
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. 8
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



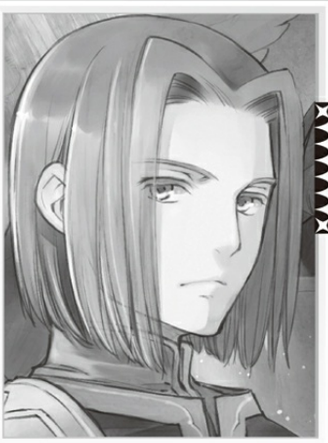
Wilfried

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.



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.



Roderick
A second-year apprentice medscholar. Gave his name.



Philine
A second-year apprentice layscholar.



Leonore
A fifth-year apprentice archknight.



Judithe
A third-year apprentice medknight.



Hartmut
An archscholar. Ottilie's son.

Rozemyne's Retainers



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



Damuel
A layknight.



Angelica
A medknight. Liseleta's older sister.

Ottilie
Hartmut's mother and an archattendant.

Royal Academy

- Hirschur……Ehrenfest's dorm supervisor. Previously taught Ferdinand.
- Solange……The Royal Academy's librarian.
- Schwartz……A library magic tool.
- Weiss……A library magic tool.

Rozemyne's Personnel

- Ella……Personal Chef.
- Hugo……Personal Chef.

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.

Ehrenfest's Nobility

Melchior
·····Sylvester's son and a member of the archducal family.
Sargerecht
·····Melchior's head attendant.
Norbert
·····The archduke's head attendant.
Eckhart
·····Ferdinand's guard knight. Karstedt's son.
Justus
·····Ferdinand's head attendant and scholar. Rihyarda's son.
Lasfam
·····Ferdinand's attendant. A laynoble in charge of his estate.
Lamprecht
·····Wilfried's guard knight. Karstedt's son.
Aurelia
·····Lamprecht's wife.
Traugott
·····A fourth-year apprentice archknight. Rihyarda's grandson.
Nikolaus
·····The son of Karstedt's second wife.
Bertilde
·····Brunhilde's little sister.
Theodore
·····Judithe's younger brother.
Matthias
·····A fourth-year apprentice medknight in the former Veronica faction.
Grausam
·····Giebe Gerlach.
Veronica
·····Sylvester's mother. Currently detained.
Gabriele
·····Veronica's mother. A former member of the Ahrensbach archducal family.
Heidemarie
·····Eckhart's late wife.
Henrik
·····A scholar working in the printing industry. Damuel's older brother.

Nobles Elsewhere

Trauerqual
·····The king of Yurgenschmidt.
Magdalene
·····The king's third wife. Hildebrand's mother.
Sigiswald
·····The Sovereignty's first prince.
Anastasius
·····The Sovereignty's second prince.
Hildebrand
·····The Sovereignty's third prince.
Raublut
·····The Sovereign knight commander.
Eglantine
·····A member of the Klassenberg archducal family.
Sieglinde
·····Dunkelfelger's first wife.
Lestilaut
·····A fifth-year archduke candidate from Dunkelfelger.
Hannelore
·····A second-year archduke candidate from Dunkelfelger.
Clarissa
·····A fifth-year apprentice archscholar from Dunkelfelger.
Heisshitze
·····Ferdinand's (self-proclaimed) ditter comrade.
Redmond
·····Clarissa's father.
Adolphine
·····A member of the Drewanchel archducal family.
Georgine
·····Ahrensbach's first wife. Sylvester's older sister.
Detlinde
·····A fifth-year archduke candidate from Ahrensbach. Georgine's daughter.
Martina
·····A fourth-year apprentice archattendant from Ahrensbach. Aurelia's little sister.
Raimund
·····A third-year apprentice medscholar from Ahrensbach. Hirschur's disciple.
Letizia
·····An archduke candidate from Ahrensbach.
Seltier
·····Georgine's attendant. Grausam's little sister.
Rudiger
·····An archduke candidate from Frenbeltag.

Lower City Family

Gunther·····Myne's dad. Gate commander.
Effa·····Myne's mom. Dyer.
Tuuli·····Myne's older sister. Hairpin craftswoman.
Kamil·····Myne's younger brother.

Lower City Merchants

Benno·····Head of the Plantin Company.
Mark·····Benno's right-hand man.
Damian·····The guildmaster's grandson. Joined the Plantin Company.
Lutz·····A leherl of the Plantin Company.
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.

Gutenbergs

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

Other

Konrad·····Philine's younger brother, now in the temple.
Dirk·····An orphan. Delia's little brother.
Karin·····The daughter of a merchant from Klassenberg.
Leise·····A chef working for the Othmar Company.

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Prologue

“This is Norbert. I have just returned. The archducal couple will be here soon.”

Melchior listened eagerly to the announcement from his father’s head attendant, unable to keep his blue eyes, which he had gotten from his mother, from sparkling with excitement. His older brother and sisters were at the Royal Academy over the winter, and his parents were busy socializing, so no one came to visit him in his room. He barely met with anyone except his retainers and was feeling rather lonely as a result.

“Lord Melchior,” Sargerecht said with a smile, “the archducal couple is due to relax here while their luggage from the Royal Academy is put away. Recall what you have recently learned and welcome them as guests.” He was Florencia’s retainer at the moment, but he was also Melchior’s tutor and planned to become his head attendant following the young boy’s baptism. It seemed that Melchior would need to practice his socializing now.

“I’ll do my best,” Melchior replied with a nod, trying his very best to remember everything he had been taught.

“Melchior, we’re back,” Sylvester said.

“Father, Mother. Welcome home. Allow me to take you to your seats,” Melchior replied, greeting them with a half-excited, half-anxious smile. He hadn’t seen his parents in days, so it was with a tense feeling in his chest that he guided them to where the tea was being prepared. “I want to hear about the Royal Academy. How are my brother and sisters doing?”

Melchior quickly surrendered control of the conversation to his guests, as his tutor had taught him was proper. His parents returned warm smiles filled with love; it seemed they could sense his growth through the way he was tracing the steps of standard socializing.

“Well, well... How should we begin?” Sylvester wondered aloud. “There’s just

so much to talk about."

"Before you left, Aub Ehrenfest, you were greatly concerned about socializing at the Interduchy Tournament. Lord Melchior has shared in your worry ever since," Sargerecht said while he poured some tea. His addition to the conversation was a deliberate effort to assist the young boy, who had subsequently realized that he had spoken too vaguely. He had thus far been told to ask broad questions that were easier to answer, but the subtle look he was now receiving from his tutor made him realize that some direction was still needed.

"I see," Sylvester replied. "We'll talk about our socializing at the Interduchy Tournament, then."

Melchior's parents began talking about the events of the Interduchy Tournament and graduation ceremony. Ehrenfest had received so many guests that the archducal family had needed to divide themselves into teams to handle them, but even then, the abundance of visitors from top-ranking duchies had made things a struggle. They also mentioned Ferdinand playing ditter against a knight from Dunkelfelger over Rozemyne's manuscript, and the unexpected appearance of an unfamiliar feybeast—during which the apprentice knights were said to have acted with extraordinary coordination. Melchior listened intently all the while, his imagination racing from the tales of this wondrous place he had never visited.

"Wilfried and Charlotte handled the visitors from lower-ranking duchies," Sylvester continued. "We even had the archducal couple from Frenbeltag as guests."

"Frenbeltag is next to Ehrenfest and is where you and Sargerecht were born, right, Mother?" Melchior asked, trying to picture the map in his head. The two of them smiled and nodded in response.

"Indeed," Florencia said. "My elder brother and Sylvester's elder sister visited, it seems. This year's graduation ceremony was apparently quite emotional for them, as your cousin Rudiger was among the graduating students."

"My... cousin?"

"You shall find out more about your family in other duchies after your

baptism, but this is a good opportunity to get a head start," Florencia noted. She explained that they had family in both Frenbeltag and Ahrensbach, and although the names were all so new to him, simply knowing that they shared his blood made him feel closer to them than he did to any of the nobles he had learned about for his baptism ceremony.

"Mother, why can I only learn about my family in other duchies after my baptism?"

"Because you will not have any opportunities to meet them before then," Florencia explained.

Melchior realized then just how small his world really was. He glanced at the door to his room, and it immediately occurred to him just how little he knew about everything beyond it. There was so much out there for him to see and to learn from.

"Lady Florencia, how was Frenbeltag? Have things, uh, calmed down somewhat?" Sargerecht asked, sounding rather hesitant. He was one of the nobles who had fled to Ehrenfest when it became clear that Frenbeltag was going to be on the losing side of the civil war, but he still wanted to know about his birthplace. Melchior remembered him once saying that he wanted to tell those from Frenbeltag that Ehrenfest was increasing its harvest by having archduke candidates perform religious ceremonies.

"Wilfried and Charlotte spoke to them in our place, but according to their report, Rudiger traveled across their duchy performing Spring Prayer," Florencia continued. "Their harvest improved as a result, and they have said that henceforth, their archducal family will always take action to lead religious ceremonies."

"For young Lord Rudiger to be doing such a thing... Children truly do grow shockingly fast, don't they?" Sargerecht said with a relieved sigh and a sentimental smile.

"Yep. They sure do," Sylvester replied with a chuckle. He then looked over at Melchior. "How about you tell us how much *you've* grown?"

"How have you been passing the time?" Florencia added. "Have your baptismal studies been going well?"

Melchior faltered. He was pretty sure he had finished everything he needed to do before his baptism ceremony, but he looked to Sargerecht for confirmation nonetheless.

“They have,” Sargerecht said with a nod and a smile. “Yesterday, Lord Melchior studied the general flow of the ceremony and the proper way to walk through the grand hall. He already knows the names of all the important nobles who will greet him, and the other day, he began studying geography so that he may assist with religious ceremonies.”

“Then I have a gift for our little hard worker,” Sylvester said as he opened up a small box. “Practice returning blessings before the baptism.”

“This is...”

“Your ring. You’ll need some practice before you can shoot mana from it. I’ll need to take it back so that I can formally present it to you on the day of, but for now... Hold out your hand.”

Such rings served as proof that one was a noble, and children received them from their parents after being baptized. Melchior observed that the feystone was green, matching the divine color of his birth, and after climbing down from his chair, he readily held out his hand. Sylvester slid the ring on his son’s finger, and the band shrank until it was a perfect fit. Melchior stroked it, feeling the bliss of having been accepted as a noble.

“Melchior, why not practice giving a return blessing?” Florencia suggested. “It is the same blessing as the one given when greeting someone of a higher status for the first time. All nobles must learn it. Focus energy in your left hand, so as to guide your mana to the ring.” She proceeded to demonstrate, and a red light emerged from her ring.

Melchior tensed his left hand, trying to imitate his mother... but his mana refused to move as he willed it, and the feystone in his ring shone only a small amount. The tool used to investigate mana capacities worked without issue, since it automatically drew from one’s latent mana, but return blessings didn’t seem so simple.

“I may not manage this before my baptism ceremony...” Melchior mumbled nervously without thinking.

Florencia gave a gentle smile and took Melchior's left hand in hers. "I am fully certain you will master this. All you need is a little practice. Thankfully, this can very easily be done with another of the same blood, so allow me to take this opportunity..."

All of a sudden, Melchior felt an odd power seep from his mother's hand into his. It wasn't a vile sensation by any means, but it was rather uncomfortable, so he instinctively pushed the mana out again. And in that instant, a soft green light appeared from his ring.

"Ah!" Melchior exclaimed.

"Do you now understand the feeling of mana moving through you?" Florencia asked.

"A bit..."

Melchior looked down at his hand. He still found it strange that he could move something within his body by his own will, and he wasn't yet confident that it was something he could manage on his own. It was true that he had transported some of the mana in his palm to the ring... but only with a great deal of assistance from his mother, who had made it so he only had to reactively push out her mana.

"Wilfried said that my sister Rozemyne gave a blessing that filled the entire hall at her baptism ceremony," Melchior said. "How much mana do I need to move to be able to do that? Charlotte told me that I should see Rozemyne as a role model."

Sylvester looked somewhat bemused for a moment and then waved a hand dismissively. "Don't try to match Rozemyne; she's a special case. The thing is, she was giving blessings and helping with religious ceremonies in the temple as an apprentice shrine maiden before her baptism."

Don't try to match her? But Charlotte said...

Melchior had received two pieces of conflicting advice. Perhaps this was his father's way of saying that he simply wasn't good enough? A wave of confusion washed over him, but it soon faded when he felt his mother's hand calmly stroke his hand.

“Sylvester does not mean to say that it is wrong to have Rozemyne as a role model,” Florencia said. “He is simply concerned that you might overexert yourself when trying to control mana for the first time. It puts a great burden on your body when you are not used to it.”

She went on to explain that Wilfried and Charlotte had overdone it with their mana practice during Rozemyne’s two-year slumber, hoping to fill the void that her unexpected absence had created. Melchior had already heard them both explain how amazing Rozemyne was and that they had worked so hard to catch up to her, but he had never heard about them making mistakes. It was new—and very interesting—information.

So, Wilfried and Charlotte mess up sometimes too...

“You need only practice within your limits,” Florencia concluded, “and slowly increase your range of abilities from there.”

“Yes, Mother.”

“Melchior,” Sylvester interjected, sounding curious, “you’ve never met Rozemyne before, but you sure seem to respect her, don’t you?”

Melchior gazed up at his father quizzically. “Charlotte comes to play with me the most, and she always tells me how incredible Rozemyne is. And when Wilfried comes, he always brings toys and picture books that Rozemyne made. You and Mother talk about her sweets and recipes too, don’t you? She also saved Frenbeltag, which Sargerecht was so worried about.”

In short, everyone praised Rozemyne on such a regular basis that Melchior thought it was obvious that he should respect and idolize her.

“Also, I’m going to be supporting her and my brother, right?” Melchior continued. “He’s the future aub, and she’s going to be his first wife. I want to be strong enough to protect them both.” He would one day be playing a supporting role to the archducal couple, filling in for them while they were absent, keeping an eye on duchy matters, and ensuring the nobles were organized—essentially what Bonifatius was doing now.

“Your enthusiasm is wonderful, Melchior, but Rozemyne’s protection is best left to her guard knights,” Florencia said.

Sylvester nodded in agreement. “The archducal couple will have guard knights to keep them safe, but the same can’t be said for other nobles. Wouldn’t you find it cooler and manlier to protect a bunch of people at once?”

“A bunch of people?” Melchior repeated. He was unsure what his father meant and could only look at him in confusion.

Father is being weird again...

“Right,” Sylvester said. “There was an attack during this year’s awards ceremony, but Rozemyne was able to protect our duchy’s students with Schutzaria’s shield.”

During this attack, unfamiliar feybeasts had appeared that could only be killed with black weapons. The arena had promptly been thrown into total chaos, and it was only because of Rozemyne that Ehrenfest had managed to come out unscathed. The divine instruments that Melchior had thought existed only in books were real, and she had effortlessly used them to protect the students. It was like a legendary story from the bible, and just hearing it made him excited.

Melchior rushed to grab his own picture-book bible, opened it up to the page with the Goddess of Wind, and pointed to her shield. “Father, is this the shield that Rozemyne used?”

Sylvester shook his head and explained that Rozemyne had made one that was even bigger—big enough to protect all the students. It had apparently been an amber hemisphere with a magic circle on it, and anyone who attacked it or had malicious intentions was thrown back by an intense gust of wind. Again, it was like a legend come to life, and Melchior’s idolization of Rozemyne only grew stronger.

“Father, can anyone make Schutzaria’s shield?”

“Nah; I reckon Rozemyne and Ferdinand are the only ones. Ferdinand is more used to the geteilt he was taught in the Royal Academy before entering the temple, but I’ve heard that he can make Schutzaria’s shield when he focuses.”

So, only Rozemyne and Ferdinand—the High Bishop and the High Priest, respectively—could make the shield. Melchior immediately drew a connection between working at the temple and receiving the divine instruments for the

gods.

The temple sure is amazing...

"Father, I want to go to the temple too!" Melchior announced. "I want to learn to make the divine instruments!"

"Lord Melchior, what are you saying?!" his attendants cried. "Please calm down!"

Melchior reflected on his choice of words; maybe he had spoken too crudely. He looked at his parents. Florencia was giving him a concerned smile, while Sylvester had an eyebrow raised in amusement.

"Father, Mother, can I have permission to go to the temple?"

"Sure," Sylvester replied at once. "You'll learn a lot from the experience."

Melchior's attendants, however, continued to protest. "Please reconsider, Aub Ehrenfest!" they cried. They were at something of an impasse, and when a decision couldn't be reached concerning how to raise Melchior, it was down to Florencia to give the final verdict as his mother. All eyes fell on her.

"Sylvester," she said with a smile, "you must not give your permission so willingly."

Melchior was overcome with disappointment; he knew that his mother's opinion was stronger than his father's at times like this. "But why do you, Sargerecht, and the others not like going to the temple?" he asked. "Don't my siblings go there?"

Wilfried and Charlotte were Melchior's closest family members, and they had been participating in religious ceremonies since he was first gaining self-awareness. Rozemyne and Ferdinand were also in the archducal family, and they led the temple. Everyone praised them, so Melchior had to wonder why he wasn't allowed to go there too.

"The Haldenzel Miracle taught nobles the importance of religious ceremonies, and news of Frenbeltag's improved harvest has probably spread that same message to other duchies as well," Sylvester said to Florencia. "But most importantly, Melchior will one day be participating in those religious

ceremonies too, once he learns to control his mana like Wilfried and Charlotte did."

"Right!" Melchior replied. "I'm going to help just like Wilfried and Charlotte!" He eagerly showed her the picture book again, but she just looked at him as though he were a rebellious child.

"It should be best for him to get used to the temple sooner rather than later," Sylvester argued. "Giving him permission now shouldn't cause any problems. It's going to happen sooner or later either way."

"Sooner or later, indeed," Florencia replied, "but I stand very firmly for the latter. Melchior will only trouble Rozemyne and the others with his current mindset—that the temple is like a game of sorts. At the very least, we should not grant him permission until after he has learned to control his mana and recite prayers."

It was reasoning that both Melchior and Sylvester could agree with. Melchior didn't want to get in anyone's way; he just wanted to join his siblings after being baptized. He wanted to be a useful member of the archducal family, like his sister Charlotte had always encouraged.

"I'll learn the prayers, then," Melchior said.

"That's the spirit!" Sylvester replied. "I'm pretty sure Wilfried and Charlotte received a bunch of instructional boards from Ferdinand when they were learning them themselves. You can borrow those."

"Okay!"

"Lady Florencia, are you certain about this...?" the attendants asked reproachfully. Melchior was still rejoicing at the news, so he failed to understand why they appeared to be so against it.

Florencia looked over the attendants, then spoke in a calm tone. "Lady Rozemyne becoming the High Bishop and Lord Ferdinand continuing to serve as the High Priest even after his return to noble society have led to their retainers visiting the temple on a daily basis. We are no longer in the past; the temple's reputation is gradually changing for the better. I imagine that you will not find it easy to change your perspectives, but please try to accept this."

“Understood.”

Melchior didn’t know what the temple had been like in the past, but he could tell from Florencia’s words that Rozemyne had caused this change for the better.

I want to meet my sister Rozemyne soon. I wonder... Can I invite her to a tea party?

Charlotte had spoken about having a tea party with Rozemyne before being baptized; maybe she would introduce him if asked. It was with this hope in mind that Melchior waited for his siblings to return, his heart filled with admiration.

The Return and a Dinner Meeting

One had to use a teleportation circle to get from the Royal Academy back to one's duchy. I squeezed my eyes shut as I tried to endure the nauseating swirling of the world around me.

"Welcome home, Rozemyne!" Bonifatius roared. My eyes were still closed, but hearing his familiar voice was enough to tell me that I was back in Ehrenfest.

"Stop right there, Father."

"Don't move, Master."

I opened my eyes to see Karstedt and Angelica standing on either side of my grandfather, positively glowering at him as he tried to welcome me with a smile. I adopted a defensive stance on instinct, recalling the incident last year when Bonifatius had very nearly launched me through the ceiling in excitement.

"Stand aside, you lot!" Bonifatius ordered. "Why should I contain my love when my granddaughter has come first-in-class two years in a row?!"

"Because she will die otherwise, Father," Karstedt said. My guard knights agreed, and with everyone against him, Bonifatius ultimately slumped his shoulders in defeat. I appreciated that he was so eager to praise my achievements, but avoiding a split skull was a lot more important to me.

"Grandfather, open your hand," I said. He did as instructed, at which point I gripped his index and middle fingers. I would have liked to hold his hand properly, but my own hands were nowhere near big enough. "We can walk to my room like this. Now, let's go all the way to the northern building together."

