Rozemyne. “I am told that Ehrenfest’s archduke candidates are exceptional—that one came first-in-class and another achieved the rank of honor student, all while aiding their classmates in raising the overall grades of their duchy,” he said. “King Trauerqual has high hopes for all of you. Do continue your efforts.”

In the end, the three candidates left without incident, much to the prince’s relief. He noticed that he had tensed up without realizing it, so he let his body relax back into his chair.

Well, that ended without anything serious happening.

Now that the lengthy greetings had been exchanged and everyone had eaten lunch, the fellowship gathering was finally over. Hildebrand was the first to rise from his seat and exit the Small Hall with his retainers. He started to relax once there weren’t so many eyes on him—which, of course, earned him a quiet rebuke from Arthur.

“You must remain regal.”

Hildebrand straightened his back again, recalling that he had been told to maintain his royal demeanor without fail even as he returned to his villa. He walked down the hall with the doors enchanted with teleportation magic, looking for the one that led to his own villa.

It was easy to tell the doors to the duchies apart, since they were numbered based on rank. The royal villas, however, were marked with the elements of the various gods, and the third prince—young as he was—found himself unable to distinguish them. It wasn’t that he couldn’t read them, but rather that reading them took him some time. The words were also written above the doors, so he had to keep looking up as he walked, which quickly made his neck ache.

“Arthur...” Hildebrand said, seeking help, but Arthur shook his head.

“You must be able to return to your villa through your own power.”

“I remember everything and I can read them; it just takes me a while,” Hildebrand protested, clearly frustrated. He then returned to looking at the letters above the doors. “Darkness marks my father’s villa, Light marks his first wife’s, Water marks his second wife’s, Wind marks my mother’s, Fire marks Sigiswald’s, Life marks Anastasius’s, and Earth... Earth marks the villa they gave me.”

Hildebrand was struck with the temptation to visit his mother in her villa—to tell her how hard he had worked today—but now that he had been baptized and given his own place to live, he could no longer see her without requesting a meeting first.

Soon enough, Hildebrand found the right door and returned to his villa. He let out a heavy sigh, unable to ignore the loneliness he felt, but Arthur didn’t chastise him this time; instead, he simply chuckled and prepared a glass of warm milk, into which he stirred a dollop of honey. The sweet taste made the prince feel as though he were back home.

“Did I handle the fellowship gathering okay...?” Hildebrand asked.

“Indeed,” Arthur replied. “You handled the greetings quite well.”

Hildebrand had worked hard to complete the first duty his father had ever given him, but at the same time, he had been terrified that he might fail. Only after receiving approval from his head attendant did the prince allow the emotions stirring in his chest to finally surface.

“The Small Hall sure was filled with people...” Hildebrand remarked.

“Only the archduke candidates and their retainers were in attendance,” Arthur replied, “so the turnout was actually rather small in comparison to the total number of students.”

It seemed that there were more mednobles and laynobles than there were archduke candidates and their retainers combined. Hildebrand couldn’t even imagine that.

“Arthur, I should have been wearing black too. I was the odd one out,” Hildebrand muttered, looking down at his clothes. Everyone in the Small Hall—students and teachers alike—had worn black, which had made him feel

exceptionally ostracized.

“You are not yet officially attending the Royal Academy, Prince Hildebrand, so you cannot wear black. You must be satisfied with the royal black cape.”

“That reminds me... There was someone else who looked like me. If she hadn’t been wearing black, she wouldn’t have looked like a student at all,” Hildebrand said, thinking back to the abnormally young-looking girl who had greeted him alongside her older brother and sister. She had hair like the night sky and eyes like the moon—a very distinctive appearance—and she had worn a dark-yellow cape, from what he remembered.

What duchy wears that cape again? Ehrenfest, was it...?

He then remembered that Rozemyne had also been at the gathering. She hadn’t seemed anywhere near as dangerous as Anastasius had said, but then again, lessons hadn’t started yet. Who knew what would happen this winter?

“I wonder whether the young girl is as skilled as her older sister...” Hildebrand muttered, unaware that he had mistaken Charlotte for Rozemyne.

Staying Home at the Castle

"Tomorrow's Starbind Ceremony with Ehrenfest and Ahrensbach is going to be held at the border gate. Do not slack in your preparations," Rihyarda said. "Now, the retainers who are accompanying Lady Rozemyne will need to be up and about by the time first bell rings, but those who aren't may take it easier. That includes you, Philine."

I nodded. We were in the retainers' room, going over our plans at the end of the day. Ottilie and Leonore were going to be attending the ceremony, since they were family of Count Leisegang and could stay in his mansion, while I and a few others were remaining behind. Lady Rozemyne was in the temple, which meant there was no need for a night watch; Rihyarda locked the room once we had all stepped out.

I was woken up the next morning by the bustle of moving retainers. Just as Rihyarda had instructed, those who would normally wake up a little before second bell were already moving around. I could not afford to be the only one getting up late. I picked up my apprentice scholar clothes and carried them to the dressing room.

The dressing room was a shared space for laynobles and mednobles who did not have any personal attendants in the castle. If one came to the room while everyone was getting ready for the day, there would usually be someone there to help one get dressed and such. In turn, one would aid others in getting dressed as well. If nobody was there, it was possible to pay for a servant with one's own funds... but now that I had left home, I didn't have the money to spare for something like that.

"Philine, over here. You can do me next."

"Of course," I replied. I had gotten quite good at dressing the castle's attendants over the past season I had spent here since Lady Rozemyne gifted me a room in the northern building.

After getting changed, I made my way to the room where attendants ate.

Brunhilde had just finished her breakfast when I arrived and was preparing to leave in her highbeast riding clothes. “Oh, Philine,” she said upon noticing me. “You could have slept a little longer.”

Brunhilde was an archnoble, but she was very kind. She taught me the precise rules of the nobility and assisted me in more ways than I could count, maintaining that any retainer needed to know at least so much to avoid shaming their lady.

“I want to do what I can to help,” I explained. “I wish to see you all off as well.”

Court chefs made food for the attendants living in the castle, and while there was less variety than what the archducal family received, the flavor was still quite good. Castle servants handled the serving. Some of them carried themselves just like the temple’s gray priests.

Judithe lived in the knight dormitory, and she had been moaning about how she wanted a room in the northern building instead. It would have been nice for the knights to enjoy the same meals we were lucky enough to receive, but training new court chefs was apparently an arduous process.

“This excursion is a good opportunity to see how milady fares outside of the castle,” Rihyarda said. “At the same time, you must keep in mind that she does not understand much about our lifestyle. Serve her well, such that she does not blunder in Count Leisegang’s estate.”

Ottilie, Brunhilde, Hartmut, and Leonore all nodded before taking out their highbeasts and getting ready to leave. Among the crowd surrounding us were the archducal family, their retainers, the families of the grooms, and a portion of the Knight’s Order to protect the party. Everyone was busy with their respective preparations; an ordonnanz had come from the temple informing us that Lady Rozemyne was on her way.

“Ah, there she is. Wait...”

My eyes widened as Lady Rozemyne arrived in her highbeast, which was much, *much* bigger than I had ever seen it before. Its entrance stretched open once she landed, and Damuel hopped out with a large, wrapped item of some

kind in his arms. I could see through the open doorway that there were many gray priests and much luggage packed inside.

“I was wondering how they were going to carry the divine instrument and gray priests to the border gate,” I said aloud. “To think she could make her highbeast that large...”

Judithe, who was looking at Lady Rozemyne’s highbeast with a similarly stunned expression, nodded in agreement. She was here to see everyone off as well.

“Alright,” Sylvester said. “Time for us to go.”

“May you return safely,” Florencia replied.

As the throng of mounted highbeasts took flight, Damuel alone returned to the castle, where he was going to be staying with the others and me.

“Welcome back to the castle, Damuel,” I said. “It seems you will finally be able to relax today.”

“Same to you, Philine. We won’t need to go to the temple for a while,” he replied.

I had been going to the temple every day, aside from when I had meetings or lectures that I needed to attend as an apprentice scholar. There was harspiel practice, assisting the High Priest, transcribing books, observing the orphanage and workshop, holding meetings with lower-city merchants... I was much busier in the temple than in the castle, and I could feel my scholarly skills developing with each passing day. No other first-year of the Royal Academy was entrusted with this much work in the castle.

Not to mention, Damuel is there too, so...

“I feel a bit uneasy in the castle, since there is so little to do,” I said.

“Fear not; I have a book from Dunkelfelger for you. Seems that Lady Rozemyne wants you to keep transcribing it,” Damuel replied. The wrapped item in his arms was no doubt the book in question. Lady Rozemyne had not failed to provide me with plenty of work.

“Will you be returning to work in the temple as soon as Lady Rozemyne

returns?" I asked. "I would very much like to go as well."

"Nah. Lady Rozemyne will probably end up bedridden once she gets back, so there's not much point in you going to the temple until she's better."

Aah, I forgot to account for Lady Rozemyne's poor health...

If she were bedridden, she would need knights to protect her but no apprentice scholars at her side. In fact, it was likely that our presence would only cause more trouble. Seeing us hard at work would almost certainly drive Lady Rozemyne to start overexerting herself.

I slumped over sadly, which made Damuel shrug his shoulders. "I'll send you an ordonnanz when Lady Rozemyne recovers," he said with a wry grin. "You'll just have to wait in the castle until then."

"Understood," I replied. "Promise me you won't forget, though."

"You sure are serious about promises, huh?" Damuel chuckled. After giving me his word, he passed the valuable wrapped book to Rihyarda and Lieseleta, took out his highbeast, and then headed to the knight dormitory.

I got him to promise to send me an ordonnanz... I can't wait.

I watched as Damuel went, smiling to myself all the while. Only when Judithe prodded my cheek was I drawn back to reality. "You sure like Damuel, don'tcha?" she said with a snicker.

"Was it showing on my face again?" I asked, rubbing my cheek.

Judithe snickered again and nodded. "You're like an open book," she said, having already sniffed out my feelings. Brunhilde and Lieseleta were aware as well.

"How could I not like him?" I asked. "He is so wonderful."

"He certainly is the hero who saved you. I thought before working here that he was just a lucky laynoble making the most of going to the temple, but now I know he's having a hard time keeping up with Lady Rozemyne's craziness. And, well... he may be a bit dense, but he's not a bad guy. You just keep working on him, Philine. I heard that not even Lady Elvira is going to be able to find him a marriage partner right away."

Judithe went on to tell me about a conversation she had overheard between Damuel and Lady Rozemyne. Lady Elvira had apparently said that she could not find him a partner in the near future, and it seemed that Damuel had gotten rather depressed as a result, even saying that marriage was impossible for him. I certainly felt bad that he was having to wait, but I also hoped that his misfortune would continue at least until my coming-of-age.

"If you ask Lady Rozemyne for her help, Philine, I'm sure you'll have Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time's divine protection on your side."

"I would never do something so shameless," I replied. "Damuel would only be disappointed."

I... I just need to be close to my coming-of-age. I might have some hope then.

Judithe was cackling to herself while trying to taunt me into confessing. I shot her a glare, then turned and started for Lady Rozemyne's chambers. Lady Rozemyne spent most of her time in the temple anyway, so her absence wouldn't have too much of an impact on my usual duties.