"V-Very well."

"Master, don't squeeze your hand, no matter what," Angelica warned.

"If you do, Lady Rozemyne's fingers might break right off," Damuel said.

As the guard knights watched on fearfully, I completed the impressive task of

getting all the way to the northern building while holding hands with Bonifatius.

“May we meet again at dinner,” I said to Bonifatius, seeing him off once we had arrived at my room. I then introduced my new retainer to those who had stayed at the castle during my term at the Academy. “This is Roderick, an apprentice scholar who gave me his name. He will be living in the knight dormitory as my retainer from this point on. Damuel, please take him there at once. I have discussed the matter with Aub Ehrenfest, so a room should already be prepared for him.”

“Understood.”

“Roderick, ask Hartmut and Philine about your scholar work,” I said. Everyone was going to be busy putting away their luggage from the Royal Academy, so my underage retainers would only begin their work in practice starting tomorrow.

“Tea is ready, Lady Rozemyne, so might I suggest moving to the tea party room?” Ottilie said. “Your siblings are there waiting for you.” It seemed that she had prepared drinks for us and our attendants, so that we could while away the time until our retainers finished putting away our luggage.

And so, Angelica and Ottilie brought me to the main building’s tea party room, where I found Wilfried and Charlotte already sipping tea.

“Melchior’s room was prepared while we were at the Royal Academy,” Wilfried said. Children of the archduke lived in the northern building from their baptism until their coming of age. Similarly to the Royal Academy’s dormitories, the top floor was reserved for the girls and the one below for the boys. Wilfried was glad to have Melchior there now, since he had previously been all alone.

Charlotte nodded with a smile. “Melchior did say that he wished to join us in the northern building as soon as possible.”

Apparently, all of the necessary preparations had been completed much earlier than usual. I was Melchior’s adoptive sister and wasn’t related to him by blood, so I couldn’t go to the room in the main building where he lived. The only times I saw him were when he was brought to the dining room to say his good nights, but we never spoke or socialized.

One thing I noticed about Melchior was how similar he was to Florencia, both in how he looked and acted. His hair was also the same purplish blue as Sylvester's, which made him look more like his father than Wilfried did. That said, I couldn't see Melchior as being a mini Sylvester as I remembered thinking about Wilfried. It was strange.

"That reminds me," I said. "Sylvester mentioned that Melchior's baptism is going to be held alongside the feast celebrating spring."

"That's right," Wilfried replied. "Melchior was born in spring. So was I, for that matter, and mine was done at the feast too. I remember that Grandmother actually..." His nostalgic musings were cut short when he suddenly caught my eye.

Hoping to break the awkward silence, I shifted the subject back to Melchior's baptism ceremony. "I am going to be blessing him as the High Bishop, much like how I blessed you at your baptism ceremony, Charlotte."

"Melchior will surely rejoice at that," Charlotte replied. "Your smile gave me strength while I was on the stage."

As we waited for our retainers to summon us, Charlotte told me all about how Melchior's room had been decorated. I truly couldn't wait to meet him.

It had become normal for Ferdinand and Bonifatius to eat dinner with us on the day we returned to Ehrenfest. I was sitting beside Bonifatius, as usual, and together we discussed the Interduchy Tournament, the ditter game against Dunkelfelger, the attack during the awards ceremony, and Cornelius's sword dance. Thinking back, a lot had happened in such a short time.

"The apprentice knights asked you for a blessing even though black weapons are forbidden?!" Bonifatius asked, barely managing to contain his outrage. "Did they intend to have their own archduke candidate charged with a crime?! It seems they've forgotten whom they're supposed to protect! They may be getting better at ditter, but they clearly know nothing about being a knight!" Then, in an instant, his expression turned gravely serious. "Hm... Perhaps I should go to the Interduchy Tournament next year instead of Ferdinand."

Ferdinand scoffed. "Now that is a suggestion I truly can appreciate. Violence is

not my forte.”

You liar. It absolutely is!

Putting that aside, there were a lot of things that Ferdinand assisted with during the Interduchy Tournament and graduation ceremony, so in truth, I wanted him to come next year as well.

“Good, good. That settles it, then,” Bonifatius said, nodding. “I’m going next year. You’ll be safe no matter what happens, Rozemyne.”

“But who’ll serve as Rozemyne’s doctor if you’re not there, Uncle?” Wilfried asked, desperately trying to prevent the impending catastrophe. Sylvester nodded in grave agreement, and of course, I shared their opinion. Nobody understood my health better than Ferdinand, and the Interduchy Tournament was so busy that I needed someone to look after me and make sure I didn’t violate any scary socializing rules. All that was presumably too much to suddenly lump on Bonifatius.

“As I will no longer be attending the Interduchy Tournament, Rozemyne, we will need to lock you in the dormitory with Bonifatius,” Ferdinand said. “This is your fate, and you must accept it.”

Sylvester raised an eyebrow at this remark. “Weren’t *you* the one who said it would be a shame to make Rozemyne give up on going to the Interduchy Tournament?”

“At such times, one must choose the lesser of two evils.”

Ferdinand had been acting strangely ever since his conversation with the Sovereign knight commander in the library. Out of nowhere, he had started trying to evade the Royal Academy entirely—as was abundantly clear in our current conversation.

Seriously, what does “Adalgisa” even mean?

I was really curious, but with how on edge Ferdinand seemed, I could guess that it wasn’t a subject I should broach so suddenly. For now, I needed to allow the whole affair to wash over me and simply keep an eye on him.

“Let us instead think of the upcoming Spring Prayer,” I said. “We can discuss

the Interduchy Tournament next year when it becomes relevant. By then, I might have even grown enough to be able to manage my health without Ferdinand."

"Impossible," Ferdinand replied tersely.

Are you being serious?! I'm trying to be considerate here!

Holding back the urge to growl at him, I continued talking about Spring Prayer; I needed to prepare for the lengthy journey it entailed and plan things out with Wilfried and Charlotte. Now was a convenient time for that, since Ferdinand was here too. I asked Sylvester which new province had been chosen to join the printing industry and started planning who would go where, with consideration for the Gutenbergs.

"Father, will Melchior be joining us for Spring Prayer?" Wilfried asked.

"Nah," Sylvester replied. "He can't control his mana yet. I can't imagine he's going to be helping out until next year."

My sudden absence after the kidnapping incident meant that Charlotte had needed to learn to control her mana over winter socializing in preparation for Spring Prayer. Melchior wasn't under such time constraints, so we settled on him joining for the first time next year.

"By the way, did you find anything on how to make the stages for the Spring Prayer ceremonies?" I asked Sylvester.

"Unfortunately not," he replied. "I'll continue my search, but it won't be easy." Apparently, Ferdinand was going to be taking a group of scholars to Haldenzel this year to research the magic circle and ceremonial stage.

"I must return to the temple," I said. "I need my ceremonial clothes and other little things."

Sylvester shook his head. "You can leave that to your attendants. Just why do you think I've given your retainers permission to go to the temple?"

I clapped my hands together in realization, having not considered that at all. It hadn't even crossed my mind that I could leave temple matters to castle attendants.

“I plan to have Justus go to the temple, so you may have an attendant of yours accompany him,” Ferdinand said. “I will contact Fran via magic letter and tell him to prepare.”

“Thank you.”

Thoughts about the temple soon led to thoughts of the lower city, and with that in mind... “Sylvester, when will the Plantin Company books be sold?” I asked.

“Speak with Moritz and the attendants in the playroom to figure things out.”

“Understood. I was also wondering—when will the mana compression lesson be? Charlotte is due to attend this year, and I have a new retainer. Have all of the participants been decided already?”

“Yep. The invitations should have been sent out.”

I ensured that Roderick and Philine were added to the list of participants. Philine’s contract needed to be changed from a duchy to a country one.

“So, when do you plan to sell the information gathered at the Royal Academy to our offices?” Sylvester asked. “We want it done as soon as you’re ready.”

“I would appreciate having two days to plan with the scholars first.”

“Consider it done. I’ll contact the offices and send word once we’ve settled on a date.”

Sylvester and I started constructing a general idea of what needed to be done while the nobles were still in the Noble’s Quarter. It was better for us to do all this in person, as conversing through letters would take far too much time, and we would no doubt miss the spring feast otherwise.

“Rozemyne,” Ferdinand said. I turned and saw that his eyes were fixed on me, while his index finger rhythmically tapped against his temple. “Have Wilfried and Charlotte accompany you when you are selling the intelligence gathered at the Royal Academy.”

“Why?” I asked. Planning to include them next year seemed reasonable enough, but their lack of involvement thus far meant they would only struggle to keep up if they decided to join us any sooner.

Ferdinand sighed. “You made it clear from the very beginning that your only intention is to gather stories from other duchies, no? It was just an accident that information from other duchies has started flowing in as well. However, that intelligence is of great value to our offices, and they now await it urgently. Selling it should not be done without Wilfried present as the next archduke.”

Wilfried reacted the most to this news—his head shot up, indicating that he was now on full alert. If the heads of the offices Ferdinand was talking about only saw me at the yearly meeting where information was sold, they would start placing more importance on me than any other archduke candidate.

“Furthermore, as the contracts have been modified, and the archduke is leading the printing industry, it is now the business of the duchy to gather stories to make into books,” Ferdinand continued. “This cannot be done on your budget alone.”

To me, it still seemed as though the printing industry existed primarily to suit my hobbies, but now that there were official contracts, everything was being done on Ehrenfest’s budget.

“You should also give some of your current workload to those serving Wilfried and Charlotte,” Ferdinand said. “It is excellent how much your retainers have grown to keep up with the enormous burden you increasingly bring upon yourself, but their superiority to other retainers is becoming more and more apparent.”

They’re growing so much because you keep having them do work at the temple...

As I protested on the inside, Ferdinand spoke again, this time in a hushed voice that only I could hear. “You will be the first wife, not the aub. Do not stand out so much.” Apparently, his intention here was to remind me that I needed to prop up Wilfried rather than myself.

“I am gathering stories and progressing the printing industry because I want to,” I said, “so I wouldn’t feel right about giving work to Wilfried and Charlotte despite them not being my subordinates. Oh... But since you’re the one who trained my retainers, perhaps you are suggesting I do the same and give their retainers tasks to complete?”

Although I'm pretty sure that isn't my job...

"How many times must I tell you not to bring more work upon yourself...? They may train their own retainers. My point is that printing is not your job alone, and that you should take care to share important information."

It seemed a little hypocritical for the secretive workaholic Ferdinand to be telling me to share my workload and my intelligence, but I couldn't deny that he was always propping up the archduke. I went ahead and nodded, although I wasn't entirely convinced.

The next day, I summoned Charlotte, Wilfried, and their retainers as instructed, then began outlining the information we had obtained at the Royal Academy. "Charlotte, please handle these calculations. Wilfried, please organize all of this information onto a single sheet."

Having to teach everyone their new jobs didn't actually increase my workload, since I needed to show the newbie Roderick what to do anyway. I ensured the information was ready to be sold to the offices while at the same time getting Philine to see how much ink and paper we had used so that she could calculate the total amount of money we had spent.

I observed everyone's progress and saw that Wilfried and Charlotte were staying up to date with their retainers while working alongside them. Things were progressing much slower than planned, though—it took three people trying their hardest, their brows furrowed in concentration, to manage what Hartmut could easily finish on his own.

Just as Ferdinand said, my retainers are so much more skilled... But how exactly can we fix this? I couldn't think of a way to remedy the situation without getting involved myself.

Once the information was organized and spread, I asked Wilfried and Charlotte to attend the meetings with the higher-ups of the offices. We needed to make the intelligence look valuable, squeeze money out of our interested parties, and distribute the earnings to those who had provided the information in the first place.

"You managed all this last year, when you had just been unwell for so long?"

Wilfried asked, looking exasperated.

“I understand why Uncle wishes to reduce your workload,” Charlotte added. “You may rely on us a little bit more, if you wish.”

“I thank you ever so much, Charlotte.” Her kind words brought a smile to my face.

Wilfried nodded in agreement with our sister. “We’re engaged, but I didn’t know about any of this,” he said. “In the future, could you call me when you’re talking about work with Father?”

“Of course,” I said. “I will do so next time.”

After finishing the mana compression class, Roderick desperately started trying the process for himself, pushing through all the mana sickness-induced nausea he was no doubt feeling. It was during that time that his father requested a meeting with me, since Roderick had yet to return home and news about him becoming my retainer had spread during winter socializing.

Of course, I refused the request for a meeting. Sylvester would settle the matter instead.

The Winter Playroom and Judithe's Younger Brother

"I shall be going to the winter playroom today," I said. "I must advertise the Plantin Company, and Rihyarda has instructed me to seek out potential retainers among the younger students."

"In that case, might I introduce my little sister?" Brunhilde asked. "Naturally, it is up to you to decide whether you will accept her, but considering her as a replacement apprentice archattendant for when I graduate does seem wise."

Brunhilde explained that she had wanted to introduce her sister to me last year but had decided against it, since I wasn't even used to my own retainers at the time. However, as I socialized with both greater duchies and royalty at the Royal Academy, I absolutely needed at least one apprentice archattendant there with me.

"Please do," I said.

"Lady Rozemyne, can I introduce my little brother too, then?" Judithe asked, her violet eyes sparkling with anticipation. It reminded me that she was the oldest of all her siblings and that she had mentioned having to work hard for their sake.

I gave her a nod, smiling.

Upon our arrival at the playroom, both Brunhilde and Judithe called over their siblings. An adorable little girl was the first to come over, and she cried out "Sister!" with the brightest smile.

"Lady Rozemyne, allow me to introduce you," Brunhilde said. "This is my little sister, Bertilde."

Bertilde was like a mini Brunhilde. The children in the playroom had all greeted me before, but it was hard to remember them when we interacted so rarely.

"My older sister often speaks of you, Lady Rozemyne," Bertilde continued. "I

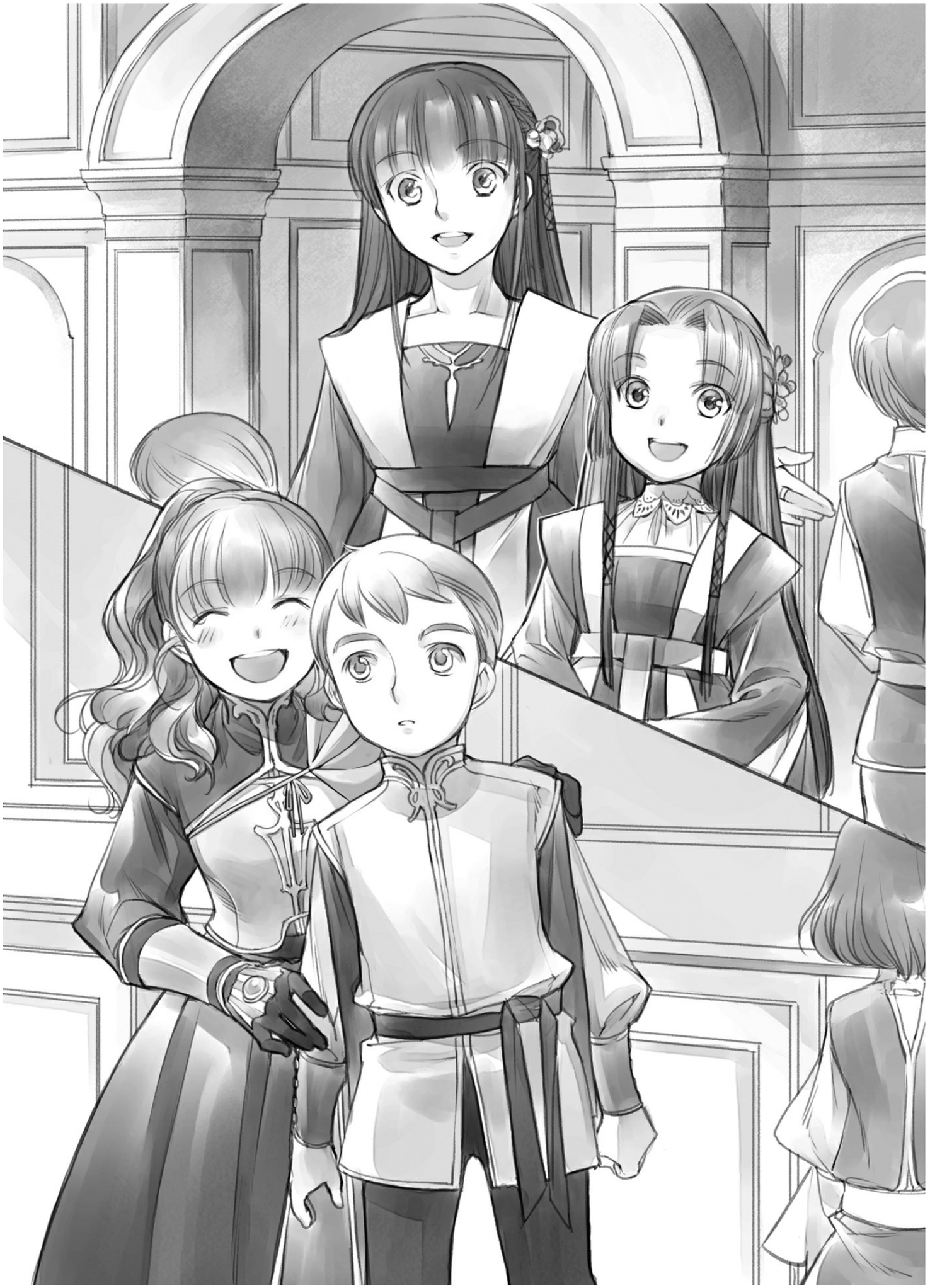
am glad that we finally have this opportunity to talk." It seemed that she had discussed fashion trends and such with Brunhilde from a very young age, and she envied her big sister for serving as my retainer and spreading her own trends. "I wish to serve you as well when I go to the Royal Academy."

"You cannot serve Lady Rozemyne without first earning Lady Elvira's approval," Brunhilde said admonishingly. Bertilde was going to be entering the Royal Academy two years from now, and she was currently serving Elvira as an extended family member. It was safe to say that Elvira was specifically training her to one day become my retainer.

Bertilde. Okay. Name: memorized.

"Lady Rozemyne, this is my little brother Theodore," Judithe said, leading her brother by the shoulders. "He's going to be joining the Royal Academy next year."

"Let go of me," the boy complained. "I can introduce myself." He had youthful features that made him resemble Judithe, but he came across as especially mature for his age. I got the feeling that it was usually his job to keep his excitable older sister under control.



They aren't similar in the slightest. Maybe they're complete opposites like Angelica and Lieseleta?

"I am Theodore," the boy said. "Pleased to meet you."

Cornelius nodded and then turned to me. "Lady Rozemyne, I think he would make for an excellent addition to your retinue."

"I've seen him train," Angelica added from where she was standing beside Cornelius. "He's surprisingly strong."

"I am honored to receive your praise," Theodore said, flushing red with embarrassment. His violet eyes were filled with admiration as he gazed at Cornelius and Angelica; they were popular as Bonifatius's prized disciples, and many children aiming to be apprentice knights apparently looked up to them.

"Theodore, why don't you ever show *me* that kind of respect?" Judithe asked, pouting. She must have felt we were stealing her little brother away from her. I could understand why that would bother her; the very thought of someone else becoming Charlotte's role model after all of my hard work to become the best big sister broke my heart.

"I shall consider taking Theodore as a retainer when he enters the Royal Academy next year," I said. The boy in question didn't seem very pleased about this news, however; he looked from Cornelius, to Angelica, to me, then hung his head with a concerned frown.

"I, um... Unfortunately, I... cannot be your retainer, Lady Rozemyne."

"What are you even saying, Theodore? Why would you turn down Lady Rozemyne?" Judithe asked, having likely never expected that answer. I raised a hand to stop her and smiled.

"Perhaps he has already made an agreement with Melchior," I said. "You must not be overly controlling here, Judithe. It is up to Theodore to decide whom he serves."

Theodore shook his head. "No, Lady Rozemyne. It is not Lord Melchior whom I wish to serve, but the giebe, as my father does. That is why I cannot become a guard knight for the archducal family." He shrank into himself as he spoke,

aware that it was unthinkable for someone to turn down such an opportunity, but his dream of one day becoming a knight like his father and serving the giebe alongside him pulled at my heartstrings. It reminded me of when I had promised to protect the city and everyone in it, just like Dad. My affection for Theodore was already shooting up.

"What a splendid dream," I said. "You have my support in full. May we compromise, then, and have you be my retainer only while I am attending the Royal Academy?"

"Excuse me...?" Theodore asked. He wasn't the only one taken aback by my suggestion; all of my retainers widened their eyes as well.

"Theodore, you may serve me only while I am attending the Royal Academy," I said. "You may guard me while studying and practicing to one day serve the giebe. How does that sound to you?"

He offered no response, but I could sense his heart waver at the prospect of only working for me temporarily. Rihyarda tried to tell me to wait, but I gestured for her to wait and continued.

"I already have enough guards for when I am in Ehrenfest. I only need more for the Royal Academy, so could you serve me only during that time?"

"I will think about it," Theodore eventually replied with a small smile.

"It seems that you all need to be lectured," Rihyarda said, planting her feet firmly on the ground and glaring at us the moment we returned to my room. "First, Judithe. You must talk things over and make the necessary preparations *before* introducing family to milady! Otherwise, you are causing trouble for both parties."

Apparently, there was much that needed to be done before introducing someone as a potential retainer. You needed to confirm that the person being introduced was willing to serve, that they worked to a good enough standard, that they were trustworthy enough, and in cases where they were underage, that their parents agreed to the arrangement. Brunhilde, in contrast to Judithe, had followed these rules perfectly. She had introduced her sister to me as a potential retainer only after serving me for one year, observing Bertilde's

progress under Elvira, confirming her wishes, and watching the spread of the printing industry in Groschel.

“It seems to me that you saw Brunhilde offer to introduce her sister to Lady Rozemyne and simply joined in on the spot,” Rihyarda continued. “This lack of preparation will only cause problems, and as we saw, Theodore had no intention of serving anyone but the giebe. Milady has said that she wishes to respect his wishes, so we will not be forcing him to be a retainer, but if you had done this with someone less considerate, his dream would never have come true. Now in particular, there is a very limited number of children in the Royal Academy who are of the correct age to become a retainer. It would not be unusual for Theodore’s wishes to be ignored, considering his lower status.”

“I see now that I didn’t think my actions through enough...” Judithe muttered, looking totally defeated. “My apologies.”

“You need only do better next time,” Rihyarda said, her harsh expression finally softening. It seemed that she was now finished with Judithe, so she turned to me, once again looking terrifying. “How many times have I told you not to announce ideas you’ve come up with on the spot, milady?! Now that you have made your suggestion to Theodore in front of all the other children, it cannot be taken back. You must carefully discuss these matters with Lord Sylvester and Ferdinand first!”

Rihyarda contacted my guardians by ordonnanz, and soon enough, I was called to the archduke’s office. The first to speak was the one who looked the most serious: Ferdinand.

“Now then—Rihyarda tells me you wish to recruit someone as a temporary retainer or some such? Just what in the world are you thinking?”

“Um... Just so you know, I was trying to follow your example, Ferdinand.”

“Elaborate,” Ferdinand said, scrunching his brow in confusion.

“You bring only Eckhart and Justus with you to the temple, and while in the castle, you borrow scholars from Sylvester or elsewhere, no? Even during the Interduchy Tournament, while you had several knights from the Order pretending to guard you, they certainly weren’t your retainers.”

Several guard knights had stood behind us while we had tea at the Interduchy Tournament, but I had only somewhat recognized their faces. They certainly hadn't been retainers Ferdinand used all the time, and indeed, when the ternisbefallen attack had occurred during the awards ceremony, they had prioritized protecting the archducal couple. Only Eckhart had accompanied Ferdinand to the grounds as his guard knight.

"As a member of the archducal family, surely you had many retainers back in your Royal Academy days, no?" I asked. "Where are they now? If you can employ their services only when you need them, I see no reason why I can't have retainers who work for me only at the Royal Academy. Sylvester said that I can't share retainers with Melchior, so I am just attempting to learn from your example, Ferdinand."

"You and I are not the same."

"How so? To be honest, I just want enough retainers to keep up appearances at the Royal Academy. I plan to raise a few more key scholars, but I have enough people in my service already."

My response wasn't met very favorably—Ferdinand grimaced, Karstedt hung his head while muttering that I shouldn't adopt only their bad traits, and Rihyarda started rubbing her forehead. Sylvester, however, seemed unusually amused. He looked between all of us and then burst into laughter.

"Bwahaha! Sounds good to me. She's doing exactly what you did, Ferdinand, and you know it. Maybe you should learn from her example and train some new retainers of your own."

"The majority of my retainers from back then were of the former Veronica faction and are considered dangerous elements in the duchy," Ferdinand said plainly. "My circumstances are not the same as yours, Rozemyne, as you can pick freely from all those available. Not to mention, there are few eccentrics who would willingly accompany me to the temple."

He was trying to say that we couldn't be compared, since I was guaranteed to leave the temple and become the next first wife through an engagement while he was going to be the High Priest now and forever, but I thought we were equally as limited in our options.

“You say that I can choose anyone, Ferdinand, but there are almost no archnobles or mednobles who are the correct faction, attending school alongside me, and not already taken by Wilfried, Charlotte, or Melchior. Pray tell, who exactly do you expect me to pick? If you have any candidates in mind, I am all ears.”

Wilfried and Charlotte had taken over leading the playroom during my two-year slumber, so the archnoble children there had pretty much all ended up with one or the other depending on their gender. The only ones who remained were those Florencia had identified and spoken to about serving Melchior, the former Veronica faction children Rihyarda had excluded right from the start, the laynobles who weren’t supposed to be considered as archducal retainers at all, and those who had given negative responses to the probing for various personal reasons.

I was aware that very few children had wanted to serve as my retainer back when it was unknown when—or even if—I would ever wake up. Some in the playroom hadn’t even known I existed until my return. Hartmut and Brunhilde were among the few who had waited for me, since they were Leisegang nobles and had seen my debut and my previous work in the playroom.

The younger students who hadn’t met me had outright refused to enter my service when probed about the idea, so it had ultimately been decided that I would receive only older students at first. Any other retainers I could pick on my own when I needed more. However, to tell the truth, I would have very much appreciated them leaving a few younger students to serve me as well.

“As the younger brother of one of your current retainers, it is clear that Theodore is not of the former Veronica faction,” Ferdinand said. “This can be resolved simply if you continue to use him after graduating from the Royal Academy. This is only a problem in the first place because you brought up some nonsense about temporary retainership.”

“Theodore said that he wants to follow in his father’s footsteps, serving Giebe Kirnberger as a knight and supporting his province,” I said. “I wish to support that dream, and for that reason, I refuse to take him as my retainer and use him for life.”

I understood that I was being a pain here, but I wanted to respect Theodore's plans for his future. I certainly didn't want to be the one to crush them.

"Even during the Traugott incident, Rihyarda said to me that she would be fine with anyone no matter their goals or motivations as long as they do their job and serve me properly," I continued. "Assuming that Theodore treats me as a guard knight should at the Royal Academy, I will not have any issues with him. This should prove less problematic than hurrying to take someone else who ultimately does not fit the role and needs to be relieved of duty."

It didn't seem wise to pick based on lineage alone and risk ending up with another Traugott. I was fine with anyone who would, at the very least, serve me faithfully throughout my remaining time at the Royal Academy.

Ferdinand and I were locked in a fierce staring match for a short while until Sylvester interrupted us while stroking his chin. "Enough with the glares, you two. You both have a point. Ferdinand isn't wrong to say that you need to raise retainers for the future, Rozemyne. But you're also right that you don't have many options right now. The adults and older kids understand the magnitude of what you've accomplished, but the younger ones are just gonna see you as some tiny kid. But, hm..." He crossed his arms and then put on a serious face. "Getting someone to serve you just for the Royal Academy, huh?"

Ferdinand grimaced even harder than usual. "Aub Ehrenfest. Do not tell me you plan to give her your permission."

"This is a lot more acceptable than her other plan to share retainers with Melchior," Sylvester replied. "Am I wrong?" Having one retainer serve two people at once would inevitably lead to those two people being compared, which was apparently far too dangerous for Melchior. "That said, archduke candidates and giebes are different. They can't really be compared, and Giebe Kirnberger would only benefit from getting a guard knight trained by Rozemyne in the Royal Academy. He's been concerned about how weak his connection to Rozemyne is compared to Giebes Groschel and Haldenzel."

Even if other giebes started offering up their children for temporary retainership in the hope of establishing connections with the archducal family, it was up to us to accept them or not. Sylvester thereby concluded that

temporary retainership wouldn't prove much of a problem at all.

"However, if you treat a temporary retainer exactly as you would a normal retainer, someone is bound to take issue," Sylvester continued. "You need to handle your retainers well, Rozemyne, or you can expect great trouble down the line."

I nodded my understanding.

"Right," Sylvester said. "I'll speak with Giebe Kirnberger, then."

Sylvester was on my side now, but Ferdinand still appeared to be dissatisfied. "I have other concerns as well," he said. "Female retainers resign after getting married, so you must focus on hiring women who will return to work after their children grow old enough to enter the Royal Academy, as Ottilie did. You are going to be staying here in Ehrenfest as the archduke's first wife, after all."

Female archduke candidates were generally either married to archduke candidates from other duchies or to archnobles from their own. If an archducal family became too small, they could also have a groom marry into their duchy, but this was such a common cause of war and conflict that it almost never happened.

Retainers who decided not to follow their lady after she was married into another duchy were relieved of duty. A lady's retainers were also relieved of duty when she married an archnoble and thereby ceased to be a member of the archducal family. I was going to be a first wife, of course, so my retainers would stay in my service.

"I intended to do some searching before my graduation, but adult women returning to work cannot serve as retainers in the Royal Academy," I said. "And in truth, at the moment, I am simply not in need of one."

"That certainly is correct," Ferdinand said, nodding in agreement.

Also, pretty much all of the adult women I know are in the Love Story Authors Association, and I don't want to break their holy order just to get a new retainer. Because, I mean, books are way more important.

Sylvester and Giebe Kirnberger ended up discussing my retainer situation, and

it was decided that Theodore would serve me only while I attended the Royal Academy—on the condition that the Gutenbergs were sent to Kirnberger next year.

Discussion with the Plantin Company

I was in the winter playroom, advertising the upcoming book sale. Our star product was doubtless going to be the Rozemyne Workshop's collection of Ahrensbach knight stories, as told by Aurelia. I was really looking forward to the whole event, since I expected that it would lead to a huge spike in stories from other duchies gathered at the Royal Academy next year.

"Stories from other duchies? That sounds delightful."

"After reading so many tales set in the Royal Academy, I'm dying to attend myself."

Such praise came from the children too young to be students themselves. Most of them were taller than me, but it was still cute to see them chattering in excitement.

"Ehrenfest books are starting to have an influence even in the Royal Academy," I said. "Do read them carefully before you attend. And if you share the books you have with your friends, then you can read an even greater selection."

Books were expensive, even for nobles. Few houses could afford to purchase several volumes at once, so instead, they would save up to buy one and then exchange it for others. Plantin Company sales could only be increased so much in Ehrenfest, which was why I needed to sell to other duchies as well.

"Hartmut, Sylvester's scholars will contact the Plantin Company when the date is set, correct?" I asked. "Add a line to today's message requesting that they see me in the morning on the day of."

"Is there something about the castle's yearly book sale that you need to discuss with them?" he asked. "I believe they are quite busy that day due to their meetings with the giebes..."

This year, the Plantin Company was having to speak with Haldenzel and Groschel too, since they were going to be selling the books printed in their

provinces. I needed to attend those meetings as well to ensure both that the Plantin Company wasn't bullied into submission by the giebes and that the giebes weren't scammed by Benno.

"I intend to inform them of our printing deal with Dunkelfelger, for it will be discussed at the Archduke Conference," I said. We needed to speak with the Plantin Company about the book rights we had won from our ditter game against Dunkelfelger and about our plans for the future. We required this information before we could discuss it at the conference.

"Understood," Hartmut replied. "I will go to the archduke's office."

"It is time for your meeting with the Plantin Company, milady."

After receiving this news from Rihyarda, I exited my room with my scholars in tow. Charlotte was already waiting outside the door, while Wilfried was standing at the bottom of the stairs.

"We must discuss things with the Plantin Company before the books can be sold, correct?" Charlotte asked. "This will be my first time attending such a meeting. I have asked your knights to contact them before, Sister, but it was always your knight and attendant in the playroom who dealt with everything."

I already knew from Ferdinand that Damuel had worked exceptionally hard while I was asleep in the jureve, but Charlotte was the one who had actually taken up the task of running the playroom. According to her, my guard knights had provided a great deal of assistance.

Charlotte turned to Damuel and said, "You were such a great help." He gave a humble nod in response.

"Damuel is very skilled at paperwork as well," I declared from inside Lessy, "and even in the temple, he is often invaluable. Ferdinand entrusts more work to him than to just about anyone."

"I see," Charlotte replied. "His efficient delegations and precise instructions truly moved me."

Back when Charlotte had first come to the winter playroom, she had proven to be entirely clueless, unable to give proper orders even to her own retainers.

She explained that my guard knights had done much to support her at the time.

“I was surprised that all of your guard knights are so capable when it comes to scholar work,” Charlotte continued, staring at me in admiration. I glanced over at Angelica, tempted to point her out as the lone exception to my sister’s compliment, but I chose to hold my tongue and smile instead.

By the time we arrived at the meeting room, discussions between the giebes and the Plantin Company were already underway. I could see Benno, Mark, and Damian. We exchanged noble greetings, and after confirming that the book sale would proceed just as last year, Damian left with the playroom attendants to prepare.

“Now, regarding the sales of any books not made in the Rozemyne Workshop...” Benno said. He then went on to explain things for my siblings’ scholars, who had never attended one of these meetings before.

All of our books had thus far been made in the Rozemyne Workshop, but we were now building new printing workshops in other provinces. Today, they were discussing the commission that the Plantin Company would charge for selling books made in Haldenzel and Groschel until they could establish their own bookstores, and the Plantin Company would serve as a sales channel into other duchies. These first deals were going to be crucial.

Our negotiations began with us considering the many stages that were going to be involved in the sales process, such as how the books were going to be transported to the castle, when they were going to be sold, and where we intended to store them.

“I can see that you charge quite a lot more to have the Plantin Company collect the books...” Giebe Groschel said, fixing Benno with a doubtful, searching look.

“Transportation costs are significant,” I replied with a smile. “We nobles can use teleportation circles, but commoners primarily use boats or carriages to transport goods. The time investment and amount of manpower required are by no means small, and the speed at which they can travel will depend on how far the locations are from each other and whether the roads are well paved. All of these variables must be considered when working out the cost, which is why

Haldenzel would need to pay more in transportation fees than Groschel."

Sending the books to the castle using the teleportation circles used to move taxes would require mana but not cost any money. Alternatively, using commoners to transport goods would remove the mana cost, but it also introduced the risk of goods being damaged on the bumpy roads. There was also the transportation fees to consider, which would reduce the amount of potential profit unless the price the goods were being sold for was raised to compensate.

"For now, we can send the books alongside our taxes to reduce the mana expense, but that option will not last forever," Giebe Haldenzel said with a grimace, aware that Elvira's Love Story Authors Squadron was growing in power and selling increasingly more books. Eventually, there would be too many to make teleporting them worthwhile.

"At the moment, I am researching teleportation circles and experimenting with lowering their mana expenditure," I said. "By the time every province has a Printing Guild and printing workshop, teleporting books should be quite affordable."

"You certainly have great foresight, Lady Rozemyne."

"Wait, when did you start doing that?"

The giebes were looking at me with wide eyes, as was Wilfried. It seemed that, unlike Ferdinand, they hadn't realized that I was doing this entirely for my own benefit. I deepened my smile, keeping that knowledge to myself.

"The research is being done by someone so talented that Ferdinand took them on as a disciple, so we can expect them to provide excellent results."

Once the matter of transportation costs was settled, the commission for selling the books was decided without issue. The tension drained from the room at once.

"That settles the discussion between Haldenzel, Groschel, and the Plantin Company." I turned to the two giebes. "You, Wilfried, and Charlotte may depart."

"What are you planning?" Wilfried asked, his green eyes sharpening as he

looked between those of the Plantin Company and me.

“I have further matters to discuss with the Plantin Company,” I said. “I must report upcoming plans, and I have other personal questions as well.” I needed to ask about the young Klassenberg woman they had taken as a lehange and about the Gutenbergs in general, if time permitted.

“Is there something that you don’t want me to hear?”

“Not in the least. You are welcome to stay if you have the time and interest.”

“I, too, wish to hear more about the printing industry,” Giebe Groschel said. And so, he, Wilfried, Charlotte, and Giebe Haldenzel stayed. It meant that I couldn’t bring up anything too personal, but there was no reason I could give to refuse them.

I turned to Benno. “At the Royal Academy, we are borrowing books to transcribe and getting apprentice scholars to gather stories from other duchies. I expect that books containing these stories will spread throughout the Royal Academy next year.”

“Throughout the Royal Academy next year, you say?” Benno asked. I could tell that he was doing a bunch of calculations in his head.

I gave a nod. “They won’t actually be sold until next summer, and since picture-book bibles are so useful for improving one’s grades, we do not intend to spread them yet. Our focus is primarily on knight and romance stories. Those in the Royal Academy seemed quite receptive to them this year.”

Benno’s dark-red eyes gleamed, like those of a predator eyeing its prey. The air in the room sharpened, and as the discussion turned into a bloodthirsty business meeting about profits, I couldn’t help but grin.

“During the Interduchy Tournament, we won the rights to publish books from Dunkelfelger the Second,” I said. “The details are going to be settled at the Archduke Conference, and the deal shall serve as our basis for the contracts we make with other duchies. I thought it best to discuss these terms with you before the conference itself.”

I couldn’t just leave everything to Sylvester’s scholars, considering how inexperienced with printing they were. We needed to decide the terms and

conditions we would give Dunkelfelger in advance, so they could serve as a foundation for future deals.

“Lady Rozemyne, are you truly making books containing stories from other duchies?” Giebe Haldenzel asked.

“Indeed,” I replied with an enthusiastic nod. “The bulk of our duchy’s knight stories are based on those I gathered from children in the winter playroom. They were exceptionally delighted to see their own tales published. If we are to start selling to other duchies, we are more likely to garner their interest by having stories from their homes.”

“I see. Then you will need love stories from other duchies as well...” Giebe Haldenzel murmured. Hearing the words “love stories” come from such a stone-faced man was strange, to say the least, but he clearly visualized such tales purely as products to be sold for profit. It seemed that he also understood commoners, and an instant later, he was thinking about how to involve his province’s printing industry in my plans.

Giebe Groschel, in contrast, appeared to be lost. He sat still, his brows drawn together in a deep frown.

“Haldenzel is making the books Elvira and the others write, so I imagine there are many manuscripts to be printed,” I said. “Groschel does not have any writers of note yet, as I understand it, so if you like, you can print the stories we gather ourselves.”

I wanted to compile knight stories from all over Yurgenschmidt into a single collection, and Roderick’s ditter story wasn’t yet printed either. At this point, there were more stories than there were printing workshops, so having Groschel take some was more than ideal.

Giebe Groschel stared down at me with a start. “Yes, I would very much appreciate the opportunity,” he said, taking the offer immediately.

“Furthermore, Lady Rozemyne,” Benno noted, “we have a report from the Gutenbergs. According to Johann, the smiths from Groschel are improving considerably. He expects to return them home in spring. As for Zack, he says that he has finished the job you gave him. He wants to know whether he should deliver it to your room in the temple or the castle.”

The job he was referring to was the mattress. I smiled; my comfy bed was finally complete.

“Have it delivered to the temple,” I said. “We may settle the details when you give your next financial report.”

“And finally, regarding the Klassenberg merchant that we are hosting for a year...” Benno said, bringing up Karin before I even needed to ask. “Her work as a lehange is spectacular. There have been many occasions when I have had no choice but to bow to the power of a greater duchy merchant, and we are looking to incorporate many of her ideas into our store. As it turns out, she also learned much about other duchies on her way to Ehrenfest. I pray that this is of some use to you.”

This prompted Mark to hold out a stack of papers, which Hartmut accepted and then gave to me. A quick leaf through the pages was enough for me to glean that the information was from not just the Plantin Company but from the guildmaster and other major store owners as well.

“You have my gratitude, Benno,” I said. “Aub Ehrenfest will surely rejoice.” As there were so many eyes on me, I couldn’t say anything more personal than that.

“You gather intelligence from commoners as well, Lady Rozemyne?” Giebe Groschel asked, blinking in surprise. There was a very firm and clear line drawn between the Noble’s Quarter and the lower city in his province. They were striving to listen to their workers when it came to the printing industry, but they hadn’t expected that there was anything else for them to learn from commoners.