Lady Rozemyne's attendants would usually sort through the letters she received requesting meetings and such in the morning after breakfast, but all the happenings today meant it had needed to be rescheduled. Rihyarda was now going through them with Lieseleta, as per usual.

"Rihyarda, do you not think the number of requests from the former Veronica faction has increased dramatically?" Lieseleta asked. "There was a while when they were sending far fewer."

"Something must have happened..." Rihyarda replied. "I shall see what I can learn."

I listened to their conversation while transcribing the book from Dunkelfelger. Progress was slow, since it used a lot of old words and complicated turns of phrase. It was ridiculous that Lady Rozemyne could read this so smoothly.

By the time Rihyarda and Lieseleta had finished sorting through the letters, Damuel had returned from the knight dormitory. "I shall now guard the door," he announced.

“Aah, Damuel,” Rihyarda said. “I must go to an associate’s to discuss some matters. You may contact me by ordonnanz if anything happens, since I’ll be staying in the castle nearby. Furthermore, Philine has an apprentice scholar lesson at third bell. There are many members of the former Veronica faction in the castle today, while most of the Florencia faction is absent, so please guard her.”

Just like that, Rihyarda had magnanimously assigned Damuel to me. My heart fluttered when he agreed to her request.

Whatever shall I do? I can hardly wait for my lesson now.

Once the letters were sorted, the attendants needed to clean the chambers. This was usually when I would decide between going to study in my room or participating in training with the Knight’s Order. However, since most of the knights were now headed to the border gate and those remaining behind were largely on guard duty, there was no training to attend. I cleared away my pen and paper in preparation for going to my room, only for Lieseleta to raise a hand to stop me.

“You can stay here, Philine. We are going to clean after today’s embroidering instead. There are always the occasional strands of thread that end up here and there, as I’m sure you can imagine.”

While Rihyarda was off gathering intelligence, Lieseleta began preparing to embroider Schwartz’s and Weiss’s outfits. Her embroidery truly was something to behold, and her stitches were ever so precise.

Angelica’s appearance certainly belied her true personality, but Lieseleta was quite surprising as well. She was quite reserved and calm during work, but she became lively and talkative the very instant she was off duty. I still remembered the first time I had seen her switch modes—it had been so seamless and dramatic that I thought she had turned into someone else entirely.

Because, I mean, Angelica doesn’t change like that.

“Judithe, why don’t you join us?” Lieseleta asked invitingly. “Damuel can handle the door. You want to embroider a cape one day, don’t you?”

Judithe’s eyes flitted from Lieseleta to Damuel. She wanted to carry out her

duty as a guard properly, but it was clear on her face that she also wanted to learn embroidery.

"We probably won't have any visitors today," Damuel added. "Why not practice some embroidery so that you can give a better gift to your future husband?"

"No way," Judithe eventually replied. "I'm aiming to be like Angelica. I'll practice for my own sake, not because I want to please a man." She had started speaking very openly around Damuel, to the extent that such casual exchanges were nothing rare. It was like they had grown close somehow, which did make me feel a little jealous.

I always end up acting so reserved around Damuel... Maybe it's because I'm not a mednoble like Judithe and don't have status over him. She doesn't have any romantic feelings for him, I know, but he's such a wonderful man that she might fall for him at any moment! How could she not?!

Damuel now had enough mana that he was capable of marrying even a mednoble like Lady Brigitte. I would need more mana to even earn his notice, so I was working hard to compress it as much as possible. I couldn't help but hate my laynoble body for its painfully limited mana capacity.

At third bell, I cleared away my transcribing utensils and prepared to leave for my lesson intended to teach apprentice scholars who had finished their first year in the Royal Academy the basics of castle work. I was Lady Rozemyne's retainer, but I had been told to attend nonetheless, since I was unfamiliar with the inner workings of the castle.

The schedule for today was to observe the working scholars. Lady Rozemyne was an archduke candidate, but she had very much wanted to participate with us; it seemed that she planned to take the scholar course as well.

I must work harder, else I will surely be called unfit to serve as the brilliant Lady Rozemyne's retainer.

"You're going to be late if we don't leave soon, Philine," Damuel said.

"I'm ready."

And so, I made my way toward the main building with Damuel, savoring the joyous feeling that swept through me when he slowed down to match my pace. Unfortunately, the smile faded from my face when we left the northern building. I was happy to be spending time with him, but going to the main building always made me feel a bit anxious. Even though we were Lady Rozemyne's retainers, we were often insulted from the shadows for being laynobles.

It was preferable for adults to visit the temple, so Lady Rozemyne would always bring Damuel with her, leaving castle duty to the apprentices. This had resulted in castle nobles referring to Damuel as a temple-only guard knight whom Lady Rozemyne kept around only because she could not bring archknights to the temple. Meanwhile, I was being called "the laynoble who exploited the saint's compassion," in reference to the fact that Lady Rozemyne had saved Konrad and granted me a room.

Hearing these insults had initially made me want to burst into tears, but over time, I grew used to them. Such harsh words were never pleasant to hear, but Damuel would console me and teach me how to ignore them. "They're just jealous because you get to be Lady Rozemyne's retainer and they don't," he would say.

Damuel is so kind and wonderful, isn't he?

There were only a few apprentice scholars coming to today's lesson. Roderick and I were the only first-year apprentice scholars, and we were joined by two second-years who hadn't been able to participate the year before. Lady Rozemyne was an archduke candidate, so even though she intended to be an apprentice scholar, she could hardly be counted alongside us.

I had spent a winter in the Royal Academy with everyone who was due to attend. It was nice that I didn't need to feel tense around them.

"Roderick," I called.

"Ah, Philine!"

Roderick was an apprentice scholar who put his all into writing stories. We had competed to see who could write more for Lady Rozemyne during her long slumber, so I felt a little bad that only I had been chosen to serve her. Were his

family not in the former Veronica faction, I was sure he would have been chosen in my place. He was a mednoble, after all, while I was only a laynoble.

"Good timing. Nobody else is here yet," Roderick said. He glanced around and then pulled out a letter from his belongings. "Th-This is for you, Philine. I want you to read it as soon as you get back to your room!" he exclaimed.

I instinctively looked between the letter and Damuel, whom Roderick must not have counted, considering that he had said nobody else was here yet. Roderick was so relieved about having delivered the letter that he muttered, "I did it..." to himself several times over, but I wanted to cradle my head and scream.

If you're going to do something like this, don't do it in front of Damuel, of all people!

Damuel looked down at the letter. "A love letter, huh? Roderick's a mednoble, so you shouldn't miss this chance to raise your status," he murmured and then let out a heavy sigh.

I sighed as well, doing my best to hide the letter. It had no doubt reminded Damuel of his lost love for Lady Brigitte and the lack of romantic approaches he was receiving.

The second-year apprentices soon arrived, and a scholar by the name of Kantna began his lecture on the castle. I walked through the main building feeling depressed, but I did not forget to write down the contents of the lesson for Lady Rozemyne.

Damuel and I returned to the northern building once the lesson was over. Upon our return, Judithe immediately shot me a look of concern. "You don't look so good, Philine," she said. "What has Damuel done?"

"Hold on!" Damuel exclaimed. "Why are you blaming me?!"

"I can't think of anybody else who might be responsible."

Lieseleta looked over at us as well. "Oh? Has Damuel done something to Philine?" she asked. "Do not tell me that he—"

"You've both got the wrong idea," Damuel hurriedly interjected, shaking his

head. “A first-year apprentice scholar named Roderick just gave her a love letter. That’s probably the reason. I have nothing to do with it.”

“I knew it was because of you...” Judithe muttered.

“Damuel, why did you not step in and stop him?” Lieseleta chided.

“Wait, why would I have stopped him?” Damuel asked. “I don’t understand.”

“It’s because you don’t understand these things that you are struggling to find a girl of your own,” Lieseleta said with a smirk.

“Ngh!”

I turned away from the chattering trio and returned to my room, where I promptly opened Roderick’s letter. It would be best to turn him down quickly.

Wait... what?!

The blood drained from my face the moment I read the contents. It was no love letter; Roderick had given me this to inform me of a planned ambush.

One sheet of paper was written in a hand that I didn’t recognize and described a plan to attack the temple priests sent ahead by carriage to prepare for the Starbind Ceremony. The writer had only overheard the plans for the ambush, so they had no actual evidence; all they knew was that the person their father served had wished for it. Even so, the writer advised that precautions be taken.

The other sheet was in Roderick’s handwriting and explained how this message had come into his possession. Viscount Gerlach’s son Matthias had apparently learned of the planned ambush and sent several requests to meet with Lady Rozemyne, but his status as a member of the former Veronica faction had resulted in each one being rejected. He had spoken with others, trying to determine who could get closest to Lady Rozemyne, and concluded that his best option was to send a letter through Roderick, who would meet with me during our apprentice scholar lessons.

It seemed they had made good on their promise in the Royal Academy to serve Lady Rozemyne even as members of the former Veronica Faction. I gripped the letter and ran back into Lady Rozemyne’s chambers without the

slightest hesitation.

“Damuel! Judithe!” I cried, holding out the papers. “Please, protect Lady Rozemyne!”

Everyone’s expressions changed the instant they saw what was written. Damuel immediately sent an ordonnanz to Rihyarda, stating that there was an ambush planned and that she needed to set up a meeting with Lord Bonifatius posthaste. He then sent an ordonnanz directly to Lord Bonifatius, breaking decorum due to the urgency of the situation.

Lord Bonifatius sent a response before Rihyarda did.

“COME! NOW!”

It was brief, but the message was clear. Damuel entrusted the chambers to Judithe and sprinted out of the room with Roderick’s letter before the ordonnanz could even repeat once.

I pray that he makes it in time.

“Lady Rozemyne...”

Together with Judithe and Lieseleta, I prayed that Lady Rozemyne would not be put in harm’s way once again. We were unable to do much else, and so we had our lunch. It was the same delicious food as usual, but my mind was so elsewhere that it tasted almost like nothing at all.

Rihyarda and Damuel eventually returned, both looking notably relieved.

“Is Lady Rozemyne safe?!” those of us who had remained behind exclaimed in unison.

“Yeah,” Damuel replied. “Sounds like they managed to block the ambush.”

Lord Bonifatius had used a magic tool for contacting giebes to inform Count Leisegang of the planned ambush. The message had come just as they were finishing lunch, meaning Lady Rozemyne had not yet departed.

Based on the fact that Matthias had sent the letter, those in charge had deduced the most likely places for the ambushers to be and sent knights to guard them. This also made it clear to the would-be attackers that their plan

had been discovered, and as a result, it seemed that Lady Rozemyne's group had managed to reach the border gate safely.

"Lord Bonifatius is proud of the coordination that took place here today," Rihyarda said, her eyes crinkled in a smile. "The bonds Lady Rozemyne has formed in the Royal Academy by breaking down faction walls are proving their value. Soon, the day may come when the unified power of children moves even us adults."

I smiled in turn, pleased that Lady Rozemyne was safe. My celebrations were short-lived, however, as Damuel stretched and shot me a grin. "Still," he said. "Too bad for you."

"Hm...?"

"You didn't get the love letter you hoped for, huh?"

His words struck me with such force that my vision spun. Lady Rozemyne's safety had been all that occupied my thoughts, but Damuel seemed to think I had been fretting about a love letter. Was I really that much of a child in his eyes? I looked up at him, struggling to hold back my tears, which made him frantically wave his hands.