“Merchants have many connections and can therefore acquire very valuable intelligence,” I replied. “They often know things one could never learn in the Noble’s Quarter. Wilfried, Charlotte, you learned a great deal while performing Spring Prayer and the Harvest Festival, did you not?”

They both nodded, having spent a great deal of time outside the Noble’s Quarter to oversee religious ceremonies. “Indeed. There is much one could not learn without seeing it with one’s own eyes,” Charlotte said.

“The commoners thanking us when we use our mana for their sake motivates

us to work harder," Wilfried added. "It reminds me that I need to become a good archduke one day."

It was Giebe Haldenzel who blinked in surprise this time; then, his expression softened. "Commoners cannot live without our mana, but we nobles would suffer without commoners. If you understand this and work with it in mind, then you will surely become a good archduke."

Wilfried was regularly mocked from the shadows for the irremovable stain on his reputation, and cruel rumors claimed that he was becoming the next archduke not because he deserved it but because he was engaged to me. He was so familiar with insults that the giebe's praise came as a genuine comfort, and with a proud smile, he said, "Thank you. I shall do my best."

Charlotte was watching all of this very carefully indeed.

During the book sale that afternoon, the love stories that Elvira and her friends had written proved to be overwhelmingly popular and were selling like hot cakes. The Ahrensbach knight stories printed in Ehrenfest were a distant second, and those of the former Veronica faction came in cheerful droves to buy them. I purchased one as well, but not for myself.

"Lamprecht, do give this to Aurelia," I said, offering the book to him. He was attending with Wilfried, serving as his guard knight. "Consider it my thanks for her giving us the stories in the first place." She had so graciously shared these tales with us during the dyeing competition, so it seemed only natural that she should get to enjoy them as well.

Lamprecht accepted the book with a smile. "Thank you. My wife will surely rejoice at the opportunity to read your book, Lady Rozemyne."

It was only slight, but out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Damuel avert his gaze the moment he heard the word "wife."

Melchior's Baptism

The feast celebrating spring was due to be held several days after the book sale. Melchior was going to have his baptism ceremony, so Lieseleta and Brunhilde had gone to the temple to fetch the clothes and other things we needed.

"Fran and Monika had everything ready for our arrival, Lady Rozemyne," Lieseleta said with a smile once my ceremonial High Bishop clothes and such were looked over. Apparently, when they had reached the temple, Ferdinand's and my attendants had already sorted everything into boxes and carried it all to the entrance to be collected.

"This is a gift for you from the children of the orphanage," Brunhilde added, showing me a small jar. "I am told it is parue juice."

"A winter sweet, then," I replied. "Please give it to Ella."

Brunhilde nodded and made her way to the kitchen.

"Fran was worried about your health and whether you've been working to increase your stamina, so I said that you've been doing light exercises at the knight training grounds," Damuel explained, having accompanied the girls on their trip. I asked about Monika and everyone else in the temple too, and thankfully, it seemed that they were all doing fine.

That was when Ottilie returned, holding two letters of invitation. "Lady Rozemyne, Lady Charlotte and Lord Wilfried have invited you to a tea party," she said. "I appreciate that this might seem quite sudden, but they wish to introduce you to Melchior before his baptism."

Charlotte's invitation included a note saying that she had cherished the opportunity to have a tea party with me prior to her own baptism ceremony. In truth, it wasn't a very pleasant memory for me—I mostly remembered how Wilfried had interrupted us, turning everything on its head.

At the very least, I suppose that tea party was when I found out just how

adorable Charlotte really is.

I had never spoken to Melchior before, so I wanted to meet with him at least once before his baptism. After sending out replies accepting the invitations, I waited for the tea party while transcribing books with my scholars.

I need to work hard so that I can be a good big sister to Melchior too!

"Good evening, Sister."

"I was overjoyed to receive your invitation, Charlotte."

I exchanged greetings with Charlotte, who was hosting the tea party, and then looked at Melchior, who was beside Wilfried and waiting for an introduction. He had the same purplish-blue hair as his father, and the same blue eyes and soft facial features as his mother, which made him look kind and peaceful. But there was one thing I noticed that was more important than any of that.

I win!

He was shorter than me.

It may only be by the smallest amount, but I'm taller! Even if we look the same age, people are more likely to realize I'm his older sister! Bwahaha! For the record, I'm not on tiptoes either!

The very real possibility that I was shorter than Melchior had worried me to no end, but with that fear out of the way, my excitement shot through the roof. Everything was bound to go swimmingly.

"This is our little brother, Melchior," Wilfried said. "I hope you get along with him as well as we do. Now, Melchior... This is Rozemyne, your older sister and the High Bishop who is going to bless you at your baptism."

"Rozemyne. I haven't been baptized yet, so I can't give proper blessings... but please let me greet you," Melchior said, stepping forward with a tense expression. He knelt down, bowed his head, and intoned, "I am Melchior, son of Aub Ehrenfest. 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."

“May Ewigeliebe the God of Life bless you, Rozemyne. May our relationship be long and prosperous,” Melchior said. He then looked up at Wilfried and Charlotte with the satisfied grin of someone who had recited the lines they were taught to perfection. They watched him with gentle smiles.

“Well done, Melchior,” Wilfried said.

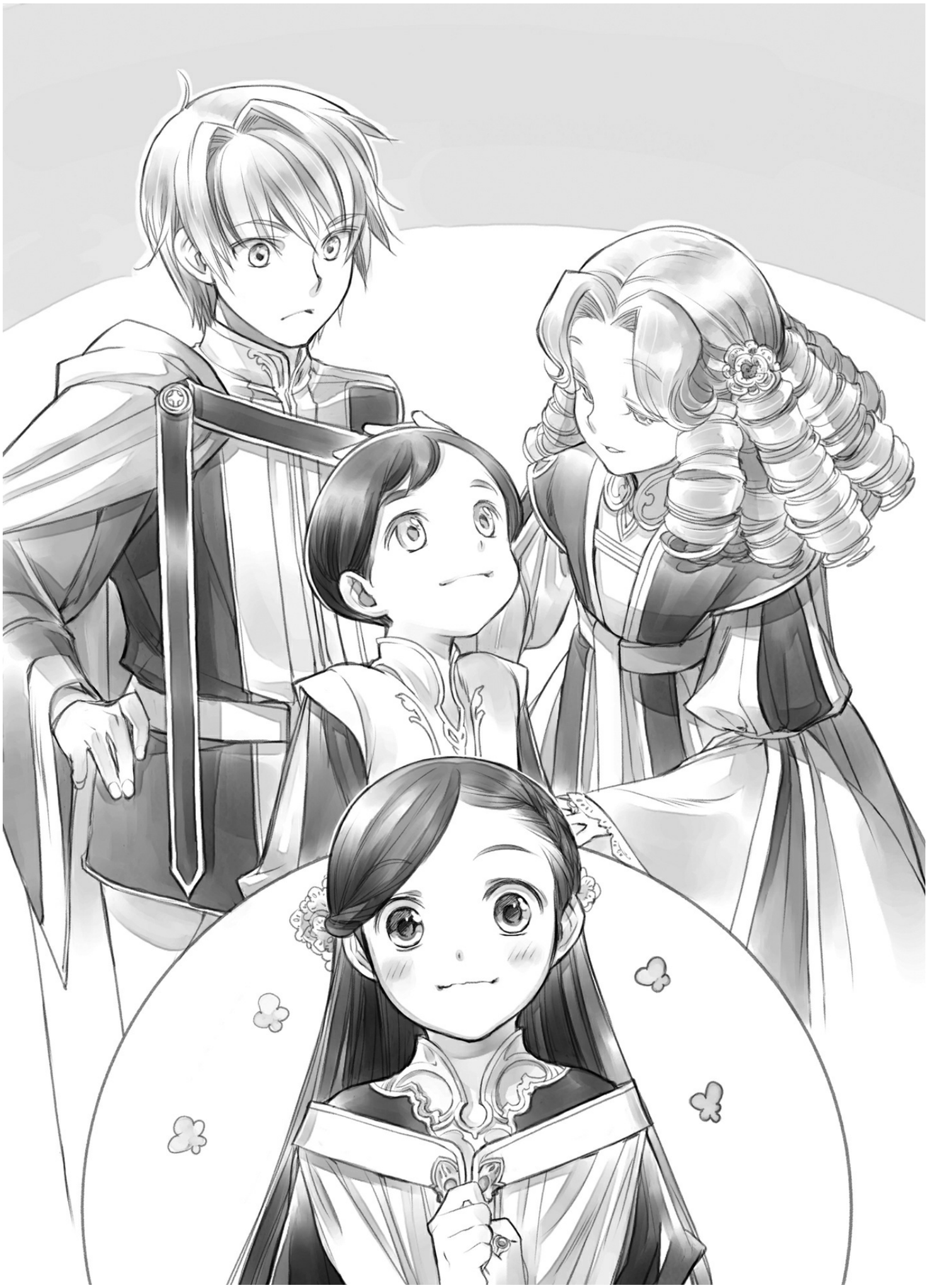
“Indeed,” Charlotte agreed. “I, too, was nervous during my first greeting. You did well.”

It was adorable to see the young Melchior so over the moon about receiving such praise from his older siblings. His education was clearly proceeding exceptionally smoothly under Florencia’s guidance, and seeing him smile made me smile too.

“The children’s room has been ever so lonely since you went to the northern building, Charlotte,” Melchior said. “I have been hoping to join you there as soon as possible. I’m glad we can have tea parties together now.”

“Yes, I am likewise glad to be spending time with you after so long apart,” Charlotte replied, gently stroking her little brother’s smooth-looking hair.

“Hm? You know, you and Rozemyne look like actual siblings, what with your hair being so similar...” Wilfried observed, touching Melchior’s hair and comparing it to mine. It certainly was the case that we both shared the same purplish-blue hair as Sylvester, while Wilfried and Charlotte had light-golden hair instead.



I wonder—is Kamil growing up like this too? He should be about five now, I think. Mom, Dad, and Tuuli are definitely showering him with love, so he's bound to be like this.

At that, I searched through my memories, trying to remember my last time seeing Kamil through the temple doors. Thinking about it, his hair was a very similar color to mine and Sylvester's as well.

I wish Kamil could call me his big sister too... But of course, that dream can never come true anymore.

"Rozemyne has brought a sweet that you have never tried before," Charlotte said, urging us to sit. And with that, the tea party began. We all sipped our tea and took bites of our sweets.

Back when the Othmar Company had delivered pound cake for the Interduchy Tournament, they had given me freshly made gelatin as a gift. I had asked Ella to make some bavarois with it, which I had brought with me today, and this was my first time serving it to anyone else. I could see Brunhilde quietly watching to see how my siblings would react.

"It goes down easily and tastes quite delicious," Charlotte said. "Are there other flavors?"

"There could be many. This one uses parue, a winter sweet." I took a bite as well. Parue was a nostalgic flavor for me, as it reminded me of the lower city. I could feel a smile rise to my face, and before I knew it, I was positively beaming.

"It's sweet," Melchior remarked, "but it feels weird in my mouth, Rozemyne."

"Yeah. I prefer cookies," Wilfried said. It seemed that while Charlotte thought highly of the bavarois, the boys found it a bit off-putting. I wouldn't be able to serve it in the Royal Academy unless I could improve the recipe.

Pudding wasn't very popular at first, so I guess it's no surprise that bavarois isn't either.

Wilfried turned to Melchior and said, "Are you feeling nervous about your baptism tomorrow?" It was an inevitable topic of conversation, considering the circumstances.

“Well, I’ve been told that I need to go in alone...” Melchior replied quietly.

“I also felt very nervous entering the hall with so many eyes on me,” Charlotte said with a smile, “but I calmed down a little when I saw Rozemyne waiting for me on the stage. You simply need to walk over to her, Melchior. There is nothing to worry about.”

Upon hearing those words, Melchior seemed to relax a little.

“Your baptism was in the winter, though, Charlotte, so at least you got to walk with the other kids going to their debut,” Wilfried said. “Melchior’s going to be walking alone, like I did. That’s way more nerve-racking.”

Winter baptisms were done alongside the debuts, but children who were to be baptized in any other season would normally have a priest come to their home and carry out a private ceremony instead. Those born in spring had to walk through the grand hall alone for their baptisms. I remembered that Karstedt and Elvira had walked with me during my own ceremony. There had been a great number of visitors then, but that was still much better than being at the castle, where basically all nobles would gather.

I watched with a smile as Wilfried and Charlotte explained the process of the baptism to Melchior, occasionally arguing with each other over minor details and such.

“So, what things do you like, Melchior?” I asked.

“I like the toys you make, Rozemyne. You made all of them, didn’t you? Wilfried and Charlotte told me. They said you are very amazing.”

As it turned out, thanks to Florencia and Charlotte reading books to him, as well as Wilfried teaching him to play with karuta and playing cards, Melchior had come to think of me as a very amazing older sister.

That’s right! I’ll show you the power of an amazing sister! Thank you so much, Wilfried, Charlotte!

I was so excited that I grew emotional, and as I clenched my fists under the table to steel my resolve, Melchior gave an adorable smile. “The books you make are so enjoyable, Rozemyne, so if you have more, I would very much like to read them. I really love books.”

AAAAAAH! He's killing me with kindness! He just said that he loves books! And with such a genuine smile! Having a bookworm little brother is even more wonderful than I imagined... I want to praise the gods for blessing me with such great fortune!

I started to tremble, trying to contain my mana before it burst out. Rihyarda must have noticed, as she came over to check on me with a worried expression. This was a tea party among siblings, so I didn't have the mana-storing necklace that Ferdinand had given me.

"Please calm down, milady."

"I am fine, Rihyarda..." I said. "I can still go on."

After attending many tea parties with my bookworm friends in the Royal Academy, my tolerance in situations like this had improved, even if not by very much. Not even death could stop me from recommending Melchior more books and making him into even more of a bookworm.

"Melchior, what manner of stories do you like?" I asked with a broad smile. "Knight stories, perhaps? At the moment, we have many tales from other duchies. They have not yet been made into books, but we have them written down."

Melchior looked at me quizzically and then returned a smile. "My favorite stories are the ones about the gods. I can play karuta too now, so the attendants often read the picture-book bibles to me. Wilfried told me I need to learn a lot about the gods to be like you, Rozemyne."

He likes the picture-book bibles...?

They were considered essential textbooks in Ehrenfest. Kids would read them on a regular basis to help them win at karuta or progress in their theological studies, but few would say they outright enjoyed these stories about the gods.

"Very well. If you like stories about the gods, Melchior, then by the gods, you shall have them! Rihyarda, retrieve the High Bishop's bible from the temple at once, and—"

Rihyarda interrupted me with a light pat on the shoulder. "Milady, I understand that you wish to dote on Lord Melchior, but please calm down. Has

my boy Ferdinand not told you that you should not show the High Bishop's bible to others so readily?" We didn't want other people seeing the weird text and magic circle if we could help it.

"A transcription should work, then."

"I believe Lord Melchior is still too young to understand its more complicated vocabulary. You can simply tell him the stories that are not yet in the picture books."

But I wanted to show him a book...

Despite my own feelings on the matter, Rihyarda was in the right, so I settled for simply telling Melchior the religious stories. His blue eyes sparkled as he listened, and at that moment, I resolved to prioritize getting him a new book.

After having a delightful time with my new brother, I saw him and his retainers off as he returned to the main building.

"Melchior truly is adorable," I said, showing the strength of my resolve to Wilfried and Charlotte. "I wish to dote on him as much as I can."

Charlotte pursed her lips in dissatisfaction. "Somehow, I feel as if my older sister has been stolen from me..."

"You've still got it better than me," Wilfried replied, pouting as well. "Rozemyne is soft on people younger than her, and even softer on girls. You should have seen how she treated me on our first meeting. I've never seen her act this sweet in my life. Rozemyne, you should treat me a little better, you know. Especially seeing as we're engaged."

"Oh my..." I replied. "But Ferdinand has always told me I am too soft on you."

"What?" Wilfried stared at me in genuine confusion. "I can't remember a single time you've been soft on me, let alone *too* soft."

"Before your debut, and during the Ivory Tower incident. In both cases, Ferdinand said that I was too soft on you, but perhaps you would rather I start being more harsh?"

Wilfried said nothing in response; he merely continued to watch me with

wide eyes.

“Just as Flutrane and Heilschmerz heal in their own ways, I treat you differently than I do my younger siblings,” I continued. “As you are my fiancé, you must grow and mature far more than normal. You do not need the compassion that I show Charlotte and Melchior.”

After letting out a quiet grunt, Wilfried silently conceded. He was unable to argue back.

Thus came the day of Melchior’s baptism. I wasn’t with Wilfried and Charlotte like last year; instead, as the High Bishop, I was going to be entering with Ferdinand, the High Priest.

“Rozemyne, use enhancement magic so that you can walk properly...” Ferdinand muttered, dressed in his own blue ceremonial robes and staying a pace behind me as we walked through the grand hall. I started channeling mana through my body in response. If one ignored the fact that I still needed to take three steps for each one Ferdinand took, there was nothing unusual about my walking whatsoever.

As expected, the hall was packed with nobles. Having so many eyes boring into me still made me tense enough that I walked with my back perfectly straight, but at the same time, I was quite used to it. I certainly had come a long way since my early days as the High Bishop.

There was a shrine set up on the stage, with the archducal couple and their retainers lined up on the left. I went over and joined them, whereupon Sylvester stood up and took center stage.

“Flutrane the Goddess of Water’s pure streams have washed away Ewigeliebe the God of Life and rescued Geduldh the Goddess of Earth. Blessed be the melting of the snow!”

At his declaration, the feast celebrating spring began.

“First, allow me to announce this year’s honor students,” Sylvester continued. “Thirteen students obtained this honor through their high grades this year—a tremendous number.”

The news caused the room to erupt in cheers and applause, although there was a clear undercurrent of surprise. Again, I was the only person to come first-in-class, but there were many being recognized as honor students. Among them were Leonore, Cornelius, and Hartmut from my retainers; Wilfried and three of his retainers; Charlotte and two of her retainers; plus Matthias and one other from the former Veronica faction.

"Well done, Rozemyne," Sylvester said. "Here is your gift. May it prove useful to you."

I noticed that the commemorative feystones being handed out as rewards were smaller than last year; this was probably because there were more honor students than the budget had accounted for and could accommodate. I accepted mine with a small smile.

After the honor students were awarded, Ehrenfest's overall grades were announced. We had come tenth in the Interduchy Tournament's ditter games. This might have seemed disappointing to some, considering that we had come sixth in the mock battle, but the apprentice knights were praised very highly for their coordination. After all, they had slain the rare and troublesome feybeast known as a hundertteilung.

"Given all that happened at the Royal Academy, Bonifatius will continue to train the apprentice knights and new recruits to the Knight's Order," Sylvester said. "Put your all into it, everyone."

He also spoke of the apprentice scholars' results and the tremendous growth shown by the apprentice attendants. Ehrenfest's influence was steadily rising after our business deals with Klassenberg and the Sovereignty, and it was known that we had drawn much attention during the Interduchy Tournament.

"We received a great number of marriage requests from other duchies this year," Sylvester continued. "We will answer these after some very careful consideration. Furthermore... we introduced Ehrenfest books to Royal Academy socializing to great success. I intend to begin selling these books next year, so to all those involved, do not slack on your preparations."

The giebes and nobles involved in the printing and paper-making industries all seemed to tense up. At this early stage, what mattered most was how many

preparations could be made before the selling began.

Last of all, there was the debut of new adults who had graduated the Royal Academy, alongside announcements of where they were going to be working. To that end, the graduated students lined up on the stage. Cornelius and Hartmut were my retainers, so their jobs wouldn't change; instead, they would simply move up from apprentices to full-fledged adults.

"Now, we shall hold the baptism ceremony for my son Melchior," Sylvester said. "High Bishop. If you would."

After the feast came the baptism ceremony, so I carefully climbed the stairs leading up onto the stage, making sure not to step on the hem of my robes. Ferdinand stood next to me and said in a booming voice: "Welcome, new child of Ehrenfest!"

As if on cue, instruments began to play, and the doors to the grand hall slowly opened to reveal Melchior, who had evidently been waiting behind them with a childish smile. His clothes were bluish-green and didn't seem to conflict with his hair color at all. He didn't seem that nervous to me, but he must have taken Charlotte's advice to heart, as I could see his blue eyes fixed on me as he slowly climbed the stage.

"Melchior," I said, holding out a mana-detecting tool enveloped in thin leather that stopped my mana from flowing into it. He took it, and a moment later, it flashed, spurring the hall into another round of great applause. Next, Melchior registered his mana to an ivory medal.

"You have the divine protection of five gods—Darkness, Water, Fire, Wind, and Earth," I said. "If you dedicate yourself to becoming worthy of their protection, you will surely receive many blessings."

Once the registration was complete, Ferdinand swiftly placed the medal inside a box. Sylvester used that time to return to the center of the stage with an important magic tool in hand—a ring with a green feystone.

"I grant this ring to Melchior, who has been recognized by the gods as my son," Sylvester said. "Congratulations."

"Thank you, Father."

Sylvester acknowledged his son's happy smile, then looked up and signaled me with his eyes. I gave a brisk nod in response, filled my ring with mana, and said, "May Flutrane the Goddess of Water bless Melchior." Perhaps because he was my cute little brother and a fellow bookworm to boot, more green light flew out of my ring than I intended.

Ah, whoops... Was that a bit too much? No, surely not. It was fine. Right, Ferdinand?

I glanced over and saw that Ferdinand was fixing me with a cold stare, more or less calling me a fool with his eyes.

Eep. Okay. It was too much.

But it was no use crying over spilled milk. My blessing couldn't be taken back, so I took it in my stride.

In turn, Melchior began pushing mana into the ring on his finger. "Thank you," he said, and a bit of green light flew over to me, bringing his baptism to a close.

And so, the northern building obtained a new resident, and my life in the castle became a lot more lively. *I shall offer the gods my prayers and gratitude for blessing me with this bookworm little brother!*

Ahrensbach’s Fish Cuisine

The feast celebrating spring marked the end of winter socializing. Nobles began returning to their own provinces, while those living in the Noble’s Quarter started working as normal. As for me, my time at the dinner table became a bit more animated, since Melchior was now eating with us.

“Am I right to assume you’ll be going back to the temple soon, as you usually do, Rozemyne?” Sylvester asked with narrowed eyes.

“No, I don’t intend to return for a little while longer,” I replied. He would have been right under normal circumstances, but not this year. He had yet to deliver on his most important promise.

“How come? Has something happened?”

Really? That’s his response? I see he’s forgotten his sacred vow.

I pursed my lips. “Sylvester, were you not going to teach my chefs how to cook fish? I have been waiting for this ever since returning from the Royal Academy.” By this point, so many days had passed that I was about to be sent back to the temple whether I wanted to go there or not. It was a disaster.

Sylvester clapped his hands together in a show of apparent realization. “Right, right. Just ask Ferdinand to bring the ingredients over. Once the chefs have them, I’ll tell them to make some traditional Ahrensbach recipes.”

“Thank you,” I replied. I was wearing a composed and elegant smile, but underneath the table, my fists were clenched in victory.

Yippee! I can finally eat fish! Finally, finally, finally!

And this wasn’t going to be the gross, muddy fish from Ehrenfest’s dirty rivers either; this was proper fish from Ahrensbach’s ocean. How many years had passed since I was afforded such a grand opportunity? I couldn’t help but get excited, and as I thanked Aurelia for bringing something so tasty from Ahrensbach to begin with, I suddenly realized something.

“Sylvester, the fish that Ferdinand is storing came from Aurelia, who brought it to Ehrenfest so that she could enjoy the flavors of her home,” I said. “I wish to share the results with her as well, so can I have permission to invite her for a meal on the day it is made?”

“Hm...” Sylvester fell into thought for a bit, then looked at Karstedt, who was standing behind him. “If we have Aurelia in attendance, then we’ll need to bring more guards and decide whether to invite Lamprecht and the rest of your estate... but I don’t have a problem with the invitation itself.”

That was the answer I wanted to hear, but as I celebrated, Florencia called out to me in a gentle voice. “Rozemyne, Aurelia may be nostalgic for the food of her home, but we do not know if she will be fit to come. Be certain to check with Lamprecht or Elvira before inviting her.”

Florencia had taken extra care to avoid outright saying that Aurelia was pregnant. Indeed, if Aurelia was suffering from morning sickness or was starting to show, she wouldn’t be able to come to the castle to eat even if she wanted to. And if she was feeling unwell, there was a chance that she wouldn’t even be able to taste the food. She was also uncomfortable being around a lot of people, and if she received a formal invitation from me, she would more or less be forced to attend.

Though I really do want to give her the chance to enjoy these traditional Ahrensbach meals...

“Wilfried, can I borrow Lamprecht for a bit?” I asked on our way back to our rooms after dinner. “I wish to speak with him about Aurelia.”

“Sure.”

Having been granted time to talk to Lamprecht, I asked him to accompany me to the room in the main building closest to the northern building. He was joining me as family rather than in an official capacity, which meant I still needed Cornelius with me as a guard, but he had a relaxed expression as well.

“Lamprecht, how is Aurelia?” I asked when we arrived. “Will she be able to join us in the castle for Ahrensbach cooking?”

“Mm, I don’t know...” he muttered, his arms crossed in thought. “I think she’d struggle as she is now. She’s having a hard time eating at the moment, so I’d rather you not send an invitation. If you do, we’ll have no choice but to attend.”

It seemed that Aurelia was having a rather miserable time with her pregnancy—she was too sick to move and spent her days vomiting and sleeping. Mom had been able to move while pregnant, but her health had sometimes taken a turn for the worse, and she had felt sick all the time.

“Not to mention,” Lamprecht continued, “if she eats at the castle, she’ll need to remove her veil.”

Oh, right. That would *be an issue...*

“I realize that I’ve never seen her face before,” I said. “Lamprecht, have *you* seen her without her veil on?”

Lamprecht blinked in surprise, then chuckled. “Of course I have. I mean, she almost never wears it while she’s in her room. She just doesn’t want to invite any misunderstandings that would damage relations between Ehrenfest and Ahrensbach. She didn’t wear a veil during her time at the Royal Academy either, you know.”

I was curious as to how Lamprecht and Aurelia had grown close when she was always wearing a veil, but as it turned out, she hadn’t actually worn one in the Royal Academy. That made sense; a face covering would have impacted her performance in her apprentice knight classes.

“I think Aurelia will continue to wear her veil in Ehrenfest until things with Ahrensbach have been patched up,” Lamprecht said. “She’s a fairly timid girl.”

“I somewhat sensed that while watching her socialize,” I replied. “She stuck close behind Mother at all times.”

After some thought, I decided to use a time-stopping magic tool to bring her hot, freshly made food. Aurelia had used the magic tool to begin with so that she could enjoy Ahrensbach cuisine whenever she wanted, so I was more or less restoring things to how they had been originally.

“So, in short, after we’ve cooked the traditional Ahrensbach meals, I want you to bring the time-stopping magic tool for Aurelia,” I said.

Lamprecht patted me on the head, a broad smile on his lips. “Thanks for putting so much thought into all this, Rozemyne. I’m sure Aurelia will really appreciate it.”

“But that means I won’t get invited either...” Cornelius grumbled as he prodded my cheek, sad to be missing out on Ahrensbach cooking. If we were taking the food to Aurelia instead of asking her to dinner, that meant we wouldn’t need to invite the whole Karstedt estate.

Upon returning to my room, I sent an ordonnanz to Ferdinand with a simple message: “Bring the fish when you can. It’s time to learn Ahrensbach cuisine.” He replied with a curt “Understood,” and with this confirmation, I was able to sleep peacefully that night.

It was during breakfast the very next morning that Rihyarda informed me the fish had arrived at the castle. I sent an ordonnanz to Ferdinand, noting that he had acted much faster than I expected and asking whether he was looking forward to the fish as well, but his response immediately laid those thoughts to rest.

“I am not particularly looking forward to it. The tool simply requires a considerable amount of mana, so I would rather stop supplying it. I would also like you to return to the temple as soon as possible.”

He was clearly trying to refute the idea, but he also noted that he was going to be spending the entire day working at the castle, so there was no mistaking his enthusiasm for the food.

Ferdinand came to the knight training grounds later that day, at the same time as I was doing my light exercises, which gave me the perfect opportunity to probe him for information. “So, what fish did Aurelia bring to Ehrenfest?” I asked. “Please show them to me.”

“Give it up. Norbert has already had them taken to the kitchen. You will not see them until dinner tonight.”

Naturally, a high-status rich girl such as myself couldn’t just go wandering into the kitchen. My only choice was to wait until dinnertime, which was something

of a disappointing realization. Still, today was the day that Hugo and Ella were going to learn from the court chefs to prepare the ingredients so that they could make traditional Ahrensbach meals for Aurelia. They wouldn't be cooking anything to suit my personal tastes.

Patience, Rozemyne. Patience.

"Still, Ferdinand, it's rare to see you out here training with the knights rather than helping Sylvester with his work," I remarked. "Is there a reason for that?"

He paused for a moment and then said, "I simply wished for a change of pace." I wasn't sure I believed him, though; he seemed to be taking this training very seriously. Bonifatius and Eckhart were eagerly serving as his partners, and Angelica was watching on with an expression of pure greed, wanting nothing more than to join in herself.

"I'm going to be doing my usual exercises with Damuel," I informed Angelica, "so you are welcome to join Ferdinand and the others. I appreciate that this must be a rare opportunity."

"Oh, Lady Rozemyne, I thank you ever so much!" Angelica exclaimed with a beaming smile. She sprinted over to her fellow knights like the wind, while I continued my usual cycle of doing some light exercises and resting.

I contacted the kitchen after doing my exercises, asking them to put aside some of the ingredients for me to bring back to the temple, then started writing down more recipes I remembered. It was probably best for us to go with a Western dish this time; something like a fish marinade, carpaccio, or meunière, or something soaked in oil and cooked in herbs. There were also broths and stews like acqua pazza or bouillabaisse... Frittered and fried were good too, as was fish gratin. I wasn't sure whether the fish we had could be eaten raw, so some of the recipes I was considering were probably off the table, but my heart raced just thinking about all the tasty culinary avenues we could venture down.

But what I want to eat most is simple, salt-grilled fish. The kind where you cut a cross shape into it, throw on some salt, and then grill it plain.

The salt would make white bumps on the fish, and the scorch marks would make it crisp. Peeling the skin off with chopsticks would result in puffs of steam

and a delicious aroma, and some sour citrus juice on top was nothing short of complete bliss. The only thing it needed to be perfect was some freshly cooked white rice or dry Japanese sake.

Unfortunately, I'm too young to drink in this world. How I miss having the body of a twenty-two-year-old...

Still, the very thought of all the fish dishes from my Urano days made me hungry. If we could get some soy sauce, there was also the option of making a Japanese stew, but there was nothing here that would satisfy that craving. Perhaps there was a fish sauce of some kind in Ahrensbach that we could use, but that simply wouldn't make for a good enough substitute. As they say, Flutrane and Heilschmerz heal in their own ways.

Before I knew it, dinnertime had arrived. I was positively brimming with excitement as I came out of my room and started toward the dining hall with my siblings.

"Today's dinner is traditional Ahrensbach cooking, using ingredients that Aurelia brought to Ehrenfest," I said. "This is going to be my first time trying it."

"Ahrensbach cooking, huh?" Wilfried replied, looking somewhat wistful. "We used to eat that sometimes. Grandmother loved it." He had apparently been raised on a regular diet of Ahrensbach cooking while in Veronica's care. I asked what the food was like, so eager that I was practically leaning out the window of my Pandabus.

"Rozemyne, do you love new sweets and recipes?" Melchior asked, his eyes wide with surprise.

Charlotte giggled. "Rozemyne introduced so many trends precisely because she wishes to eat all the sweets and dishes she enjoys. Perhaps she will start another one after eating tonight's dinner."

"Well, I can't wait to try this food myself."

Back when the ban on socializing with Ahrensbach nobles had come into place, importing Ahrensbach ingredients into Ehrenfest had become significantly harder. It certainly hadn't helped that Veronica was detained, and

there was no one else to order traditional Ahrensbach cooking. Melchior had no memory of eating Ahrensbach food, while Charlotte just barely remembered having it on a few occasions.

"This is zanbelsuppe—fish soup with herbs and pomes," said one of Sylvester's attendants.

After our appetizers, we were served what looked a lot like bouillabaisse. Its appearance wasn't entirely the same—it was yellow instead of red, owing to the pomes—but I expected that it would taste quite similar.

I dipped my spoon into the soup and eagerly brought the liquid to my lips. I drank it down greedily... then set down my cutlery and slumped over in disappointment.

It's been so long since the last time I tasted this cursed dish. It's Yurgenschmidt's traditional soup: flavorless water. What a disappointment!

It seemed that the chefs had used the traditional Yurgenschmidt soup-making method of allowing the ingredients to stew until they were essentially mush, then throwing out all of the delicious broth and the amazing fishy flavor it contained. Instead, what we had was practically insipid; it was water with some shredded-up boiled fish floating in it. The fabled zanbelsuppe was awful, and the fact that my expectations had been so high made it all the more painful.

I can't believe all of the delicious flavor has been watered down into nothingness. Come back, flavor! Come baaack!

The fish that Aurelia had brought with her were exceedingly rare in Ehrenfest, and they had been wasted on *this*. I could have died then and there—and my ghost would have haunted the chefs who had produced this atrocity.

"Eh... Is this really what it's meant to taste like?" Sylvester murmured under his breath.

"Normal soup definitely tastes better," Wilfried said in agreement. Everyone else sitting around the table looked a bit disappointed as well; they had become so accustomed to my dishes packed with flavor that this bland water didn't satisfy them anymore.

As we were bemoaning the disappointing nature of our soup, another dish was brought in. “This is fikken,” Sylvester’s attendant explained.

As far as I could tell, it was white fish meunière with a distinctly buttery aroma. My stomach growled in anticipation, but I was reluctant to get my hopes up; perhaps this had been rendered just as flavorless as the zanbelsuppe. I nervously stabbed my knife into the dish before me and brought a bite to my mouth.

“I taste... fish,” I said, almost taken aback. The skin was crispy and properly coated in butter, and the addition of some rigar gave it a pleasant garlicky aftertaste. The fish itself practically fell apart in my mouth, having seemingly not been overcooked. All of these wondrous sensations had come from but a single bite, and it was so nostalgic that I wanted to shed tears of absolute joy.

This is actual fish from the sea... Not some weird, muddy alternative, but the real deal, like I was hoping for.

I savored each bite, allowing the flavor of the rare fish to dance on my tongue. It was fairly standard meunière that had clearly been seasoned and dredged in flour before being panfried in butter, and while the rigar was a little unique, it still tasted impressively similar to what I was used to from my Urano days. Back then, I probably would have described the taste as fairly average, but in this world, that “average” was what I valued more than anything. Unlike the cursed soup, it was delicious. It actually tasted like proper fish.

Aah, fish! It’s been so long! Thank you, Aurelia! You are my Verfuhremeer—my Goddess of Oceans!

I finished off my fikken, almost moved to tears. It was tasty, as one would expect meunière to be... but I still found myself craving salted fish.

“I appreciate the thin slices,” I said. “Could this fish be salted and grilled, then served with some citrus juice squeezed on top?”

“As you wish.”

I waited, excited, only to be served lemon-flavored meunière for some reason. They had added salt, as requested, and the buttery taste was mostly replaced with the sourness of the citrus juice. This meunière was a lot more

refreshing than the one that was previously served, but it wasn't what I had asked for. I wanted simple, salted fish.

Of course, I couldn't complain about the court chefs here and now; one wrong move on my part would inevitably lead to them being fired. I was to blame for the confusion more than anyone—my instructions evidently hadn't been clear enough, and as they were passed from person to person like a game of telephone before they reached the chefs, I needed to speak precisely enough that the specifics of my request would remain intact.

Sigh. I wanted to eat salted fish.

I wasn't being ungrateful, by any means; I was still glad to have been afforded the chance to eat fish after such a long time. I was also wearing a genuine smile, in stark contrast to Ferdinand, whose dazzling expression was entirely fake. It was the smile he gave whenever he was extremely disgusted or otherwise dissatisfied. Clearly, he was thinking that the unimpressive flavor hadn't been worth all the time and mana he had spent maintaining the time-stopping magic tool.

"There are still some ingredients left over, are there not?" I asked Lieseleta. "Tell my chefs to put them back in the time-stopping magic tool."

"Rozemyne, why would you make such a request?" Ferdinand asked, his smile even more saccharine than before. I could tell just how much he wanted to yell at me for giving him more work to do as the mana supplier, and it seemed that I wasn't the only one; Wilfried and Charlotte were glancing nervously between him and me.

"I intend to experiment with cooking fish more at the temple," I replied, aware that I was guaranteed more freedom there than here in the castle. It was also easier to direct the chefs there. It seemed that Ferdinand wasn't satisfied with this answer, however, so I continued. "You can make a delicious soup using fish if you properly handle the broth. I wish from the bottom of my heart to improve the zanbelsuppe we had today."

I wasn't going to set my standards too high and expect something on the level of soupe de poisson; acqua pazza or bouillabaisse would do. My main priority was making something that actually tasted good.

“Books, sweets, cuisine... You truly are ravenous when it comes to the things you want,” Ferdinand said with a look of exasperation. He was the last person I wanted to hear that from, considering what he was like when it came to delicious consommé and researching magic tools. His fake smile had vanished, though, so I could conclude that he was interested in my proposition.

Despite his silent disapproval, Ferdinand hadn’t actually forbidden me from taking the remaining ingredients back to the temple. I decided to ask Lieseleta to ensure that something else was packed alongside the prepared fish fillet.

“Do remind them to pack the bones and heads as well.”

“Did you say the bones and heads?” Lieseleta asked curiously. “What would you need those for?”

I glanced over at Ferdinand, who was once again wearing his false smile, then back at Lieseleta. “As one uses chicken bones to make chicken broth, they are essential for making fish broth. If you phrase it like that, I am certain the chefs will understand which parts are important.”

“Very well,” Lieseleta replied, then headed for the kitchen without making a sound. As I watched her go, I steeled my resolve to eat some very delicious fish.

Incidentally, while we had found the zanbelsuppe to be terrible, Aurelia had been starved for the Ahrensbach food she was so familiar with and rejoiced over the opportunity to eat it. She hadn’t been able to eat the fikken no matter how good it was, however, so perhaps completely tasteless food was actually more agreeable to her at the moment.

Returning to the Temple and the Meeting with the Gutenbergs

Ferdinand had instructed me to climb into my Pandabus and take the time-stopping magic tool containing the fish back to the temple. I gleefully prepared to do just that and turned Lessy into a family-sized car, as per usual, only to have Ferdinand tell me that wasn't big enough.

"Rozemyne, the tool will not fit inside a highbeast of that size," he said. "Make it as large as you would when carrying the Gutenbergs."

"Is the time-stopping tool that big?" I asked, looking at him questioningly. Either way, I did as instructed and made Lessy about as large as a bus.

"Look there," he replied, directing my attention to several male servants carrying a box easily big enough for an adult man to lay inside and stretch his legs.

"And that thing is filled with fish?"

"Some of it has already been used, so I cannot imagine it is completely full."

Judithe was acting as my guard knight, so she climbed into the passenger seat of my Pandabus. After confirming that my scholars were with me as well, I made for the temple. Roderick looked tense, as this was his first time going there.

"Welcome back."

"We have been eagerly awaiting your return, Lady Rozemyne."

As usual, my temple attendants were there to greet me when I arrived. "Fran, Zahm, Gil, Fritz—please take this box to the kitchen," I said. "And feel free to request the help of others if it proves too heavy for just the four of you. After that, bring Hugo and Ella to my chambers. I wish to discuss the new ingredients with them."

Fran called several gray priests over to help them carry the tool. Meanwhile, my retainers put away their highbeasts and waited. They were all used to the temple—aside from Roderick, who looked entirely perplexed.

“You summon chefs to your chambers, Lady Rozemyne?”

“My attendants do not approve, but direct communication is crucial to avoid any misunderstandings,” I explained. Back when we had needed to discuss the Italian restaurant and their becoming court chefs, among other things, Fran had used to grimace whenever I asked for servants to be brought to my chambers. Now that he had seen me do it so many times, however, he seemed to acknowledge that it was necessary.

“You would do well to embrace this too, Roderick,” I continued. “The sooner you adjust to my methods, the better. Now that I have your name, there is a good chance that you will one day become my closest retainer.”

“I will do my best,” Roderick replied with a nod.

Philine offered a gentle smile. “Lady Rozemyne also invites commoner merchants to discussions of the printing and paper-making industries, and she even asks for their opinions, so you mustn’t allow such minor revelations to surprise you.”