"N-Now, now! Th-There's no need to cry, is there?" he stammered. "I mean, er, there're plenty of fish in the sea. You'll get another love letter or two for sure. No doubt about it."

That's not what I'm upset about!

Judithe and Lieseleta gave exasperated sighs. I knew deep down that Damuel was just showing concern for me, since he didn't know how I really felt about him. He was a kind man, but he was doing the exact opposite of what I wanted from him.

Should I just say it now? Should I stop holding back and confess everything?

I balled my fists and glared up at Damuel, filled with determination. He was probably used to getting such stern looks from Judithe, but evidently not from me; I could sense how taken aback he was from his expression alone. After eyeing him carefully for a moment, I took a deep breath and—

“Damuel, I hope you don’t get a girlfriend or get married before I come of age!”

“H-Hold on a moment,” Damuel sputtered. “That’s just cruel, Philine! I’m dying here!”

“It’s only a wish. It can’t be cruel.”

“Yes, it can!”

Judithe and Lieseleta began cackling at how genuinely offended Damuel looked. I laughed alongside them, half relieved and half upset that he hadn’t understood me at all.

I wonder whether I should escalate things and go ask Lady Elvira for her help...?

Reaching a Crossroads

The time at which guard knights of the archducal family were able to return home depended on the day—sometimes they wouldn't finish work until sixth bell, while those on night watch wouldn't finish until the following morning. In most cases, my husband Lord Lamprecht would return before seventh bell, after I had eaten dinner and bathed.

"Lady Aurelia, Lord Lamprecht has returned."

The announcement came from Riadina, the attendant who had accompanied me to Ehrenfest. I would go without my veil when she and I were the only two in my room, usually when I was lounging around after my bath, but I always put it back on when there was even the slightest chance of someone else seeing me.

"It truly is a shame that you hide your perfect golden-blonde hair," she continued. "Your dark-green eyes too, a little sharp and raised though they may be."

"I would not wear this veil so obstinately were I not married into a Leisegang's family," I replied. "It would be unthinkable for me to remove it when Lady Elvira is already far from welcoming of me. I can hardly imagine how much her mood would worsen if she knew my face."

I suppose the only people in this duchy who have seen beneath my veil are Lord Lamprecht and Riadina...

Lord Lamprecht and I had shared very little time together in the Royal Academy, owing to the fact he was a few years above my own, and nobody else from Ehrenfest had seen my face. Nothing good would have come from it.

After all, my resting expression is identical to the one Lady Gabriele would make following her marriage into Ehrenfest, when she would craft vicious plots. My face is going to be despised here.

Lady Gabriele's appearance was preserved only in a few portraits in

Ahrensbach. It had not been until Lady Georgine mentioned my likeness to her grandmother, based on pictures her mother had, that I was made aware of my plight.

Ever since I was a little girl, people had told me that I looked as though I were scheming something awful and that my eyes carried the cruelness of some base villain. That was bad enough, but now I had married into a family who reviled and cursed my likeness—a fact that had only been revealed to me during the tea party before my wedding. How could the gods be so cruel, truly?

There is no doubt that I will be subject to even more awful misunderstandings than before. I would never take the risk of removing my veil.

There was a magic circle sewn into my veil which prevented the material from obstructing my vision, and only once Riadina had aided me in putting it on did I permit Lord Lamprecht and his attendants to enter the room. Lord Lamprecht sat down next to me, took out a letter of invitation, and then handed me a sound-blocking magic tool.

"Aurelia, this here is an invitation from Mother," he explained. "Rozemyne and Lady Florencia are holding a tea party at the beginning of autumn to advertise some newly dyed pieces of cloth. Seems like they want you to join. Riadina will need to stay behind, unfortunately. Mother is going to be selecting your attendant instead. So, what do you think?" He checked that I was holding the magic tool and then added, "Mother's deeply involved with this event, what with Rozemyne being her daughter. If you refuse to attend, it's going to be a lot harder for you to get into the Florencia faction."

I was following my mother-in-law Lady Elvira's instructions and refusing any contact with the former Veronica faction, who held deep connections with Lady Georgine, but I had not yet socialized enough to enter her and Lady Rozemyne's faction.

"It seems that Mother intends to give you some time to get used to living in Ehrenfest and then invite you to tea parties and the like once you've taken off your veil, but—"

"I could never," I interrupted, reaching to secure the fabric that covered my face.

Lord Lamprecht smiled. “I won’t force you to remove it. Mother wants you in the faction no matter what, but if you don’t think you can handle this, I don’t mind if you decide not to participate.”

“But my relationship with Lady Elvira would...” I began, but my words failed me. It was a suggestion that felt as though it would destroy not only my relationship with Lady Elvira as her daughter-in-law but Lamprecht’s relationship with her as her son.

“Well, at the very least, I’m prepared to leave home,” Lord Lamprecht said. “You don’t need to force yourself if you think you won’t be able to handle entering Mother’s faction. I’d rather hear your decision sooner rather than later, though, since I’ll need to find a new home for us.” He spoke with a joking smile, but his light-blue eyes were completely serious; he seemed genuinely prepared to leave his home.

“Lord Lamprecht...”

“I mean it. Now that Lord Wilfried is engaged, he’s in place to be the next archduke. And with you being wed into the duchy, the nobles of the former Veronica faction are rising up. You saw how many letters of invitation you’re getting, right? Even if we end up running from home, the former Veronica faction will welcome us with open arms. I... I’m not going to force you to live locked up like this, with your face hidden forever.”

“But is Lady Elvira not on guard against the former Veronica faction because of all the dangerous people it contains?” I asked. “There are those who attacked Lady Rozemyne and the other archduke candidates.”

Before my marriage into Ehrenfest, Lady Georgine and my father had made it sound as though the duchy resented Ahrensbach solely because of a wrong committed several generations ago. Lady Elvira had explained that there was much more to it than that, however, so I was hesitant to approach the former Veronica faction.

“Now that Lord Wilfried is guaranteed to be the next archduke, the archducal family will probably start trying to absorb the former Veronica faction again,” Lord Lamprecht said. “Lord Wilfried will lead the former Veronica faction while Lady Rozemyne leads the Leisegang faction, and when they are married, the

two factions will fuse together."

His eyes sparkled as he spoke of the future, but I remained skeptical. Perhaps it was due to me being fundamentally pessimistic or my own marriage situation having changed so many times, but I could not imagine the future Lord Lamprecht envisioned actually coming to pass. The future was always unexpected.

"If you're finding life hard right now or you'd rather socialize with the former Veronica faction than with Rozemyne and my mother's, tell me. We can pick either faction right now. I... I don't want to disrespect my first wife like Father did," Lord Lamprecht said, eyeing me closely. His feelings were no doubt honest. He had always been a bit clumsy with personal matters, ever since the first time we met, but he was not one to lie or attempt to deceive others.

"I am not opposed to remaining here; I was exposed to such malice in Ahrensbach that I am quite used to staying within the confines of my home. However, Lord Lamprecht... If you are so strong in your faith, why did you agree with Lady Elvira's request for us to move here and avoid contact with the former Veronica faction?"

"Mother's faction is in power right now. Rozemyne's churning out one trend after another, and everyone in the Royal Academy knows it. I thought you'd find it easier living here if you joined her faction too, and if you *can* adjust to things here, I think that's for the best. But there are some things that just can't be forced. We have a choice, so I think it's best for you to make your own decision."

I had spent my entire life following orders from Lady Georgine and my father, seldom making any decisions of my own. But now, whether I liked it or not, I was faced with an exceedingly important crossroads. I quaked as I realized that I would need to make a choice.

"I should mention—since Rozemyne is heading this event, I'm sure it will be safe. Why not try socializing with Mother's faction and then making a decision after that?" Lord Lamprecht asked. I was quite grateful to have an opportunity to socialize before choosing a side, but it was still possible that attending would cause me great suffering.

“I am told that Lady Rozemyne was once attacked by an Ahrensbach noble,” I said. “Is it not possible that she would vent her frustrations on me?”

Lord Lamprecht shook his head. “Rozemyne would never be mean to someone who’s innocent. She’s a really kind girl. She showed compassion to the temple’s orphans, and she saved my lord when he was a breath away from being expelled from the archducal family.”

He had seized this opportunity to brag about his little sister, as he so often did, so I took a moment to recollect my thoughts. I recalled the small figure I had seen at the border gate, chastising her guard knights at the Starbind Ceremony and granting a wondrous blessing.

“I will think it over carefully,” I said. “I shan’t keep you waiting for my response.”

“This’ll be a big decision for you, Aurelia, so think about it as much as you need to. I’ll see you later,” Lord Lamprecht replied. He retrieved the sound-blocking magic tool he had given me and then lifted my veil just enough to kiss me on the cheek, near my lips. He held up his cape a little such that his attendants could not see the slivers of my face he exposed in the process.

Going that far will only make people even more curious about my appearance!

I would normally scold him whenever he teased me like this, but I was so relieved and overjoyed that he would protect my wish to hide my face that my frustrations quickly washed away. Once again, I simply could not be angry at him.

I watched Lord Lamprecht leave with his attendants and then let out a sigh. “What do you think, Riadina?” I asked from where I was seated. “I was told that I may choose a faction on my own, but as you know, I am not well accustomed to making decisions.”

Riadina had lost her husband in the purge following the civil war, and as a second wife, she had been unable to return to her family or stay in her current home. My mother had taken her as an attendant, saving her, and when my mother passed, Riadina was assigned to me instead. She had been with me ever since I was a child, so she knew me better than most.

“To think you were not even permitted to select your own course in the Royal Academy...” Riadina reminisced. “You had wanted to be a scholar or an attendant, but you were ordered to take the knight course, since Lady Alstede was lacking in apprentice guard knights.”

“Indeed,” I replied. “It all worked out well in the end, though. Had I not taken the knight course, I would presumably not have met Lord Lamprecht. Fate truly does work in strange ways.”

I had met Lord Lamprecht while Lady Veronica still maintained power in Ehrenfest; he had been instructed to marry a woman from Ahrensbach, as the guard knight of the next archduke. Retainers of the archducal family were required to spend a great deal of time with the one they served, leaving their homes unattended, and this was especially true for guard knights. Lord Lamprecht had known that marrying someone from another duchy who could not understand this would only cause problems, so he had socialized specifically with apprentice knights from Ahrensbach.

Around the same time, I was taking the knight course at my father’s behest, all so that I could serve Lady Georgine’s daughter Lady Alstede. I still remembered how empty those days had made me feel.

“It had already been decided that Lady Alstede would marry an archnoble upon her graduation,” I recalled. “She would only remain a member of the archducal family for two years at most, regardless of whether I was in her service. It was upsetting beyond words to learn that Father had decided my future purely to make Lady Alstede’s last couple years in the Royal Academy as convenient as possible.”

“By that time, the archduke’s first wife was already falling ill, and the archduke was planning on raising Lady Georgine to his second wife,” Riadina said. “Your father must have wanted to form as strong of a connection with her as possible before then.”

Father had been pleased to earn Lady Georgine’s favor, even if only a little, but I soon found there was no place for me in any of the friendship groups the other apprentice knights had already formed. I would often retreat to the knight building under the guise of training simply to evade them.