I put away Lessy while Fran and the others finished moving the luggage, then entered the temple. Nicola greeted me with a bright voice when we arrived at my High Bishop’s chambers. She had already prepared tea, and the accompanying aroma of sweets made me feel truly at home.

“Philine, start explaining the nature of temple work to Roderick,” I said. “Damuel, speak with the others and determine in what order you will guard me. I only need two guard knights in the temple; having five in these chambers is entirely unnecessary.”

“Understood.”

I sipped my tea and enjoyed this year’s last batch of parue cakes while giving out instructions. Soon enough, Hugo and Ella arrived, looking especially nervous. Their eyes were flitting between my retainers.

“Now, please tell me about these new ingredients,” I said to the chefs.

“It was a struggle,” Hugo replied, a distant look in his eyes. “Ahrensbach ingredients are not easy to work with at all. In fact, they can be exceptionally dangerous if not handled and dissected properly.”

After removing the fish from the time-stopping magic tool, the chefs needed to put them in a covered pot, secure the lid with weights, and immediately light the fire; even the slightest hesitation would result in the fish taking flight and attacking everyone.

Apparently, the magic tool contained many, many strange creatures. Preparing one of the fish required the chefs to prod it with a wooden stick to make it spit out all its stones, which came out with such force that potlids had to be used as shields. Another fish needed to be very carefully dissected, but not even the court chefs knew where to start. The kitchen had essentially turned into a war zone—which wasn’t much of a surprise in a world where mushrooms danced and vegetables grew violent.

Well, the fish tasted normal, but I suppose they’re actually far from it.

“As we did not know what ingredients you would need, Lady Rozemyne, everything that was left over in the castle was returned to the magic tool to be brought here,” Ella said. “The court chefs have warned that some of these ingredients are better thrown away, as commoner chefs would struggle to safely dissect them. Even the most violent fey creature will die without water, and as these are fish, it seems we can simply leave them atop some earth and wait for the inevitable.”

I firmly shook my head. “We will not be throwing anything away. I will ask the High Priest how to dissect them and do it myself.”

“You’re likely to struggle with your, erm... delicate arms,” Hugo noted with some reluctance. Ella was nodding in agreement beside him, but I was confident in my fish filleting skills. Surely I could manage with my schtappe turned into a knife.

“No matter your thoughts, do not discard anything before I have consulted the High Priest.”

“Understood.”

Having finished their post-battle report, the chefs proceeded to give Nicola papers describing how to dissect the remaining ingredients.

“You need not begin right away, Nicola, but start by trying to understand the recipes,” I said. “At this early stage, I assume you won’t be able to tell me which fish is used in zanbelsuppe, for example. Once you understand the recipes, attempt to follow them using our own methods.”

“I will do my best.”

After the chefs exited the room, I wrote to Ferdinand asking him to teach me how to dissect the fish. I was sure he was capable; he was such an expert on fey creatures that he even knew how to defeat rare species that only lived in Ahrensbach.

“Zahm, deliver this letter to the High Priest. Fran, you may begin your report on what happened while I was away.”

“Understood.”

I was updated on the situation, but it didn’t seem like much had changed in my absence. The children in the orphanage were doing well, and Konrad was now able to read and do simple math. I could see Philine listening carefully as Wilma gave her report.

“Playing with the children of the lower city while accompanying Lutz to the forest in autumn did wonders for him,” Wilma said. “They promised to play in the forest again when spring comes, so he has been striving to learn all the karuta before then.” It was good to know that the orphans and the children of the lower city were steadily getting closer.

“I wish to decide on a date to meet with the Gutenbergs,” I said, “but when might a good time be? Both the winter coming-of-age ceremony and the spring baptism ceremonies are right around the corner.”

“Indeed they are,” Fran replied, “and after the baptisms is Spring Prayer. If you intend to send the Gutenbergs on another long trip, I would advise that you speak with them before the coming-of-age ceremony.”

“The workshop will also need time to prepare, so we’ll need to know the leaving date well in advance,” Gil added.

We casually agreed that we would come up with some suggestions and ask the Gutenbergs which they preferred, and it was then that Zahm briskly returned from the High Priest's chambers. "My apologies, Lady Rozemyne," he said. "The High Priest wishes to ask the Gutenbergs some questions, so he is going to be attending the meeting as well. Here are the dates that work for him."

The atmosphere in the room changed in an instant; Ferdinand joining us meant we couldn't do things as we normally would. We would need to summon the Gutenbergs on a date we decided, and we would need a properly prepared room. The Gutenbergs would also need to dress up.

"But there's only one date that the High Priest can do before the coming-of-age ceremony!" I exclaimed.

"Then that will need to be the date," Zahm said. "Please write the letters of summons to the Plantin Company and the Gutenbergs."

I went over to my desk straight away, penned the letters, and then turned to Gil. "Send these to the Plantin Company! Explain the circumstances to them as well."

"At once!" Gil replied, rushing out of my chambers. There was much to be done, so Fran and Zahm started discussing the tea and sweets we would provide while the guard knights planned out their schedules for the day.

"Lady Rozemyne, as there are going to be more nobles in attendance this time, let us use a meeting room in the noble section of the temple," Fran suggested. I was going to be bringing more retainers with me than usual, and Ferdinand would naturally be bringing his. The orphanage director's chambers would end up being too cramped, and more people were bound to complain about how the furniture wasn't appropriate for someone of my high status.

I nodded at Fran and asked that he reserve a meeting room for us, while Zahm left to inform the High Priest that we had settled on a date.

Gil must have sprinted the entire journey to and from the Plantin Company because he returned not long after Zahm did, desperately gasping for air. "The Plantin Company agreed to the date, but they want to know when to bring the

completed mattress. Will during this meeting do, or should they arrange it for another day?"

"There are many ceremonies in spring, and the Gutenbergs must prepare to leave, correct? Having them bring the mattress on the same day sounds ideal, but"—I turned to look at Fran—"would that be too soon? Shall we prepare the High Bishop's chambers for guests?"

"It does not matter how soon it is," Fran replied emphatically. "It is the job of attendants to make these preparations in the time frame given. There is no need for you to worry, Lady Rozemyne."

"From our viewpoint as guards, it is better for the commoner craftsmen to settle this in your chambers while you are attending the meeting," Damuel added, while Cornelius nodded in agreement. And so, it was decided that the Gutenbergs would deliver the mattress on the same day.

I can't help but wonder—what does Ferdinand even want to ask them?

The date of the meeting had arrived, and the room was almost overflowing with people. Ferdinand and I were naturally here, as were our retainers and temple attendants. There were also Benno, Mark, Damian, and Lutz from the Plantin Company, as well as the rest of the Gutenbergs, who were visibly anxious despite being well-trained enough to visit the temple. Josef, one of our ink craftspeople, was particularly on edge. The look on his face seemed to say, "Going to the orphanage director's chambers is bad enough; how do you think I feel about being here in the noble section?"

"Lady Rozemyne, there is something I wish to introduce you to before the meeting begins," Benno said. "This is a chair, the seat of which incorporates the same innovations as your mattress. Would you like to accept it in addition to your order?"

Ingo and Zack brought a fancy-looking chair into the meeting room. Its legs and armrests were nicely decorated, and the seat was upholstered with dyed cloth. It was a beautiful piece of furniture clearly designed for a woman.

"This is a chair we made while experimenting for your mattress," Benno continued. "The wooden parts were made by Ingo's carpentry workshop and

the mattress by Zack's smithy. The necessary dyes were courtesy of the ink craftswoman Heidi, while the actual dyeing was done by Effa, your Renaissance."

I decided to test it out and found that it was harder than the sofas from my Urano days—although this was probably to be expected, considering that it was more or less just coils covered in cloth. Still, it was leagues above wooden boards, and it didn't hurt my butt to sit on. If paired with a nice cushion—or a blanket in the case of the mattress—it would probably be really comfortable. The most important thing about the chair to me, however, was hearing that the Gutenbergs had all worked together to make it.

"Yes, I quite like this chair. I shall purchase it alongside the mattress." I took out my guild card and tapped it against Benno's to pay him.

"What is all this, Rozemyne?" Ferdinand asked with a glare, breaking the silence he had maintained thus far. "I do not believe you mentioned anything about a 'mattress' in your reports."

"Erm, well, this was a personal purchase, and the product is still rather experimental," I said, hoping that he would allow me this one indulgence. I wanted the Gutenbergs to focus on the printing industry for now, so I was planning to wait until all their traveling across the duchy was complete before making mattresses public. "I intended to quietly introduce it to you once all the trial and error was complete, so—"

"I could not care less about your personal circumstances," Ferdinand snapped, his eyes narrowed. "I want an explanation of your strange new product."

It was clear that I didn't have a choice in the matter, so I ultimately conceded. "A mattress is designed to make beds even more comfortable—and as Zack noticed, they can be used for chairs as well. I won't need any for my Pandabus, but they will make carriages far more tolerable to use."

Benno and Zack glanced up without a moment's hesitation, wearing the mercantile expressions of two men who had just spotted a profitable enterprise. There wasn't a doubt in my mind that they planned to take the guildmaster for all he was worth.

“Rozemyne, allow me to sit there,” Ferdinand said. “If this chair is as comfortable as you suggest, I shall order one myself.”

“If you teach me how to dissect fish, then certainly.”

I had already asked Ferdinand once in my recent letter to him, but his response had said only that he planned to attend this meeting. I hadn’t forgotten about the fish, though, and I wouldn’t let him fool me. I stared up at him, making it clear that I wasn’t going to budge on this matter.

Ferdinand frowned at me, then let out a defeated sigh. “Very well.”

I stood up with a grin and offered my chair to Ferdinand. He sat down, touched the seat several times, and then tried it with and without a cushion on it.

After quite some time, Ferdinand gave his verdict. “I will order a bench made with this mattress after the meeting. Gido, prepare the necessary form.”

His attendant replied with a dutiful “Understood” and swiftly exited the meeting room. Based on the fact that Ferdinand was ordering not just a regular chair but an entire bench, I assumed that he was quite taken with the mattress.

Wait... Don’t tell me he intends to put that in his workshop and use it as a bed.

I tried not to dwell on the thought and instead turned to the Gutenbergs. “Now, I must request your winter reports.”

Benno provided a summary of the book sale at the castle and a comparison of Groschel, Haldenzel, and the Rozemyne Workshop. We could reduce our prices thanks to the use of plant paper, but books were still expensive. Ehrenfest also had a very finite number of customers to appeal to, and increased competition had resulted in a decrease in sales overall.

“I am told that printed books are being debuted in the Royal Academy next year, and I am eager to see how the market grows,” Benno continued. “We are also making steady progress with the stationery that you requested. It is proving very convenient for organizing documents written on plant paper.”

Benno and the others were working hard to realize my ideas, including the old-fashioned folders that secured papers in place with string and the filing

cabinets used to store them. There were a few miscellaneous pieces as well—items that one would normally find in a one-hundred-yen shop.

"Deliver twenty or so to the High Bishop's chambers, with the Rozemyne Workshop crest on them," I said. "We're going to be using this stationery more and more, so we'll also need machines that can poke holes in paper in a more uniform fashion and machines that can cut sheets to a uniform size."

In other words, I wanted hole punches and guillotines. I was starting to consider staplers as well when Johann twitched. His fears were very much justified; this was going to be his job, after all.

In any case, Johann gave a report on the proliferation of pumps and the Groschel craftspeople he had been working with over the winter. "Almost every well from the north end to the center of town has a pump now," he said. "As you suggested, Lady Rozemyne, we prioritized putting them where the merchants from other duchies are expected to stay. We intend to continue our work along Craftsman's Alley and then start in the south part of the city."

It seemed that Johann's disciple, Danilo, was making excellent progress, meaning Johann had someone to share his workload with. Everyone at Zack's workshop had similarly spent so much time making mattress coils that they could complete Ferdinand's order themselves.

"And the ink?" I asked. "How is that coming along?"

Josef started his report on ink made from Groschel ingredients. Heidi was sitting this one out, since there were so many nobles in attendance, but her research results were on another level. She had made so many more colors than I expected.

"Heidi very much looks forward to the next long trip when she can obtain new ingredients," Josef concluded.

"I see; I shall send these research results to Giebe Groschel. And do tell Heidi that the Gutenbergs are going to Leisegang in the spring. You will once again be accompanied by scholars and archduke candidates, and while I am sure that sounds unnerving to you all, I trust you to do well."

Josef nervously raised a hand, seeking my permission to speak.

“Yes, Josef?”

“My sincerest apologies for speaking out of turn, but for this next trip, we were hoping that you might allow us to stay in the lower city, as we did in Groschel, rather than in a noble’s estate.”

Heidi needed to be present for their ink research to see any progress, but Josef would have a heart attack trying to live with her in a noble’s estate. Given how she tended to act, that was something I could understand.

“If you believe that is for the best, I shall negotiate with Giebe Leisegang for you to have residence in the lower city.”

“Thank you.”

It appeared that Josef wasn’t the only one pleased about this news; Zack and Johann looked just as relieved.

Like last year, we would be leaving for Leisegang after the Central District part of Spring Prayer was over. I asked all those gathered to be ready to leave by then, and everyone nodded without a change in expression, having become accustomed to the process after so many long-term trips. That concluded the winter reports and our discussion about Leisegang—but there was still one more thing to cover.

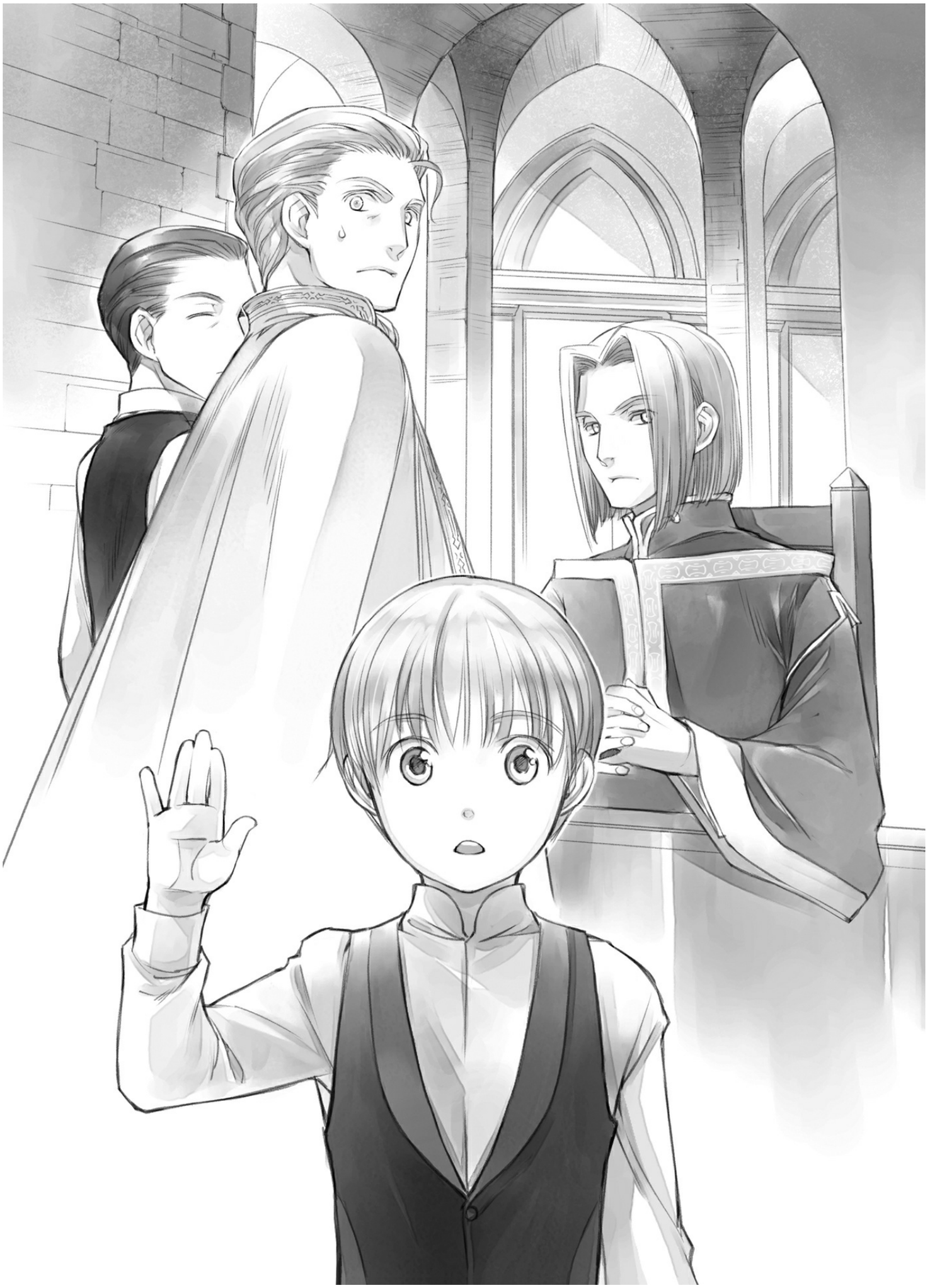
“Ferdinand, did you not have something that you wished to ask the Gutenbergs?”

He glanced up and said, “Ah, yes,” putting every single Gutenberg in the room on edge. “Does Ehrenfest’s lower city have a store that deals in feystones?”

Benno and Mark blinked a few times, seemingly unsure. The craftspeople, however, clearly knew what Ferdinand was talking about. They didn’t know how to answer without potentially coming off as rude, so they each looked at the others, trying to push the job of answering onto someone else.

Ferdinand was getting annoyed about the lack of a response when a lone voice cut through the silence. “As a lowly servant, I apologize for the discourtesy of asking at all, but might I receive permission to speak?” It was Lutz, who was standing behind Benno. He was the perfect person to answer this question; he had been raised in the same environment as the craftspeople but

had also been studying how to speak to nobles at the Plantin Company.



Ferdinand raised an eyebrow, then permitted Lutz to speak.

“There is a store in the lower city that buys the feystones made when one fails to dissect a feybeast in the forest,” Lutz explained. I never went hunting myself, so this was all news to me, but making a mistake when cutting up a feybeast produced a feystone worth anything from a middle copper to a large copper. The store that bought them was by the west gate, near where the market was held.

“And what feybeasts do you hunt?” Ferdinand asked.

“Primarily shumils, but feystones from eifintes and zantzes fetch a higher price, since they are harder to obtain.”

Shumils are like small versions of Schwartz and Weiss, right? They hunt them?

It was a shocking revelation, but I knew what life was like in the lower city and understood that it couldn’t be helped. I would simply put it out of my mind.

“I see,” Ferdinand said. “Scrap stones, then. Do you know whom the purchased feystones are then sold to?”

Lutz shook his head. “Only the workers of the store or those of the Merchant’s Guild would know that.”

“I see...”

Ferdinand seemed to be deep in thought, so I turned to Benno. “How is the Klassenberg merchant doing? I could not ask before due to the giebes being at the castle.” I thought it was very mature of me to have waited until now to ask, but Benno’s eyes hardened in response. He was still wearing a smile, but I could tell that he didn’t want to talk about it while Ferdinand and the other nobles were here. Unfortunately for him, it was unlikely that we would ever meet again without this many nobles around, Ferdinand notwithstanding.

“She is a skilled lehange,” Benno said. “I believe that all one needs to know about her is being detailed in letters.”

“Her name is Karin, correct? I found her information about the state of affairs in Klassenberg and other duchies to be very interesting indeed, but I am finding it difficult to judge what kind of person she is. Furthermore, I would like to

know how much she has been learning about us and sending home in turn. As the one responsible for her, Benno, I think you are best suited to enlighten us."

Benno endured my stern glare for a brief moment before averting his gaze, having been beaten by my persistence. "As we understand it, she had no reason to expect that she was going to be left in Ehrenfest. She comes across as stouthearted for the most part, but there are times when she just looks uneasy. We were concerned that she would try to make contact with some outside source to feed them information, but she doesn't seem to have attempted anything of the sort since the end of autumn."

"So, what do you intend to do about her?"

Benno stroked his chin. "For now? Nothing at all. I see no issue with us treating her as a normal lehange and then ending the contract when the time comes."

Aw, what? You're not going to marry her?

"I see..." My hopes had certainly been raised, since Corinna had mentioned their relationship changing at the end of winter, but it seemed that nothing had happened in the end. It was unfortunate, to say the least. "Otto and Corinna gave me the impression that I might be blessing you during the next Starbind Ceremony."

"That would never happen," Benno replied, his dark-red eyes boring into my soul as he willed me to stop messing around. I gulped, thanking my lucky stars that there were so many guard knights around me. If anyone deserved his anger it was Otto, Corinna, and the guildmaster, since they were the ones trying to get Benno to marry Karin. I wasn't involved whatsoever.

"We will primarily need to be on guard against Karin from the end of spring to the summer," Benno continued, "since that is when her father is due to return for her. That said, this is a problem between merchants; we will not trouble you or the archduke, High Bishop."

I gave a careful nod; it was clear beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was resolved to settle this matter himself, no matter what that entailed. "I trust your decision and your resolve, Benno—but if you are ever in need of my power, please do not hesitate to ask."

“Thank you,” Benno said politely. He then gave a confident grin that seemed to say, “Heh, look at you getting all cocky. I can handle this myself, idiot.”

Dissecting Fish

The coming-of-age ceremony for commoners was held at the end of winter, and the plan (of my dreams) was for the fish to be dissected at some point between then and the baptism ceremony at the start of spring.

“Ferdinand, when and where are we going to be dissecting the fish?”

I asked this same question every single day while assisting him with his work. It wasn’t until the third day that he gave me an answer, all the while fixing me with a cold glare as though he were looking at garbage. The joke was on him, though; I was pretty much immune to his icy stare by this point.

“Two days from now, in the afternoon. It will be done in your workshop.”

“I would rather do it in the morning so that we can have the fish ready for dinner the same day. You are invited, of course. We’ll need to make a lot, since we’re cooking for everyone in the orphanage too, so you might as well share in the fruits of our labor.”

Ferdinand was so exhausted that he relented, agreeing to dissect the fish with me in the morning no matter how annoying he found it.

“Is there anything I need to do to prepare?” I asked.

“Summon all of your guard knights, change into riding clothes, and ensure your hair is tied securely behind your head. Do not underestimate what we are up against.”

His response seemed a little strange, considering that we were just going to be preparing food, but I decided not to give it any further thought and sent an ordonnanz to the castle. I would need my attendants to bring my riding clothes with them as well.

It was only a short while later that Lieseleta arrived with the riding clothes, with Leonore and Judithe serving as her guards.

“Lieseleta, Monika has said that she wishes to learn the noble way of tying up hair,” I said. “Would you mind teaching her?”

“Not at all. It may take a while, though; perhaps you could spend that time reading?” Lieseleta suggested with a giggle. It was a truly magnificent idea, and I wasted no time picking up the book that Fran had prepared for me.

“Lady Rozemyne’s hair is quite silky and smooth to the touch, but that makes it harder to grip and properly secure in place,” Lieseleta said, brushing my hair before gently taking a lock of it in her hand. I caught the beginning of her explanation, but it wasn’t long before I was absorbed in my book and stopped paying attention to her entirely.

It was the day of the fish dissections. I woke up early, ate breakfast, had Monika tie up my hair, then got Nicola to change me into my riding clothes. I was ready to go and overflowing with enthusiasm.

“Leonore, Angelica, are all of my guard knights here?”

“Yes. All of them,” Angelica said, her chest puffed out. “I spotted Judithe through the window just a moment ago. I can enhance my eyesight now.”

In stark contrast to Angelica’s proud demeanor, Leonore was looking at me with a clouded, worried expression. “You seem quite excited, Lady Rozemyne. Are you not likely to collapse at this rate?” she asked.

“I’m quite alright. I won’t collapse. Not before I’ve enjoyed my fish, that is!”

“...It is good to see you so enthused.”

Once I was changed, I told Zahm to inform Ferdinand that we were ready, while Angelica summoned the other knights.

“Lady Rozemyne, a message from the High Priest,” Zahm said upon his return. “He wishes for you to bring the magic tool to your workshop. He also said for you to bring the implements he has listed.”

I made my way to the workshop as instructed and opened the doors. The attendants had moved the boxes, desks, and such used for brewing into a corner, making space for the magic tool that was placed in the center of the

room. Hugo and Ella then brought in a sturdy pot with a lid, exactly as Ferdinand had requested.

“Do we really need to be this careful...?” I asked. “I mean, we’re only preparing fish.”

“The ingredients we have are the ones the court chefs had no use for, right?” Leonore asked. “There are many fey creatures eaten in Ahrensbach that I could imagine commoners struggling with.” She then went on to name a few, but there weren’t any I recognized.

“Leonore, are there any fish in there that we can salt-grill?” I made sure to note that what I had in mind was a very simple process—one just needed to cut a cross into the skin and then sprinkle it with a generous amount of salt before cooking.

Leonore looked somewhat troubled. “Do you mean to say that you only cut as deep as the skin? In that case, do you cook it without removing the organs? That sounds very difficult... Is it essential that you prepare it that way?”

“I assumed that salt-grilling was the simplest cooking method,” I muttered, surprised that she had rejected the idea almost immediately. “Would you rather we boil it or something?”

“The issue is not the method of cooking but your suggestion that the skin and organs not be removed first.”

In other words, we had no choice but to fillet the fish. I was contemplating other ways to prepare it when Ferdinand arrived with Justus and Eckhart in tow. They entered the workshop and stood in front of the magic tool alongside my guards.

“Let us begin by dealing with the most troublesome specimens,” Ferdinand said. “Rozemyne, watch from the side, and take care not to interfere.”

I wanted to be of some use in filleting the fish, but if even something as simple as salt-grilling was complicated in this world, maybe it was best for me to stand down. Judithe was assigned to guard me, while I sat and watched from one of the tables that had been pushed into the corner.

“Everyone, form shields of Wind and enclose the taunadel,” Ferdinand

instructed.

“Yes, sir!” replied the knights. They formed their geteilts and moved into a circle, much like a gathering of athletes before a sports match. Ferdinand opened the cover of the time-stopping magic tool, removed a taunadel, and then crudely flung it into the center of the huddling knights. No sooner had he taken out what he needed than he shut the tool again.

That fish looks a bit like a yellow urchin with a tail... Or maybe more like a puffer fish.

As I squinted to get a closer look, the taunadel grew longer and thinner, and the spines covering its body turned purple at the tips before they started shooting from its body. I couldn’t believe how aggressive the fish was, but the barrier of shields surrounding it meant that its attack was simply reflected, causing the spines to shoot straight back at the taunadel. It almost seemed too easy, but I could imagine commoners struggling to deal with such a sudden barrage.

“Keep your guard up until the taunadel runs out of spines,” Ferdinand said. “Each spine is poisonous, so getting stabbed would not be ideal.”

“Yes, sir!” the knights barked again, all wearing stony expressions.

My ears twitched at his words. “Erm, Ferdinand... It seems to me that the poisonous spines are all jabbing into the fish. Will the meat still be edible?”

“I do not know,” he replied curtly.

I took a sharp breath despite myself and cried, “What do you mean, you don’t know?! I want you to teach me how to *dissect* the fish, not *fight* them! They need to be safe to eat!”

“How am I supposed to know? Never before have I dissected a fey creature with the intention of eating it. This method will allow us to collect resources from the taunadel without issue. If you... truly insist on eating it, I suppose you may use a potion to detect whether the meat is poisonous.”

I wasn’t sure I could stomach fish that was full of poison—or fish that just didn’t taste very nice, for that matter. I specifically wanted to eat something tasty.

This is such a disappointment! I've never been more disappointed with Ferdinand in my life!

Once the fish had no more spines to shoot out, the knights put on gloves and started collecting them. They were valuable brewing ingredients, apparently.

"You desired the meat, correct?" Ferdinand asked.

"Not when there's poison in it. How am I supposed to eat that?" I asked, harrumphing at the very idea. He shook his head, said that I was a handful, and then "graciously" deposited several poisonous spines into my brewing ingredient box. It wasn't what I wanted at all.

I wanted food, not brewing ingredients. Will I even get to eat fish today...?

Just as my dream was beginning to die, however, Ferdinand came over to me. "Here. Regisch should suit your needs. You wish to dissect it, no? This contains no poison and should therefore be safe to eat."

"Really?!" I exclaimed, leaning forward.

Ferdinand plopped two rainbow-colored fish on the table, each about thirty centimeters long. They barely reacted, perhaps due to the lingering influence of the time-stopping magic tool. "Eckhart, Cornelius, hold their tails," he said. "Do not let them escape."

"Sir!"

"Rozemyne, flood this one with your mana." Ferdinand noted that regisches had very hard scales that knives couldn't cut through, but that these scales became even harder as the fish absorbed more mana. "Once it has been filled completely, the scales will swell and spread out. Flood it all at once and then tear them off."

It was clear that only nobles were able to dissect regisches, which begged the question—why had they ended up in Aurelia's luggage? Commoner chefs would clearly be unable to deal with them. I was at a loss, but in any case, I poured my mana into the fish. The time-stopping magic seemed to fade, and the regisches began to flounder violently.

"Guh!" Cornelius yelped. It seemed that even he was having a hard time

holding one of the regisches by its tail, so I drew upon even the mana that I usually kept compressed and slammed it all into the fish. “Stop flailing!”

An instant later, its scales swelled up and turned into what seemed to be tear-shaped feystones. The regisch flapped around feebly as Cornelius continued to hold it down.

“Now, tear them all off,” Ferdinand said, having already poured mana into the other regisch. I did as instructed, grabbing one feystone scale after another without hesitation; descaling a fish was such a fundamental skill that it was almost second nature. Once I was done with one side, I flipped the fish over and got to work on the other.

I don’t think I’ve ever tried peeling such big, round scales before. They must be, like, over five centimeters long!

Not only were the regisch’s rainbow scales beautiful, but they were also all the same size. I took one between my thumb and index finger, then held it up to the light so that I could see through it.

“This scale is so shiny and pretty. If we make a few alterations, I think we could use it as an accessory...” I mused aloud. I was sure that I could get Zack or Johann to cut it for me, but when I turned to everyone else for their thoughts, I saw them staring at me in utter disbelief. “U-Uh... Was it something I said...?”

“You fool. That in your hand is a rainbow feystone,” Ferdinand said. “It contains all elements, and on top of that, it is filled with your own mana. It is a highly valuable ingredient—not something to be wasted on such a frivolous endeavor.”

I was aware that rainbow-colored feystones contained all the elements, but it hadn’t occurred to me that this scale was a feystone. Evidently, it had morphed into one while I was forcing my mana into it.

“The knights all used their mana to slay the taunadel, so give one feystone to each of them,” Ferdinand said. I did as instructed and then gave a feystone to Judithe as well. It seemed only natural that she should get one, considering that she had guarded me, but she received my offering with a conflicted expression.

“I didn’t fight, though...” she said.

“You guarded me, no? As was agreed after the ternisbefallen incident, we must reward not only those who attack the enemy, but those who play crucial support roles as well. Otherwise, everyone would want to be attackers, and we would not have anyone to serve as guards.”

“Lord Bonifatius scolded us the other day for how we gave out points back then, but I didn’t think that logic would apply here too...” Judithe said, nodding. It seemed that the knights hadn’t yet fully absorbed the message. Perhaps I would need to inform Bonifatius.

Once everyone who was owed a feystone had received one, I turned my attention back to the bare, twitching regisch in front of me. Its scales were its only valuable resource, and now that they had all been removed, it looked like any other white meat fish. My first thought was that it would taste delicious cooked with herbs or salt. Frying it sounded good as well.

“Ferdinand, may I salt-grill this?” I asked.

“I would advise you to remove the flesh before anything else. Once it dies completely, it will turn into a feystone.”

“Oh, right! I forgot about that!”

It had completely slipped my mind, since the regisch before me looked so much like an ordinary fish, but fey creatures turned into feystones upon death. In short, they would become inedible. Now I understood why cooking Ahrensbach fish whole was so difficult.

Filleting it is, then.

I whipped out my schtappe, chanted “*messer*,” and then went to remove the regisch’s head. But before my knife even touched the fish—

“Fool!” Ferdinand barked. “Cut into the body, not the head!”

“Ah.”

The Japanese-style filleting I was so used to would have killed the regisch in an instant, but I didn’t know any other method. I stopped, knife in hand, and nervously looked around.

“You may count on me, Lady Rozemyne,” Angelica said, striding forward with

Stenluke in hand. “I’m an expert on dissecting things.”

“You may rest easy, master of my master,” Stenluke agreed.

Cornelius lifted the regisch by its tail and tossed it up into the air. Stenluke’s feystone flashed, and Angelica swung her manablade with a sharp expression. An instant later, there was a pile of expertly cut fish meat before me.

“There, Lady Rozemyne.”

Oh my god. That was amazing. Angelica’s cooler than she’s ever been!

My heart was throbbing at Angelica’s heroism, and it seemed that I wasn’t alone—Eckhart was comparing her and the chopped-up regisch with raised eyebrows. “You are strangely dexterous at times, Angelica,” he observed.

“I’ve been doing a lot of training with Lord Bonifatius,” she explained.

Upon hearing this, I professed my love for my dear grandfather Bonifatius from the bottom of my heart. I wanted to entrust all further fish dissecting to him and Angelica.

Among the other fish, there were eel-looking things called meerschlanges, which were over a meter long and covered with eyes like a ternisbefallen, and a flounder-like fish with a bunch of eyes on its back. Both were dissected pretty normally, despite how strange they looked. Apparently, it was very hard for commoner chefs to prepare the eyes properly.

Ferdinand dissected the meerschlanges with as much style as Angelica when she had sliced up the regisch. I had witnessed many battles during my time in this world, but I could say with confidence that both of them looked cooler now than ever. They were like expert sushi chefs dominating the cutting board.

Be still, my beating heart! Aah, my precious fish!



Soon enough, Ferdinand got to work on another strange fish called a sprasch, which was only about as large as a sardine. He took some pieces of meerschlange he had chopped up earlier and put them in the sturdy pot we had with us, violently threw some sprasches in as well, then slammed the lid on and shouted for all the knights to help him hold it in place.

The events that followed were almost surreal. As I watched on in a daze, there was a sudden, loud explosion from within the pot that made me jump. More explosions continued one after another, causing the pot to rumble furiously.

“Erm, Ferdinand. The fish seem to be exploding...” I said.

“We must wait until the explosions stop,” he replied. “Knights, continue to hold the lid so that it does not come off.”

Only when the blasts stopped was the lid removed. Inside the pot, to my complete surprise, was fish paste.

Aah, I want meerschlange-and-sprasch-ball soup! But there’s no miso here! If only this place had soy sauce... I would have been fine even with clear soup.

The knowledge that those thoughts were even crossing my mind made me realize just how much I had grown accustomed to this very unusual world.

I was hoping to find something resembling shrimp or prawns in the time-stopping magic tool, but nothing caught my eye. I wanted to make bouillabaisse with shellfish, but as that evidently wasn’t an option, I decided to settle for using normal fish instead. The famous *Marseille Bouillabaisse Charter* forbade the use of shellfish, squid, and octopus anyway, so a dish made without them would presumably be more authentic. Then again, it also said that only fish from the Mediterranean reef were allowed to be used, so I was going to be violating it either way. For me personally, all that mattered was that I was making bouillabaisse with fish of some kind.

I decided to keep the innards of the remaining fish with the intention of making broth to enhance the flavor of the bouillabaisse, and to have the fish paste turned into balls that we would put in the soup.

Hugo and Ella worked hard that evening to create a veritable feast. The knights were able to enjoy the meal as well, since they had played such an important role in helping us dissect the fish, although they naturally had to take turns eating.

The main courses were regisch and the other normal fish fried and cooked with herbs in various ways, which diners could eat according to their preference. I was going to be served the salt-grilled fish that I yearned for so desperately.

“So, Ferdinand—what do you think?” I asked. “They’ve been cooked very similarly to the zanbelsuppe, but with proper broth, even the fish tastes delicious, no?”

“I obtained some valuable ingredients, so this is not as bad as it could have been...” Ferdinand replied. He punctuated his remark with an aloof scoff, but it seemed to me that his hands were moving exceptionally fast.

Well, he seems satisfied enough.

“Aah, fish tastes so good...” I gushed. “I’ve come to want Ahrensbach.”

Ferdinand momentarily choked on his food and then sputtered, “Why would you say that, fool?!” My guard knights were staring at me in similar wide-eyed shock, but it was only when Hartmut remarked on it being a good idea that I realized how extreme my comment must have been.

“Oh? Was that not appropriate for me to say?” I asked. “I simply meant that it must be nice to live in Ahrensbach, what with all its fish...”

“That was not at all clear,” Ferdinand replied.

I laughed it off and waited for my salt-grilled fish to arrive. Fran appeared a short while later and gently set the plate in front of me. It was a simple dish—white fish sprinkled with salt before being cooked—but it had taken a lot of pleading on my part for them not to do anything extraneous to it.

“Is that the salt-cooked fish you were so obstinate about eating?” Ferdinand asked, looking at my plate. “It smells quite agreeable.”

“I know, right?” I replied with a smile before taking a big bite. The flavor really

made me crave some white rice, but it was still absolute bliss. All of a sudden, I glanced up with a start. I was fairly certain I had been in this same situation at some point in the past.

When was it again? Oh, right! That time with Sylvester!

It was back when Sylvester had dressed as a blue priest and asked to taste my meal. I was pretty sure that commenting favorably on the smell of something was the euphemism nobles used to demand food.

Nah, nah, nah. Ferdinand isn't Sylvester. He wouldn't ask for food from my plate.

I glanced over at him, confirmed that he was coolly continuing his meal, then looked down at the single piece of salt-grilled fish before me. The proper thing to do in this situation was to offer him my food and then eat whatever remained once he was satisfied, but I didn't want to surrender my dinner entirely.

"I will not give you the entire dish," I said, trying to recall my wording from back then. "You may have half, though."

Ferdinand raised an eyebrow. "If you remember that much, then you surely remember the correct course of action as well."

"The correct thing to do is pretend that I didn't understand you, right? Since this is my fish, and I refuse to give it up." I gave an indignant "hmph" and then continued to eat until only half of my meal remained. Ferdinand watched me all the while with an indescribable expression.

"Okay, Ferdinand," I said. "You can have the other half." I offered my plate to him, which he accepted with a chuckle.

"You could not call this 'half' by any definition, Rozemyne. This is the High Bishop giving leftovers to the High Priest."

"Hm?"

"Well, regardless—you are of a higher status than me within the temple. I will graciously accept your gift."

I didn't intend to give you my leftovers! Honest! That sounds so cocky! Give

them back!

Of course, I couldn't actually say that out loud, so my only choice was to watch Ferdinand eat the fish... all the while wearing a similarly indescribable expression.

Satisfied with the food, I enjoyed some post-meal tea. Ferdinand was doing the same while looking over me and my retainers.

"Rozemyne, Spring Prayer is just around the corner. I imagine the Leisegangs will welcome you from the bottom of their hearts, but I am uncertain how they will react to Wilfried, who has Veronica's blood and whose reputation will forever be stained by the Ivory Tower incident. You will need to observe matters carefully and prop him up at every opportunity."

In short, I needed to protect Wilfried from the stones cast by the Leisegangs, much like he and Charlotte had protected me when I woke up for winter socializing.

"All of you, protect Rozemyne as well," Ferdinand said, fixing my retainers with a hard stare. "She will one day stand with Wilfried as his first wife. Do not under any circumstances fall for Leisegang's honeyed words."

"Understood."

Spring Prayer and Leaving for Leisegang

This year, Wilfried was due to leave for Spring Prayer before I even finished the spring baptisms. There was a lot for him to balance; he needed to head to Leisegang as soon as he was done here to do some final checks for the printing industry.

"I'm going to be traveling by highbeast as you do to perform ceremonies in both the morning and afternoon," Wilfried explained. "I need to finish things quickly so that I can go to Leisegang."

"I do not mind you copying me, but did you remember to pack rejuvenation potions?" I asked. "Doing two ceremonies in one day is quite a heavy burden." He was going to be using feystones containing my mana, so perhaps the task ahead wouldn't be quite as taxing on him, but there was still reason to be cautious.

Wilfried glanced at Ferdinand, then nodded. "Yeah, I did. I prepared some, since I can make them myself now."

So... you're rejecting the kind potions that Ferdinand often gives us?

The flavor was still pretty awful, but they were much more effective than the potions we learned to make in class. I decided to have Lamprecht carry some with him just in case and told him to ensure that Wilfried didn't push himself too hard.

"Is he really going to be okay?" I asked Ferdinand. "It certainly isn't easy doing the ceremony twice in one day."

"This is nothing compared to when you visited several places in one day back when you were an apprentice blue shrine maiden," he replied. "He has stamina and feystones, whereas you had neither. There is nothing to worry about. Simply let him be."