It was there that I found the opportunity to speak with Lord Lamprecht. At first, he had simply asked me to introduce him to the other girls; I was three years his junior and he had not been able to sense my mana, so he had not seen me as someone worth romancing. At the time, however, Lord Lamprecht was already a sixth-year. He was too late to begin socializing, and in contrast to its reputation today, Ehrenfest was viewed as a completely unattractive duchy. Nobody in a greater duchy like Ahrensbach would wish to marry into a bottom-ranking duchy like Ehrenfest.

“You will struggle to convince anyone who is not desperate to leave Ahrensbach,” I had said to him at the time. “Indeed, anyone who does not wish to leave as I do...”

“Well then, Lady Aurelia, would you come to Ehrenfest with me?” Lord Lamprecht had replied. “Lady Veronica would rejoice to have you, and your presence will aid our house in getting closer with the Veronica faction.”

I had smiled and agreed, thinking of nothing but escaping my father. Of course, Father refused the idea outright, stating that he would not permit me to marry into a bottom-ranking duchy like Ehrenfest, and to an archnoble with so little mana. He eventually agreed to allow Lord Lamprecht to escort me at his graduation, to serve as one last memory before our farewell, but even that required a great deal of negotiating.

“Yet, despite resolving to be separated from Lord Lamprecht, we ended up married nonetheless...” I mused.

“That, too, was an order,” Riadina said. “How do you feel about your present lifestyle? I believe Lord Lamprecht has placed this decision in your hands because he cannot imagine that someone on guard enough to wear a veil even in her own room is content.”

I pondered the question. I had always thought that I would rather stay inside forever than be exposed to the malice of the outside world, so the fact that I could not leave my home did not bother me in the slightest. What did bother me, however, was being kept under surveillance at all times by Lady Elvira’s servants. They were watching to ensure that nobles of the former Veronica faction could not contact me, but it was painfully exhausting. In a sense, it was

like having hostile enemies all around.

“There is one thing I would change,” I said with a sigh. “I wish for Lady Elvira to accept that I will not be removing my veil. That is all. There are still portraits of Lady Gabriele here, I am told, and the wizened old men of the Leisegangs consider her visage one to be reviled. I could not live in peace as the object of their scorn, so I intend to keep my face obscured.”

I understood that entering Lady Rozemyne and Lady Elvira’s faction was the best move for me, but it was hard to imagine that those who had been abused by Lady Veronica and suffered from Lady Gabriele being wed into the duchy would ever welcome me.

“The dyeing competition is no exception. I am going to be nervous on my own without you, Riadina, but... as long as I may wear my veil, I am willing to participate. For the sake of bettering my own future.”

“Then please inform Lord Lamprecht,” Riadina said. “If you state your wish honestly, he will certainly move to accommodate it.”

“So, how was the dyeing event?” Lord Lamprecht asked upon my return, his eyes tinged with concern. He had requested the afternoon off work to check up on me, and I had returned to my room while giggling about the events of the day—much to Riadina’s surprise.

“Lady Rozemyne is just one surprise after another,” I said. “I was struck with the urge to leave when I was asked to remove my veil, but... when I expressed my resistance, Lady Rozemyne suggested that I simply procure a new veil dyed using Ehrenfest’s new method, to prove my desire to assimilate into the duchy. Lady Elvira even said that, under these new circumstances, she would permit me to continue covering my face.”

It would take some time to redo the embroidery, but that was no issue; I had nothing but time on my hands, and to be permitted to continue wearing my veil, I would go to whatever lengths were necessary.

“The design on the new cloth is quite adorable,” I continued. “Lady Rozemyne said that she will gift some to me.”

“Quite... *adorable*?” Lord Lamprecht repeated.

“Yes. I am very fond of adorable designs. It was not one I would have picked on my own, as it would have stood out in unflattering contrast to the cruelness in my eyes, but being able to hide my face means this matters not. It was Lady Rozemyne who explained this to me, and although it may not have been the most appropriate thing to say to a woman agonizing over her appearance, I could tell that she had spoken for my sake. The contrast between her standing proud at her suggestion and her retainers floundering in an attempt to stop her from speaking was so amusing that I was barely able to contain my laughter.”

“Oh my. That is quite something...” Riadina said, likewise unable to contain her laughter.

I returned my attention to Lord Lamprecht, who was listening with a grin. “However, she had most likely been told to make this suggestion so that she could then acquire information on Ahrensbach,” I said. “She asked me a great many questions.”

His expression hardened in an instant. “Questions like...?” he prompted me, leaning forward defensively.

“She wanted to know about any famous knight stories in Ahrensbach, and she asked me how many books there are in the book room of Ahrensbach’s castle,” I explained, struggling to keep a straight face.

“Huh? How many... books?”

“Yes. She focused entirely on books, as though she were concerned with nothing else. Lady Florencia and Lady Elvira did their best to dress things up and return to more normal topics of conversation, but nobody could stop Lady Rozemyne. I was so swept up in her enthusiasm that I even told the story of a sea feybeast being slain. This manner of story is quite rare in Ehrenfest, it seems, as all those at the tea party—not just Lady Rozemyne—listened in rapt attention.”

It was an exceedingly commonplace story told to me by my wet nurse, but Lady Rozemyne had listened with sparkling eyes, and the air in the room had softened before I realized. The tea party had ended up inviting and peaceful, unlike any I had experienced in Ahrensbach.

“Oh, Riadina. That reminds me. Lady Rozemyne has asked for the fish we brought with us. She wishes to try developing new recipes,” I said.

“She desires the ingredients themselves, not the already-cooked meals?” Riadina asked, sounding troubled.

I nodded. “She said that my desire for Ahrensbach cooking is only natural, and that she intends to couple our ingredients with Ehrenfest seasoning to create a new dish. She was also very grateful, since this is something that has only been made possible by my presence. I had thought of throwing away the fish due to the mana expenditure, but it seems they are going to be of more value than expected.”

It had been quite startling to see Lady Rozemyne lean forward with such interest and passionately rant about creating a new trend using Ahrensbach ingredients. Her enthusiasm had served to heal my emotional wounds from when the meals I prepared were spitefully replaced with raw ingredients, which was my reason for having them in the first place.

“Lady Rozemyne found the good in so many things that I could not,” I continued. “She embraced them with a smile, and it is thanks to her that I realized my mistake in thinking that Lady Elvira was not welcoming me.”

On the carriage journey home after the event, Lady Elvira had quietly said to me, “I see that you are in fact not unwilling to embrace Ehrenfest.” Her tone was no different from usual, and yet she sounded so much kinder that I ended up blinking in surprise. “It seems that you are different from Lady Gabriele, who looked down upon Ehrenfest and made no attempt to naturalize. Today’s tea party has proven as such, much to my relief.”

Only then had I realized how my obstinate refusal to remove my veil had appeared to others. To Lady Elvira, I had seemed exactly like Lady Gabriele, who had refused to adapt to Ehrenfest. It was exactly the opposite of what I wanted. After hurriedly rejecting the idea, I explained that I was almost identical in appearance to Lady Gabriele, and that I wished to continue wearing my veil to avoid the disdain of the Leisegangs’ old men.

“Lamprecht said the same a few days ago, but I simply could not believe that you resemble her enough to warrant taking such drastic measures,” Lady Elvira

had said. “May I see your face, even just for a moment? I have seen portraits of Lady Gabriele, so I can tell you how the elderly will respond.”

Now reassured that I meant no harm, Lady Elvira had insisted on seeing my face. I had obliged her.

“And then?” Lord Lamprecht asked. “What did Mother say?”

“She said that she will accept me into her faction once the new veil is complete and embroidered,” I said. “Its similar appearance to the clothing of those in her faction will indicate to everyone the choice I have made. She will encircle me such that members of the former Veronica faction cannot easily approach, and she will provide assistance even when I am speaking with the elderly Leisegangs.”

Upon learning that I did indeed look identical to Lady Gabriele, Lady Elvira had provided me with her full support. Never before had I felt so strong of heart.

“Aurelia, does that mean—”

“Yes. I have decided to join Lady Rozemyne and Lady Elvira’s faction—to live as a woman of Ehrenfest, not as a noble of Ahrensbach with the former Veronica faction. Lord Lamprecht, I hope for your support.”

I had chosen Ehrenfest over my homeland, thereby cementing my fate as a recluse. I was not entirely isolated, however—my newly strengthened relationship with Lady Elvira offered some opportunity to socialize as she began inviting me for tea and meals in the main building and to her meetings with merchants. In turn, the servants assigned to me seemed to grow warmer as well.

Soon enough, the cloth from Lady Rozemyne arrived. I poured my all into embroidering it, embracing the reclusive lifestyle I had always wanted.

The Road to Exclusive Business

The incredible news came near the start of summer.

It was hotter inside the dyeing workshop than outside, and the air was thick with the scent of fermenting plants. Crates packed with fresh white cloth from the weaving workshops were brought in and lined up according to their quality. Beside them, dyes that would sometimes bubble and pop were being stirred gently.

“C’mere, everyone! Big news!”

Dilla had been busy unpacking one of the crates when the foreman rushed into the workshop and started gesturing everybody over. “What’s the big idea?” she asked, tossing the piece of white cloth in her hands back with a grimace. “Effa, do you know what he’s on about?”

“He had to see the Dyeing Guild this morning. Maybe something happened there,” I replied as I set down my own piece of cloth and made my way over to the foreman. He was so excited that he began to explain before we were all even gathered around him.

“Lady Rozemyne, the archduke’s adopted daughter, apparently taught the guild a new dyeing method,” the foreman said, speaking so eagerly that his voice was almost a shout. “She wants to revive an old forgotten technique, then she’s gonna hold an event to decide which dyer gets her exclusive business! She wants a sample of cloth using the new method from every dyeing workshop, then she’s gonna pick her favorite. And whoever makes the one she picks is gonna get a new title!”

“Seriously?” came a voice. “A fancy title like that would make gettin’ a beruf certification easy! Just doin’ business with the archducal family is enough to branch off and start yer own workshop!”

Excitement swelled all throughout the workshop as the details of the event were explained. Dilla, however, shook her head in frustration. “Sure, that’s

good news for anyone who wants to be a foreman," she said, "but it doesn't mean much to us. We don't wanna learn new dyeing methods just 'cause some fancy noble thought them up. I mean, what'll we do about the work we have now? Ain't that right, Effa?"

She was seeking my agreement, but her words passed through one ear and out the other. I wasn't interested in a beruf certification, but the thought of being Lady Rozemyne's exclusive dyer was exciting beyond words.

Winning this would mean I can see Myne too, right?

These days, I had to rely on Lutz, Tuuli, and Gunther to tell me how Myne was doing. I was jealous that their jobs allowed them to meet with and speak to her. I wanted to see her myself. I wanted to hear her voice. Not to mention, here in the lower city, it was a mother's job to make clothes for her family. If she was wearing something I had dyed, I could rest assured that I was doing my job as her mother even just a little bit more.

I want this job. I need it. But do I have what it takes to use this completely new dyeing technique and make cloth that suits Myne better than anything else?

The foreman continued as I fell into thought. "The thing is, not everyone here can turn in cloth," he said. "Only the best of each workshop will get seen by the archducal family. This is the perfect chance to boost the Heuss Workshop's name, so everyone, put your backs into it!"

In other words, I would need to pass the workshop's own selection process just to get my cloth into the castle. I looked around me, at all the men desperate to get their beruf certifications and establish their own workshops. Jorg was even asking others to let him win. He was an amazing dyer. He had always striven for independence over a leherl contract, and he had spent such a long time honing his skills. I knew that, but I wasn't about to let him beat me.

This is a new dyeing method. I should have a chance to win.

I pumped myself up and then spun on my heel, turning away from everyone asking about the new dyeing methods. The foreman explained that the Dyeing Guild would soon be receiving all the necessary documents. I had been in the middle of working with undyed white cloth before we were all interrupted, so I started sifting through it all, looking for pieces of a high enough quality for a

member of the archducal family.

“Leaving the noisy men alone and getting back to work, huh?” Dilla asked as she returned to emptying the crates. “That’s the spirit.”

I found a piece of cloth that looked perfect and hugged it to my chest. “No, actually. I just thought that, with the whole workshop competing for this, I should make sure I get the best cloth. We don’t have much here that would suit a member of the archducal family, and the weaving workshops might not be able to complete any new orders in time, right?”

“You... You’re going to compete?”

“Mm-hmm. I want that title. Now, if you’ll excuse me...” I turned to the foreman. “I’m going to be participating with this cloth here. Also, I just remembered an important errand that I need to run, so I’m turning in for the day.”

Time off was generally dealt with on a first-come-first-served basis. The men snapped back to reality at my announcement and then swarmed the crates of white cloth, fighting over scraps. Meanwhile, I hurried out of the workshop, the cloth I had chosen still pressed to my chest.

I had succeeded in getting cloth for the competition, but I couldn’t waste something so expensive on a first attempt. I needed to learn and practice the new method. I got home, carefully stashed away my high-quality cloth, and then rushed to a cloth store to buy some much cheaper material.

It’s a good thing I bought this when I did. They’re going to be out of stock in no time.

My next stop was the Dyeing Guild, but my time spent there was brief. They didn’t have the documents for the new dyeing method yet, so I decided to look through dyes in the meantime.

“Hey, Effa. Can you give me the cloth you took yesterday?” Jorg asked as soon as I arrived at work the next morning.

Jorg was a man in his late thirties who desperately wanted to start his own workshop. He was particularly envious of Ingo, an especially young member of

the Gutenbergs who had used his title to bring huge success to his carpentry workshop. Jorg always grumbled that he would achieve just as much if dyeing craftspeople could receive titles too.

“You know I’m aiming for the beruf certification, right? I really need this title and job to get it,” he continued, speaking with the utmost seriousness. He had a lot of supporters in the workshop thanks to his sincerity.

Dilla looked between Jorg and me with concerned eyes. “Effa, you don’t care about the certification, do you?” she asked. “You don’t need it like Jorg does. Just let him have this, okay?”

I couldn’t blame her for siding with him—from an outside perspective, my decision to participate had come completely out of nowhere. I wasn’t about to back down, though. Really, I wanted *him* to let *me* win.

“Sorry. I might not want the beruf certification, but I need that title. Jorg can get his certification whenever as long as he proves himself, but this is my only chance to get the archducal family’s exclusive business. He should be the one letting me win instead.”

Dilla balked in surprise; she hadn’t expected me to argue back. Jorg was just as taken aback, and his face was scrunched up in displeasure.

“Huh? But what for?” Jorg asked. “You’ve got a husband, so it’s not like you need a title to support your family.”

“If you think I’m going to let you win just because of that, you’ve got another thing coming. None of us here are working for fun, you know. We’ve got lives to lead and families to provide for. Not to mention, my husband is a soldier. Something could happen to him at any time. You’re not the only one who wants to win for their family, Jorg.”

I was almost never given the chance to meet with Lady Rozemyne, so I refused to believe I was wrong to strive toward the one opportunity within my reach. I was going to do everything in my power to make it happen.

“Do you think you can beat me...?” Jorg asked.

“I definitely won’t give up without a fight. Besides, I know more about what will suit Lady Rozemyne than you do. I might not know the details of the

competition, since the documents aren't here yet, but this is a new dyeing method. I think I have a chance."

"Why, you..."

Jorg's face began to twist in anger, but Dilla stepped in between us. "Okay, okay. That's enough of that," she said. "I was willing to back you up, Jorg, but that was before I realized that Effa is this determined. She's said her piece and she's not gonna let you win, so quit needlin' her and get to work. The sooner you pick your cloth, the better," she said, waving Jorg away.

The onlooking dyers grinned as Dilla started waving Jorg away. "Yeah, exactly!" one said. "Jorg missed his chance 'cause he was so busy dronin' on about how he's gonna win. It's his own fault, really."

"He wants to start his own workshop, right?" another added. "Surely he's got connections with some weaving workshops."

Jorg shook his head and walked away. "I was just thinking I could save on costs by using cloth from here..." he muttered. Even now, his posture pretty much oozed confidence. He had worked so hard and for so long that he wouldn't be easy to beat. I needed to stay sharp.

My only advantages are my knowledge... and my love.

I didn't know how the new dying method worked, so I decided to focus on selecting red dyes that would suit Myne for the time being. I needed something that would complement her hair, skin, and eyes. Meanwhile, Jorg stuck some old wooden boards and some thread onto a nearby stand and started to attach some cheap white cloth, ready to practice. I hadn't seen anybody prepare to dye cloth like that before, and it was then that I realized—he was using the new method.

"How do you know the new method already, Jorg?" I asked. "Not even the guild received the documents yet."

"Nah, this isn't the new one. It's the old one. There were two, remember. My old man's over sixty, you see. He's been wafting around with one foot in the grave, but he sprang back to life the moment I mentioned the revival of some old technique. He told me all about it. Even pulled out his old tools. Can't say

whether they'll still work, though."

Jorg's father had worked hard in an attempt to secure a beruf certification, but when some high-status noblewoman from a neighboring duchy had married into Ehrenfest, all the techniques he had mastered were rendered useless almost overnight. He was forced to start again from scratch, now focusing on a single-color dyeing method, but he simply couldn't keep up with the new apprentices. In the end, far from getting his beruf certification, he had been forced to renew his lehange contract time and time again. It was an unfortunate cycle that had snuffed out his hopes and dreams.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Using techniques from your dad is a pretty cheap move," Barno complained with a grimace. He was likewise looking to win the title.

"What's wrong with me using all the tools I can get my hands on?" Jorg replied. "I *need* a beruf certification, so I'm gonna do whatever I can to get one. I *will* win this." He spoke so forcefully that I could practically feel Barno shrink back a little. My eyes flitted between them both; everyone had their own motivations here, but that wasn't going to deter me.

Tomorrow's Earthday, which means Tuuli will return home tonight for sure.

And sure enough...

"I'm home, Mom. Big news!" Tuuli exclaimed as she rushed through the front door. It wasn't long after sixth bell. Her green hair was tied in a braid that swayed ever so slightly behind her head, and her chest heaved with each breath.

"Yaaay! Welcome home!" Kamil called out. He rushed out to greet his big sister and then started pouring her some water.

"The workshop is a mess right now with all the news," I said, "but I'm guessing that you and the Gilberta Company know even more than we do."

"Probably. That's why I rushed home. I've never been this impatient for a weekend before," Tuuli said. She thanked Kamil for the water and then moved to help with dinner as we continued our conversation. "Okay. So, this happened

when I went to deliver a hairpin to the temple...”

“Aww, talking about Lady Rozemyne *again*?” Kamil complained. He puffed out his cheeks and glared at Tuuli.

“Making hairpins for Lady Rozemyne is part of my job. If you’re going to complain, I won’t give you the book I brought from her workshop.”

“Ooh! I want the book! I want the book! Thanks, Lady Rozemyne!”

Tuuli was able to silence Kamil with a book printed in the temple. I would normally have scolded him for not helping with dinner, but I decided that he was better preoccupied.

“So?” I asked. “What happened, Tuuli?”

“This new dyeing method is actually something she gave to the Gilberta Company. I know how it works, since she demonstrated it in the temple workshop. Let’s work together so that you can get her exclusive business.”

The next day, on Earthday, Tuuli and I spread out some practice cloth and started thinking about how to dye it. My greatest weapon was all my knowledge of the archduke’s adopted daughter—of Myne. I already knew what her hair and skin were like, and I could learn through Tuuli about the kinds of designs she tended to wear, so I was in a good position to produce something that would really suit her. I needed to use this advantage to its fullest.

“I know what colors will suit Lady Rozemyne the most, but what about the design...?” I mused aloud. “I’ve never drawn something to be dyed before, and I don’t have much of an eye for art.” My main area of expertise was dyeing cloth a single, solid color, so this new method was entirely new to me. I also hadn’t practiced any designs that would properly complement a noble.

“Okay. I’ll draw the outline then. I’ve been practicing art as part of my hairpin and embroidery research,” Tuuli said casually.

I widened my eyes at how much she had grown. At what point had she learned so many skills? She had always been a hard and dedicated worker, though, so it wasn’t too much of a surprise. It had probably only seemed so strange because I wasn’t seeing her anywhere near as often, what with her

moving to live with the Gilberta Company as a leherl. My daughter was growing even more than I had imagined, and now she shone like the sun to me.

“I see. You’ve learned to draw... I’ll leave that part to you, then, Tuuli.”

“I think Lady Rozemyne will want a design like last year’s for the coming winter,” Tuuli said. She went on to tell me about the outfits that Myne was wearing now, including one that Tuuli had based on the baptism clothes I altered so long ago. “Noble fashion is really complicated. I studied a lot and put my all into the design, but even then, only a small part of what I gave them was actually used. There were a lot of really important things that I apparently hadn’t included, and the final design ended up pretty different as a result.”

We had thought the altered clothing looked appropriate for a rich girl, but as it turned out, it wasn’t even close to what actual nobles wore.

“But still, they used some of your design, didn’t they?” I asked. “You just need to adapt a little more in preparation for next time. She told you what they changed, right?”

“More or less. I messed up so much, though. I can’t help but be a little mad at myself...” Tuuli grumbled. She was looking vexed, so I reached out and stroked her hair. As far as I was concerned, she was working harder than anyone could reasonably expect.

“It’s thanks to your hard work that I’m able to know what kind of clothes Lady Rozemyne wears,” I said. “That’s massively helpful in itself. Now, what sorts of patterns would suit those designs? Has she settled on one for her winter hairpin? You can draw them now, can’t you? Please. I’m all ears.”

“Leave it to me,” Tuuli replied. She took out a pen and some paper with a proud smile, and the sound of scratching soon filled the air as she began drawing a rlyzinie. “I was thinking of going with rlyzinies this time. They’ll be perfect for this competition, won’t they? And with how tiny Lady Rozemyne is, a bunch of small, scattered flowers will look cuter on her than a few big ones.”

“Hmm. That would be cute, but shape alone won’t be enough to identify the rlyzinies. I also think a deeper red would suit Lady Rozemyne best,” I said, envisioning the flowers in my head. Tuuli chuckled and said that I was welcome to choose the colors. Rlyzinies were naturally red, but I thought a darker color

would complement Myne even more.

“Mom, Tuuli, why do you talk about such boring things all the time? Hurry up and finish work already...” Kamil whined.

“Sorry, Kamil. This is something I can only talk about with Tuuli here, so...”

“But you’ve been saying the same things over and over!” he moaned. He had a point too; we had been talking about the dyeing competition ever since the evening before when Tuuli came home. I understood why he was so fed up, but we needed to sort all these details out now. I couldn’t afford to wait for the next Earthday.

As I struggled to think of something to say, Gunther walked in and flicked Kamil on the forehead. “Your mother’s tryin’ to get exclusive business with Lady Rozemyne, so don’t get in her way. A real man supports his family when they’re working hard,” he said with a laugh. He then looked at me. “Good luck, Effa. Kamil, how about we go grab something to eat? Whaddaya want? We can go to the food stands.”

“I want a buchlette! One with loads of sausage inside!”

“C’mon, I’m gonna need more than just a buchlette!”

Gunther and Kamil eagerly headed out, chattering about what to eat for lunch all the while. As the door shut behind them, Tuuli looked at me with a smirk.



“So, Mom... Did you get the hots for Dad just now?”

“I suppose...” I replied with a knowing smile. “Just remember, Tuuli—when you get married, make sure you do what I did. Pick someone who loves and supports your dreams.”

Jorg had successfully worked with his dad to revive an old technique, and I could see his dyeing getting better by the day. Still, I couldn’t afford to lose. I spread out a piece of practice cloth, added some wax based on the rlyzinie illustration that Tuuli had drawn, and then tried dyeing it in various ways. I ended up deciding on both the traditional red of a rlyzinie and the darker shade that would complement Myne so well.

I wonder whether I could make the cloth gradually change from one shade to the other...?

If possible, I wanted to change the shade by dyeing it several times as Myne had suggested. I hadn’t seen a demonstration and was relying entirely on the explanation that Tuuli had given me, however, so it wasn’t going to be easy.

“Hmm...” Jorg grumbled, looking at my practice cloth. “So that’s why you said you’d be better at picking cloth for Lady Rozemyne, huh? Your daughter makes her hairpins. You sure have an advantage here.”

“Maybe. But there’s nothing wrong with using every advantage one has, now is there?”

“This is well above anything my old man gave me,” Jorg said. “You’ve had a huge advantage since before this contest even began.”

Barno nodded along and shouted out that it certainly was unfair. Then, more and more people started expressing their agreement.

“I mean, how good of a job you do doesn’t even matter, does it?” Jorg continued. “You’ve just gotta stick your name on whatever piece of cloth is yours and they’ll pick it. That’s exactly the kind of thing a noble would do.”

I struggled to hide my frustration. I couldn’t deny that my extra knowledge put me in a better position than the other dyers, but to say I would win based

on nothing more than Myne recognizing my name was outrageous.

“If my name alone was enough, I wouldn’t be working this hard,” I shot back.

“That doesn’t prove anything. You probably still need to make something half-decent so the cheating’s less obvious,” Barno said.

“Jorg, Barno, that’s enough,” the foreman interjected. “If all this cheating nonsense were true, Effa would have been picked from the start, and nobody else would have been given this new dyeing method. There wouldn’t be any point in holding this big competition.”

As much as I appreciated the assistance, everyone was still sure that I would win based on favoritism alone. My pride as a dyer wouldn’t stand for that; the very thought that they believed I couldn’t win on my own merits had me steaming with anger. I mean, Myne would absolutely pick whichever piece of cloth had my name on it—there was no doubt about that—but that wasn’t how I wanted to win.

“How about this—we label our pieces with numbers rather than names to keep things totally anonymous,” I declared angrily. “We’ll even have people from the Dyeing Guild set everything up. That way, the Gilberta Company merchants can’t stealthily tell any of the nobles who made what. Will that stop all this whining?” I asked, placing my hands on my hips as though I were scolding some rebellious child. My tone was so forceful that Jorg and the others fearfully stepped back.

“What the...? Do you really think you can win with a handicap like that?” Jorg asked. “Once we get the Dyeing Guild involved, there’s no going back. You’ll be stuck with these new rules no matter how much you cry about ’em.”

“You’re all going to be the ones crying. If you still can’t win when my so-called ‘advantage’ is gone, forget about the title. You’ll never even get your beruf certification!” I said with a dismissive sniff.

Jorg exchanged an awkward glance with Barno. “Ngh... Just you wait!” he shouted. “I’ve got my old man’s tech here. I won’t lose!”

“See, Jorg? You’re gettin’ help from your family too,” Dilla said with one eyebrow raised. “Don’t you have just as much of an advantage?”

“Yeah! That’s just as unfair!” Barno said with a disgruntled nod. Once again, the others voiced their agreement as well.

“It doesn’t bother me,” I said with a wave of my hand. “Lady Rozemyne wants to revive the old techniques too, right? There’s nothing she’d want more than for people who know the otherwise forgotten methods to start bringing them back.”

Dilla stared at me in wide-eyed shock, while Jorg looked equally as surprised. “Effa...” Dilla muttered. “You—”

“Really. It’s fine,” I said. “I know my cloth is going to suit Lady Rozemyne better than anyone else’s.”

And so, through the foreman, we petitioned the Dyeing Guild to implement our new rules. Our terms were accepted by the Gilberta Company, and we craftspeople could work knowing that we were going to be judged fairly.

I ignored the loud goings-on around me and focused entirely on dyeing the rlyzinies a pleasant red. They were known to symbolize familial affection, and I dyed them again and again, hoping that Myne would sense my love. As the dark reds turned to warm crimson, the cloth ended up with flowers of varying shades.

Soon enough, everyone laid out their finished cloth, and the Heuss Workshop selected Jorg’s and my work to be sent to the castle. Jorg was praised for reviving his father’s old techniques, while I was praised for adopting the new technique and for having the courage to say that my cloth would suit Lady Rozemyne the best.

In the end, my cloth made it to the final selection process for Lady Rozemyne, and it was ultimately chosen for her new winter outfit. I did not receive the title, however, nor was I given her exclusive business. It seemed that she hadn’t been able to choose one from the final three participants, so she had said that she would make her decision next season.

The foreman, who was rejoicing at the thought of the archducal family asking for our business, patted me on the back and said, “I knew you could do it, Effa!” It was nice to know he had believed in me, but I was more frustrated that I

hadn’t dyed my cloth with enough love for Myne to recognize it was from me.

“They’re ordering from us, sure, but I didn’t get her exclusive business...” I muttered.

“You’re looking at this all wrong,” Jorg said with a grin. He gave me an encouraging slap on the back. “I didn’t think you’d get *any* work without your name to rely on, but here we are. You weren’t all talk after all. Your dyeing technique was clever, and your reds really were something else. You’ll just need to try a little harder next time, yeah?”

“Thanks, Jorg. And you got the beruf certification you wanted so much, right? Congratulations,” I replied, unable to keep my frustrations from showing through my eyes.

Jorg looked down at me and cackled with amusement. “What’s with that expression?” he asked. “You don’t look all that happy for me.”

“I mean, the archducal family selected neither of us for the title, but you got what you were looking for anyway. It’s not fair...” I said. He had gotten his certification for receiving business orders from an archnoble and for his contribution to the revival of an old technique.

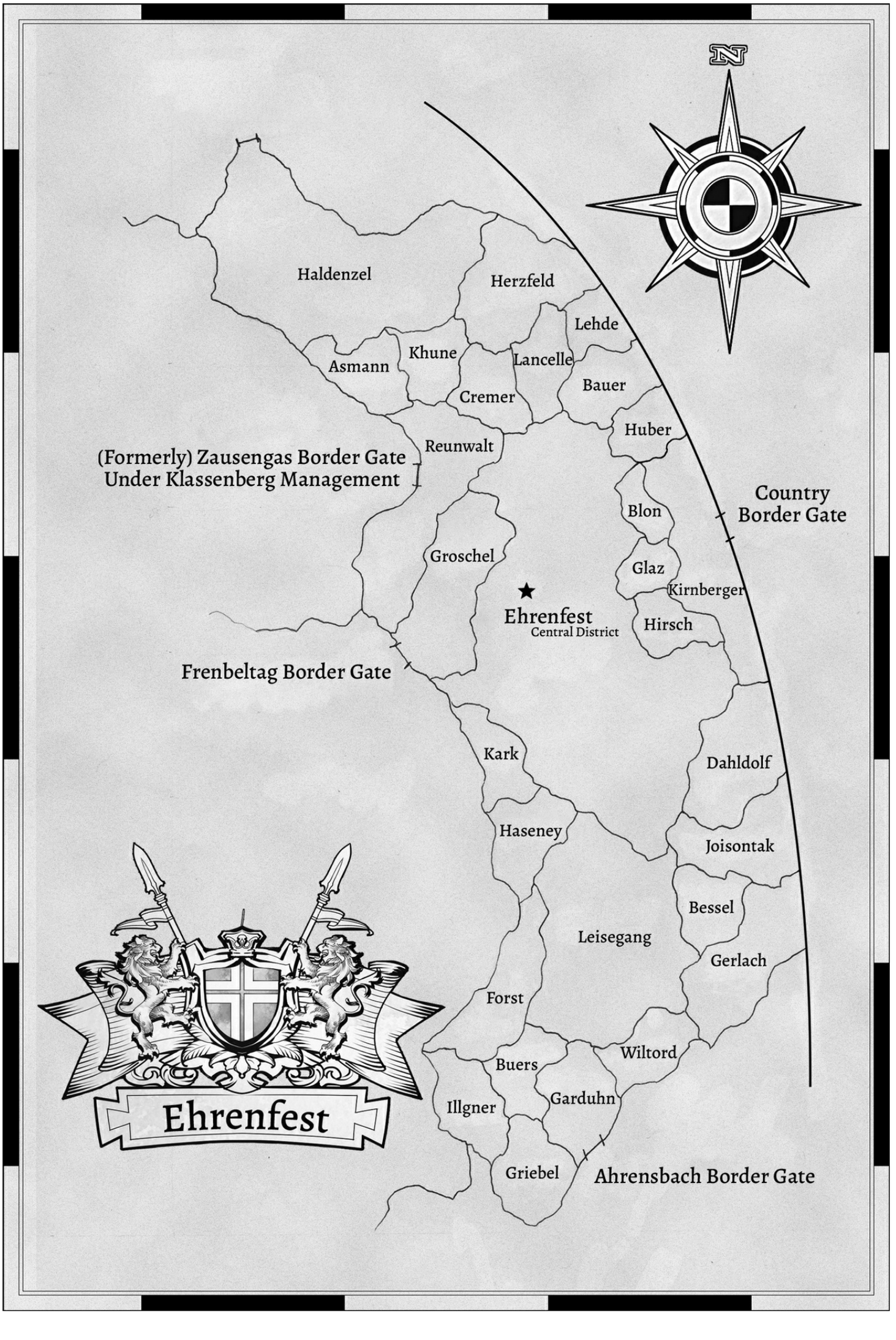
“No helping that. We were aiming for different things. Shouldn’t you just be glad that nobody else was chosen? You’ve got a second chance to make your dream come true. We’ll see if you get it before I manage to set up my own workshop.”

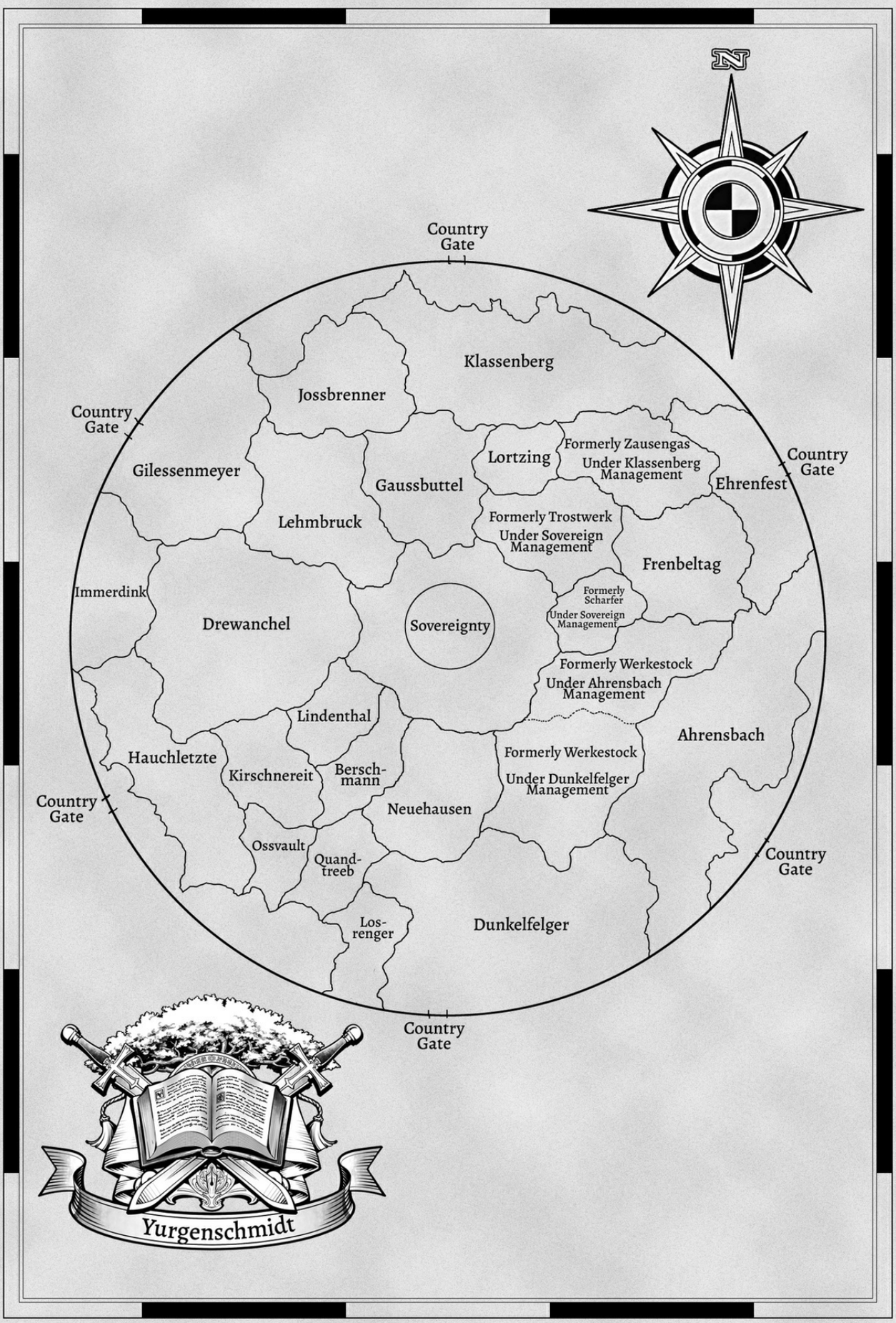
He was right. Things weren’t over yet. I was getting a second chance.

“Yeah,” I said. “Next time for sure.”

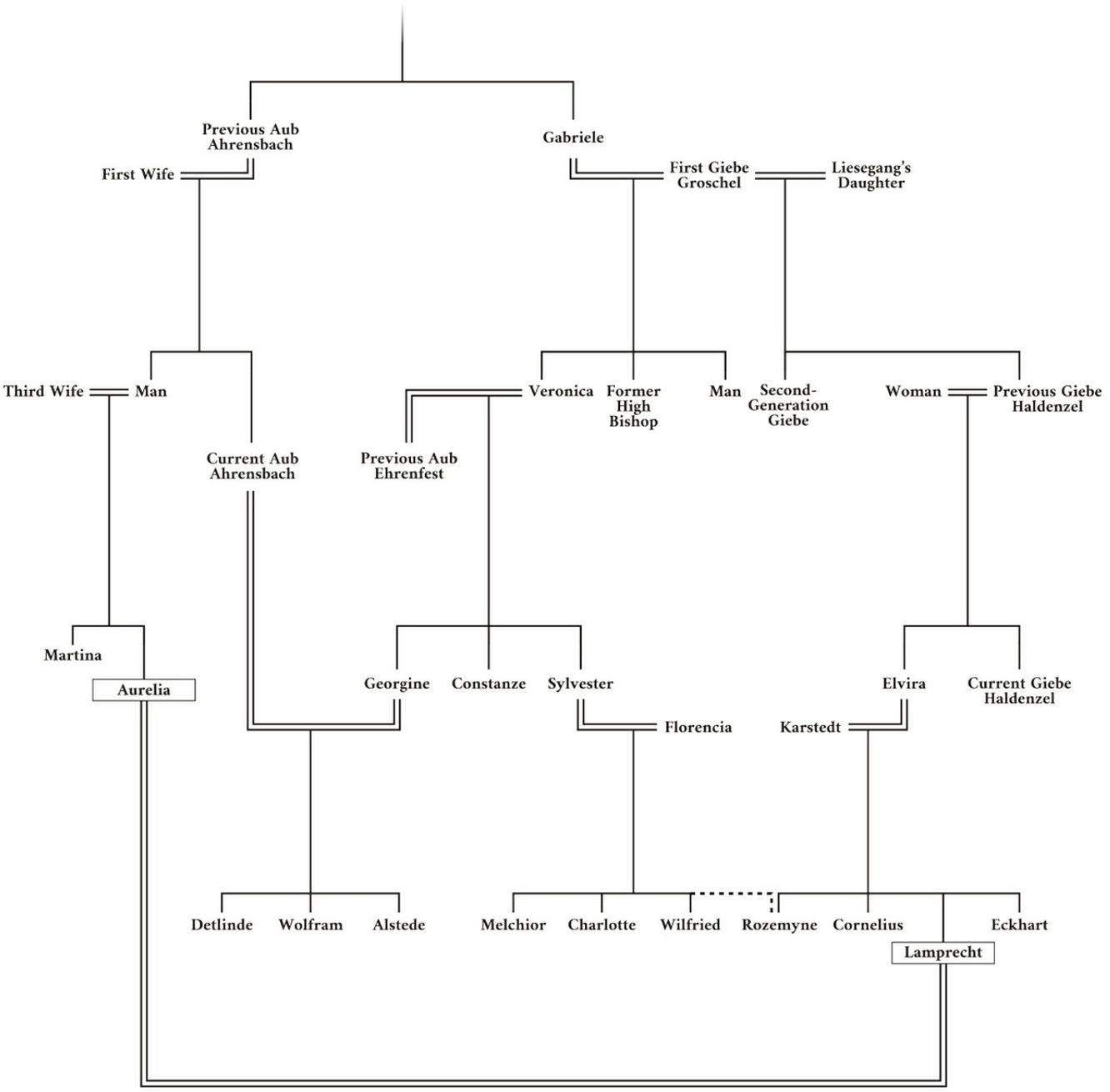
I won’t miss this opportunity again.

The next competition was going to be for spring, which meant the cloth would need to be green. I clenched my fists and turned to the future, wondering how I would go about dyeing this one. The second battle had already begun.


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

Family Tree for Those Involved in This Short Story



※This is a family tree to show Aurelia's relation to Gabriele, so some characters not relevant to this short story are not shown.

Afterword

Hello again, it's Miya Kazuki. Thank you very much for reading *Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 4 Volume 5*.

This volume covers everything from the end of spring in Ehrenfest to the beginning of winter and Rozemyne's second year in the Royal Academy. Lamprecht getting married, Groschel grappling with the printing industry, and the dyeing competition being underway have made things especially busy for Rozemyne. An ambush targeting the gray priests was prevented, and while the wedding seemed to end peacefully, there were some rather ominous overtones...

Groschel presumed that its printing industry was progressing smoothly, but this was far from the case, and the province soon encountered many problems that others did not. As they attempted to resolve things, Rozemyne tried to figure out which submitted piece of cloth belonged to her mother, to no avail.

On the brighter side, Rozemyne was able to rejoice over the fish that Aurelia brought with her from Ahrensbach, and she had fun planning her Rozemyne Library.

And so, Rozemyne's second year at the Royal Academy begins with the coming of winter. Her guardians are no doubt preparing for one intense headache after another as they anticipate the chaos she's going to create.

This volume's prologue was from Matthias's perspective. He is Rozemyne's schoolmate and the son of the former Veronica faction noble Viscount Gerlach, who is probably better described as a member of the Georgine faction within it. I wrote about how the former Veronica faction perceived the brides coming in from Ahrensbach and the ways in which the views of the children clash with those of their parents. In the end, it is thanks to Matthias's habit of overthinking everything that the archducal family manage to avoid a potentially big incident.

The epilogue for this volume was written from the perspective of Hildebrand, the son of the king's third wife. Despite having only recently been baptized and

not having undergone his debut at the Archduke Conference, he is assigned to oversee the Royal Academy as a member of royalty. How exactly do Rozemyne and Charlotte look to an unbiased third party, I wonder...?

Also in this volume are two new short stories, one of which focuses on Aurelia and the other on Effa.

In Aurelia's story, I aimed to describe her situation following the wedding and why she wears the veil. This was my first time writing a conversation between Aurelia and her husband Lamprecht, which was quite refreshing. The bulk of each volume is written from Rozemyne's perspective, and Lamprecht always ends up feeling a little irrelevant due to how little contact she has with him, so hopefully this chapter gave him more of a presence. Although in terms of standing out, I think we can all agree that he's losing to his wife. (Hahaha.)

In Effa's story, I wrote about the dyeing competition from the perspective of the lower city. It was a massive event, and the craftspeople who had to actually dye the cloth underwent a lot to make it happen. Effa wants to perform her role as a lower-city mother by dyeing the cloth used for her daughter's clothes, but the ambitious men in her workshop are just as eager to secure the special title and exclusive business with a member of the archducal family. Her pride and stubbornness as a dyer is something that her family usually never sees, so I hope you found it entertaining.

Matthias and Laurenz, the two apprentice knights of the former Veronica faction, received character designs from Shiina-sama for this volume. You may find them showing up more often from this point forward. There's also Hildebrand, the third prince, who you can tell received an honest upbringing from just a glance, and Aub Ahrensbach, who really has the "older man" look that I envisioned. Of course, there are also Freida and Charlotte, who have now grown up significantly. They're both as cute as I was hoping.

Also, an update: *Bookworm* won first place in the tankobon category of *This Light Novel is Amazing! 2019*, meaning we've won two years in a row! I never thought it would happen, but everyone's votes really helped us out. I can't even begin to describe how happy I am. Thank you all for your support.

In any case, this volume concludes our four back-to-back releases! Did you

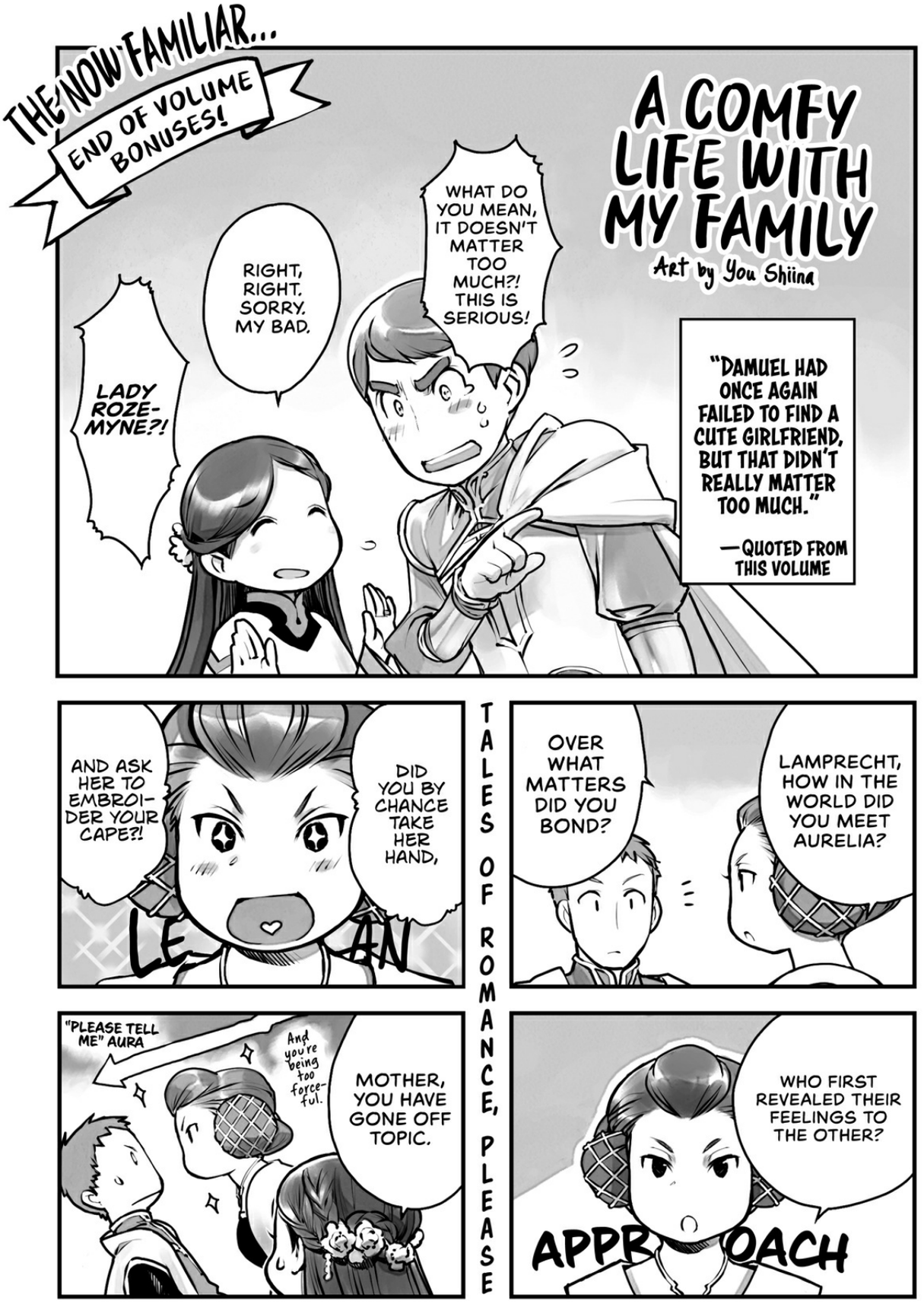
enjoy them? I poured my absolute all into making this happen. There were days when I had no time to write anything due to personal matters, and sometimes I even thought I wouldn't make it all the way to the end. It's a huge relief to be writing this afterword now that the manuscripts are all done.

I am endlessly grateful to my editor, who heroically scheduled this mad dash that I insisted on, and Shiina-sama, who inevitably gets wrapped up in these plans and accepts all the work that gets dumped on her as a result.

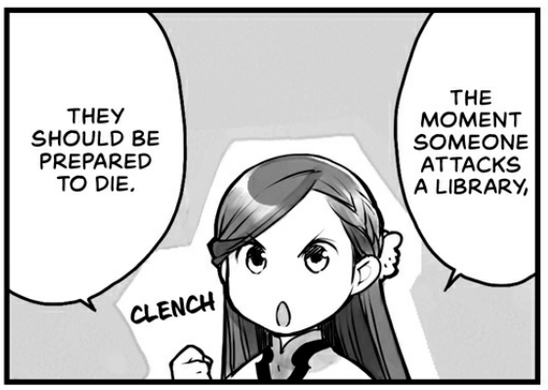
This volume's cover art is based on the dyeing competition, with Effa spreading out the cloth she dyed and Tuuli showing the hairpin she made. And then there's Rozemyne, wearing their lovingly made creations with a big smile on her face. Meanwhile, the color insert has the top dogs of Ehrenfest lining up at Lamprecht's wedding. I really do love how tense they look. Thank you once again, Shiina-sama.

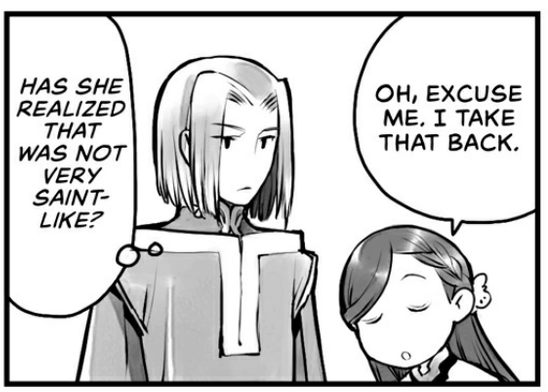
And finally, I offer up my highest thanks to everyone who read this book. May we meet again in Part 4 Volume 6.

October 2018, Miya Kazuki

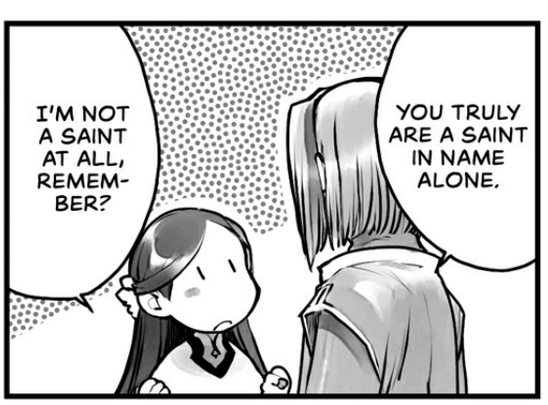

THE NOW FAMILIAR...
END OF VOLUME BONUSES!
A COMFY LIFE WITH MY FAMILY
Art by You Shiina
WHAT DO YOU MEAN, IT DOESN'T MATTER TOO MUCH?! THIS IS SERIOUS!
RIGHT, RIGHT. SORRY. MY BAD.
LADY ROZE-MYNE?!
"DAMUEL HAD ONCE AGAIN FAILED TO FIND A CUTE GIRLFRIEND, BUT THAT DIDN'T REALLY MATTER TOO MUCH."
—QUOTED FROM THIS VOLUME
DID YOU BY CHANCE TAKE HER HAND,
AND ASK HER TO EMBROI-DER YOUR CAPE?!
LE AN
TALES OF ROMANCE, PLEASE
LAMPRECHT, HOW IN THE WORLD DID YOU MEET AURELIA?
OVER WHAT MATTERS DID YOU BOND?
MOTHER, YOU HAVE GONE OFF TOPIC.
And you're being too force-ful.
"PLEASE TELL ME" AURA
WHO FIRST REVEALED THEIR FEELINGS TO THE OTHER?
APPR OACH

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A SAINT

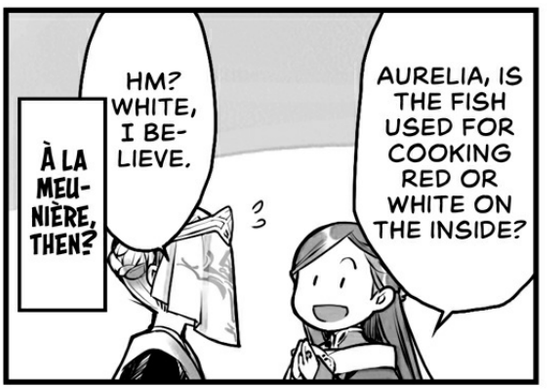


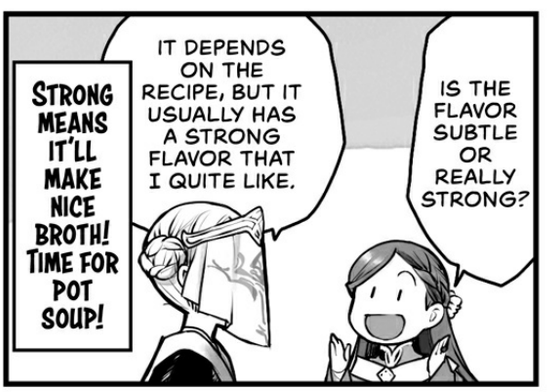


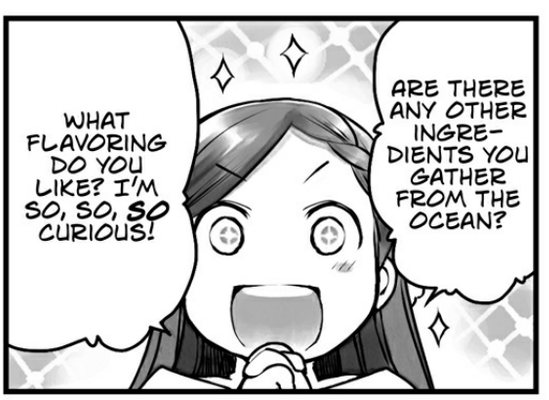


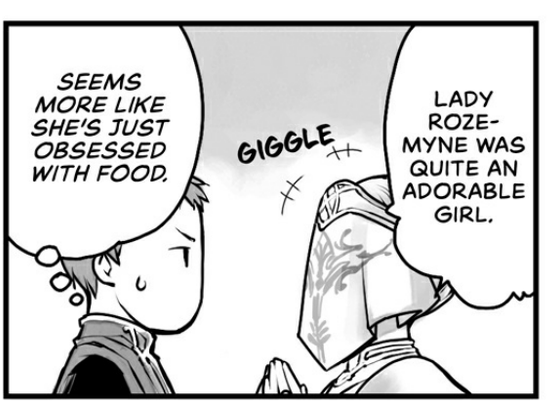


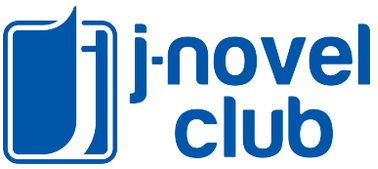
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Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 4 Founder of the Royal Academy's So-Called Library Committee Volume 5

by Miya Kazuki

Translated by quof Edited by Kieran Redgewell

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