I would take the chalice from Wilfried when he returned and start doing Spring Prayer ceremonies in the Central District, but this year, there was a lot

for me to do before then. Hartmut and Cornelius also wanted to accompany me now that they were adults and could leave the Noble's Quarter for work.

"No," I said. "Both of you are staying."

"But why?"

There were three main reasons: I didn't need noble scholars with me while doing religious ceremonies, bringing more people meant bringing more food, and we didn't have space for everyone to sleep. That was why all of my retainers except the guard knights I absolutely needed to bring were going to be staying behind. Hartmut glared enviously at Damuel, who was due to accompany me, before clapping his hands together in apparent realization.

"Very well, then, Lady Rozemyne. I will learn the work of a tax official so that I may accompany you during the Harvest Festival."

"What? Retainers can do tax work?"

"Given the shortage of manpower, I am sure the aub will relent after a little pleading."

Okay... Yeah. I can see that happening too.

The "shortage of manpower" he was referring to stemmed from the fact that Sylvester and Ferdinand trusted so few people to accompany me. The former Veronica faction had previously had an iron grip on all important jobs, including those dealing with taxation, and although the key members had since been replaced, a considerable number still remained. I could already imagine Sylvester being introduced to the idea of Taxman Hartmut and agreeing on the spot.

Well, I guess I would *feel safer with Hartmut than someone I don't know... Though I would feel more nervous in another regard.*

"In any case, Hartmut—you're staying behind. To focus on learning to do tax work, I suppose. Cornelius, I understand how much you want to accompany us, but I only need Damuel and Angelica as guards. My apologies, but you will need to remain here as well."

"Lady Rozemyne, why am I the only adult knight being excluded...?" Cornelius

asked, grimacing. Unfortunately for him, no expression of displeasure would change the reality of the situation.

"The primary reason is that there aren't many rooms for nobles in the winter mansions of commoners," I explained. Normal blue priests didn't go to these ceremonies with loads of guard knights in tow, so there were generally only three or so rooms set aside for them. Having several *noble* guard knights accompany me would doubtless be a recipe for trouble.

Damuel could stay in a room for attendants when needed, but Cornelius was a blue-blooded archnoble—the kind of rich boy who would ask to bring attendants to dress him in the morning. He wasn't the kind of guard knight you wanted with you when dealing with commoners.

"Not to mention, we have already decided on you, Leonore, and Angelica coming with me to Leisegang. We want the right people doing the right jobs—Damuel in the Central District, and you in Leisegang."

Our trip to Leisegang would see us staying at Count Leisegang's summer mansion, since we were there not just for Spring Prayer, but for the printing industry as well. Cornelius was far better suited to accompany me there than Damuel, especially since he was a blood relative. Bringing attendants there was considered normal, and they would have plenty of rooms.

"Understood."

It wasn't long before we left for Spring Prayer. Everything from here was business as usual—we asked Hasse's mayor Richt whether there were any problems, performed the ceremony, then went to the monastery to hear the report from the gray priests and switch personnel. I then handed them the manuscript to be printed next year.

"We have safely received ink and paper from the Plantin Company, and printing is progressing smoothly," one of the gray priests informed me. "There has been an unexpected development, however—the townspeople recently asked us how we were spending the winter here, and when we spoke of our work, the men said that they wish to help with printing as their winter handiwork."

“I cannot provide an answer now, but I will consider the matter and prepare a response in case Richt sends a formal inquiry,” I replied. “Having more hands would certainly be appreciated, but is there not a risk that the blizzards will prevent them from returning home? We would need to begin storing more food if so, which is no trivial matter.”

“Indeed. We certainly would not want fighting over food in such an enclosed space.”

The subject was postponed for now, since no progress could be made until it was time to prepare for winter. That marked the end of my conversation with the gray priests and shrine maidens, so I moved to my room.

If the people of Hasse wanted to print, we would need to raise the city’s literacy rate. That likely wouldn’t be a problem, though—they would become more familiar and comfortable with books through their work, which would make them more likely to take their studies seriously. Perhaps now was the time to start thinking about holding lessons. The only problem was that I would much rather start them in the nearby Ehrenfest temple than the faraway monastery. In order to do that, however, I would need some kind of excuse to justify it.

As those thoughts ran through my mind, I changed from my High Bishop robes to the outfit made with Mom’s cloth. I even put on my matching hairpin from Tuuli.

I’m gonna show these off to Dad. Eheheheh.

After eating dinner, I made my way over to the table where the soldiers were seated. They weren’t drinking, since they were on the job, but they were wolfing down Ella and Hugo’s food while laughing uproariously among themselves. My fleeting interactions with the soldiers who came to guard the gray priests—and with Dad in particular—were very special to me. I wouldn’t miss them for anything.

“Hello again, everyone. Would you mind telling me about the lower city?” I asked. “You honorable soldiers who patrol every nook and cranny must be able to provide me with information that I cannot get from my Gutenbergs.”

One of the soldiers wasted no time in seizing the opportunity to speak. “High Bishop! The truth is, the commander’s wife is your Renaissance!”

“It was a big deal when you chose to give her your exclusive business last winter,” another added. “Did you know who it was?”

“Oh my! Truly there are strange coincidences in this world,” I replied, doing my best to feign surprise. Of course, it was no coincidence at all—my choice had come entirely from watching how Tuuli reacted to the provided cloth.

From there, the soldiers began talking about how the Renaissance contest had proceeded—Dad had presumably spoken about it nonstop at the time. They explained that Mom had worked harder than ever before after the choice was narrowed down to three candidates, and that her efforts were ultimately rewarded.

“The commander really lost it when you didn’t give her the title the first time,” one soldier noted. “We all prayed that she’d get selected next time, and our wish came true. Thank you for picking the commander’s wife as your Renaissance. We owe you our lives.”

“Quiet, you lot,” Dad interjected, though his blatant smile made it clear that he was enjoying the conversation. He looked at me and said, “High Bishop, my wife Effa worked very hard for this. She wanted you to wear the clothes she dyed herself. She discussed what cloth would suit you with my daughter, your hairpin maker, and thought very hard about what she would produce.”

My expression softened as I pictured Mom and Tuuli discussing what designs to use. “This is the outfit made from that cloth,” I said, raising my skirt a little in demonstration. “This is what Effa dyed for me.”

The soldiers whistled, and some looked at me with wide eyes, surprised to see that I was actually wearing it. They had probably assumed that Dad was exaggerating when he told them the story. His overbearing love for his family was common knowledge, and he had a tendency to stretch the truth when it came to bragging about them. It brought back very pleasant memories.

“Oh, right. The commander’s daughter works for you too, doesn’t she?” one of the soldiers asked. “Have you met her before?”

“Indeed. I am always wearing her hairpins. This one was made by Tuuli as well,” I said, brushing my fingers against it.

Dad beamed and started boasting to his men about how Mom was challenging Ehrenfest’s new dyeing method and Tuuli was making hairpins for princes. They were already tremendous feats, but somehow, he still managed to exaggerate them.

“For the millionth time—we know, commander. Have you managed to get drunk on the fruit juice?” the soldiers asked, grimacing in a way that confirmed they really had endured the story countless times before.

“Alright, I’ll talk about my son then,” Dad said, having not learned his lesson at all.

“We’ve heard all about him too!”

“Oh, but I have not,” I interjected. “How do the children in the lower city spend their days? In what ways do they differ from the children of the orphanage?”

“The lower-city kids are a more rambunctious bunch than the orphanage’s children,” one soldier said, waving his hand while the others nodded in agreement. “They go around doing whatever they want.”

The orphanage’s children, in contrast, always stayed in neat lines when going to the forest, listened to what the adults said, and greeted the soldiers at the gate. They were striving to talk like the people of the lower city, but when put on the spot, they would instinctively revert back to polite speech.

“No lower-city kid is that polite,” the soldier continued. “They even play pranks on those of us who are the dads of their friends.”

The soldiers reminisced about their youth and about what their own children did, while Dad told me that Kamil had started gathering in the forest and was socializing with the orphanage children through Lutz. “My son said that the kids his age at the orphanage know a lot of stories about knights and the gods,” he said.

Hold on a second... Aren’t Dirk and Konrad the only kids his age at the orphanage?!

I was overjoyed to have found a link between Kamil and myself. It also reminded me that Wilma had reported that the lower-city kids were a good influence on Konrad. I would need to ask her for more details about that.

Seventh bell rang. The bell itself was located in Hasse's winter mansion, so the sound was far more distant than I was used to in the temple.

"It is time to sleep, Lady Rozemyne," Fran said from where he was standing behind me. I nodded in response and started saying my farewells.

"Unfortunately, I must now take my leave. Once again, we are expecting a lot of merchants to come to the city of Ehrenfest during the summer. I imagine it will prove quite the struggle, but please put your all into managing them, for the peace of our duchy. Rest well."

My Spring Prayer had come to an end, with me learning some truly wonderful intel, and that meant it was Charlotte's turn. "I see your highbeast is based on Weiss," I said to her. "It is white, and I recognize the golden feystone on its forehead."

"Schwartz and Weiss are the shumils I am most familiar with, after all."

"I think it looks simply adorable."

"My aim is to change its size freely as you do with yours, Sister, but I am finding this rather difficult."

Charlotte was under the impression that one could change the size of their drivable highbeast on a whim and was now trying to accomplish this herself, despite how much time and mana it required. She had only seen the tiniest amount of success so far.

"There is not much you can do but practice," I said. "Take care to keep rejuvenation potions at hand until you master it, and when your mana runs low, drink one at once."

After seeing Charlotte off, I waited for Wilfried to report on the final checks he was doing in Leisegang and prepared to leave myself. Cornelius, Leonore, and Angelica were going to be accompanying me as my guard knights, while Ottilie and Brunhilde were coming along as my attendants. The question was,

who were best suited to join us as my scholars? This had to do with the printing industry, so I wanted to bring them all, but Philine was a laynoble, and Roderick was of the former Veronica faction.

"Philine, Roderick—you might find Leisegang to be very unwelcoming and even hostile toward you," I said. "If you would prefer, you are welcome to stay at the dormitory. The choice is yours."

"I shall come with you," Philine said flatly and without the slightest hesitation. "No retainer of yours should miss anything to do with printing."

"I feel the same," Roderick added. "I do not want to miss an opportunity to learn about printing. I am not yet doing satisfactory work as your retainer, Lady Rozemyne, so I am in no position to withdraw over a little hostility."

Roderick was going to the temple every day, seemingly in competition with Philine, and his attempts to complete the work given to him by Ferdinand were being met with responses similar to the ones she had originally received: constant rejections and demands that he do it all over again. His failings had made him feel discouraged at first, but Philine had reassured him that there was no need for him to worry about it, since everyone had walked the same path.

Unfortunately, Angelica had then declared that she had *not* walked this path and never would, while Hartmut had noted that he was able to do the work just fine from the very beginning. The troublesome duo had managed to knock Roderick back down into the depths of despair with these remarks, so as of late you could often find Damuel shooing them both away before they could do any further damage.

It was around the time that Charlotte was getting back when Elvira, the head of the printing industry, sent me a detailed list of dates for our upcoming trip. In turn, I passed this information on to the Gutenbergs, who were doubtless almost finished with their preparations.

"This is due to be another long expedition, but I thank you for your cooperation," I said on the day of our journey to Leisegang. The Gutenbergs had

come loaded with work tools, which I made sure were tagged appropriately before being loaded into Lessy one after another in quick succession.

The gray priests heading to the paper-making workshops were busy working under Gil and assisting with the final preparations. As they went about their various jobs, I noticed them occasionally tugging on their clothes, evidently still not used to wearing them. Meanwhile, Fran and Monika were loading important luggage for Leisegang's Spring Prayer.

"Zack, I thank you ever so much for developing the mattress," I said. "It is so comfortable that I am loath to leave my bed each morning. I imagine it will not be easy preparing the High Priest's bench, but I trust you to do well."

"You may count on me," he replied. "Everyone in our workshop is positively determined to do a perfect job for the High Priest. Thank you for the referral."

Despite being the archduke's younger brother, Ferdinand had never before ordered that any such goods be made for him. Now that he had requested this bench, however, workshops were rising up and competing to get his exclusive business.

"The Smithing Guild is asking for mattresses to be registered as the pumps were, but I ask that we be allowed to monopolize them for the rest of the year at least," Zack noted.

"I am not concerned with when you give the blueprints to the Smithing Guild," I replied, "though I do believe it would be in your best interests to publicize them and train new smiths before you get so caught up in all the orders that you lose track of everything."

Although I was the one who had ordered the mattress and come up with the idea, it was Zack and his smiths who had gone through the necessary trial and error to make it a reality. I would naturally start taking some royalties once the blueprints were given to the Smithing Guild, but I wasn't in any particular rush for that to happen.

"Thank you from us all," Zack said. "As you continually order new goods one after another, Lady Rozemyne, I do not expect that we will need to monopolize the mattress for long. Furthermore, as my other smiths always take on this work during my absences for these trips, I am confident that they will improve

drastically.” He made this last remark with a wry smile; he always seemed to disappear to other provinces just as the workload was becoming more intense, which meant his disciples had to work their fingers to the bone to keep up.

Johann shrugged. “That’s true for my workshop too. While I’m off on these trips, I need to leave them with work whether I want to or not.”

“Incidentally, how is your disciple doing?” I asked. “Danilo, was it?”

“He’s making steady progress. The young Groschel craftspeople really moved him, it seems.”

Danilo had apparently become quite cocky from everyone at the workshop saying he was the only one good enough to take over from Johann. He hadn’t given much thought to the news that those in Haldenzel were becoming more and more skilled, but his attitude had soon changed when he saw those from Groschel and witnessed that there were other craftspeople capable of making letter types just as exact as his own. His complacency was now gone, having been replaced with a determination to better hone his talents.

“We’ve also finally completed the pulleys for those bookcases Ingo ordered,” Johann continued. “Danilo and the others have been tasked with making them in bulk, and that should be done by the time we get back.”

Johann went on to note how much they had struggled to make pulleys that could support the weight of the bookcases and allow them to turn smoothly and without clattering. I was looking forward to seeing the final product and was eternally grateful for their hard work.

After confirming that the Gutenbergs and all of my temple attendants were inside my Pandabus, I had my guard knight Judithe sit in the passenger seat, then headed to our meeting spot at the castle. Ferdinand was leaving the temple at the same time as us, but he had a different objective: he was heading to Haldenzel with some scholars to investigate its ceremonial stage.

“Hopefully you discover something new,” I said.

“Simply seeing the magic circle will be enough,” Ferdinand replied, a smirk playing on his lips. It was good to see that he was enjoying himself.

Awaiting our arrival at the castle were our soon-to-be companions: the

Haldenzel scholar team and the Leisegang printing team. Also due to accompany us were Wilfried, Charlotte, and their retainers, to make it clear that I wasn't the only one carrying the printing industry.

"Everything ready, Rozemyne?" Sylvester called.

I turned around to look at him, only to be met with more faces than I was expecting. It was already known that Elvira was going to Leisegang as the head of the printing industry, but also standing by were Karstedt and about five other knights.

"Since there are so many archduke candidates mobilizing here, we decided to have the Knight's Order join you, much like they did for Haldenzel. They're Karstedt's family on his mother's side—a perfect fit, don't you think?" Sylvester said with a grin. He then glanced over at Wilfried, his eyes tinged with concern. "Rozemyne, as your siblings have Ahrensbach blood, they'll need to keep their guard up in Leisegang at all times. That said, Wilfried is going to be the next archduke; he'll need to learn to deal with them eventually. His future will change a huge amount depending on whether or not he can make them his allies."

Sylvester wasn't expecting anything as extreme as a physical attack, but he knew that the trip was going to be emotionally taxing.

"I shall shield them as best I can," I replied. "Wilfried and Charlotte did much to protect me during winter socializing, after all."

"Thanks. I don't know where he gets it from, but Wilfried possesses this blind optimism. I can't help but feel nervous for him."

I turned my attention to Wilfried and saw that he was busy talking to Ferdinand. "Do not lower your guard, no matter what happens," Ferdinand said to him.

"Are you sure?" Wilfried asked. "There was nothing out of place when I went to perform the final checks. In fact, everything went perfectly smoothly." He puffed out his chest... only for Ferdinand to unceremoniously tear that pride to shreds.

"Of course it did, fool. Anything short of perfection would mean that

Leisegang was unprepared. They would never expose such weakness to you. And above all else, if you had reported that their work was incomplete, Rozemyne would not be going there right now. Seeing her is what they desire more than anything."

Wilfried remained silent, unable to offer a response.

"There are many in Leisegang who strongly wish for Rozemyne to be the next aub," Ferdinand continued. "Their blood relatives in Rozemyne's service have made it perfectly clear that she has no desire to take up such a position, and that she intends to marry and support you, but there are some who still cling to this unfortunate dream. They are your enemies, and you are journeying into hostile territory. Carve this into your heart and do not, under any circumstances, make any blunders. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Uncle..." Wilfried replied with some hesitation. Even from afar, I could tell that he was biting his lip and staring down at the ground.

Sylvester sighed. "There are some things he just doesn't understand well enough yet. Go give him your support, Rozemyne."

I nodded and walked over to Wilfried. "I understand that Ferdinand may have sounded somewhat harsh, but his words come from a place of concern for you. He wouldn't have bothered to say anything unless he cared."

Wilfried made a doubting expression. I understood why he was so skeptical, but for Ferdinand to have said all that, he truly must have been concerned.

"I suspect you will understand once we arrive at our destination," I said. "I, too, have been told to take great care and to shield you from the Leisegangs."

"Shield me, huh?"

One threat who immediately came to mind was that old fox, my great-grandfather, who despised Veronica's bloodline. We needed to be careful.

"Rozemyne... Do you think I'm going to be okay?" Wilfried asked, looking worried.

"Of course." I gave my chest a confident thump. "Because I'm going to be there with you."

“Well, now I’m even *more* worried...” He pursed his lips at me in an exaggerated show of displeasure, then gave me his usual smile.

Giebe Leisegang

“Farewell, Lady Rozemyne.”

Judithe alighted from my Pandabus, since she was going to be sitting out this trip. Angelica climbed in to take her place, at which point the nobles surrounding me produced their highbeasts and took flight in order.

“Angelica, did you get some rest?” I asked as I took to the sky as well. She had gotten several days off, since she had already accompanied me for Spring Prayer and was now joining us on our journey to Leisegang.

“Yes,” she replied. “I rested when Master wasn’t training me.”

I’m going to assume that means she didn’t rest much at all...

“Master trained me even more than usual after I mentioned you praising me for cutting up that fish, Lady Rozemyne,” Angelica continued. “He told me to show you even greater precision during the next dissection. I think he wants to participate too.”

“In that case, inform him that I shall invite him to the temple at the next opportunity.”

“Understood,” Angelica replied, sounding delighted. “I’m sure that will make him very pleased.” She then started to tell me how amazing Bonifatius was, who the strongest knights in the Knight’s Order were, and what fighting styles both Eckhart and Ferdinand preferred to use. I gave a few perfunctory responses until Cornelius brought his highbeast a little closer.

“Lady Rozemyne,” he said, “we have arrived in Leisegang and will soon be landing at the summer mansion.”

I squinted down at the scenery below us; there was nothing but blackish earth with patches of snow here and there, making for a very pitiful sight lacking much in the way of greenery. I was sure there had been a greater abundance of plants and shrubbery during Lamprecht’s wedding.

“The land certainly does change with the seasons,” I commented. “It hadn’t even occurred to me that we had entered Leisegang.”

“This makes it easier to identify enemies attempting to hide,” Cornelius replied. Leisegang had already been the setting for many failed ambushes in the past, but I wasn’t worried about another attempt—the Knight’s Order was accompanying my guard knights, and during Spring Prayer, everyone was busy preparing the fields to help increase the harvest.

That reminds me... The first time I came here, Sylvester was disguised as a blue priest.

The highbeast at the lead started to descend, signaling that we had arrived. We had visited Leisegang many times before, but the only thing I remembered clearly was the side building used for temple visitors. We had gone inside the summer mansion when we attended Lamprecht’s wedding, but we had departed right after lunch. The entire affair had also left me so tired that I went straight to sleep, so it hadn’t stuck in my memory.

I exited my highbeast, whereupon Fran, Monika, and Hugo started unloading luggage and food and carrying it to the side building for priests. Our ceremonial work here would involve nothing more than handing the small chalices to Giebe Leisegang—which would take no time at all—but we had to stay until the printing talks ended. Thankfully, Leisegang had a side building we could use, which meant that Fran and the others would never cross paths with the province’s nobles. It was a lot more comforting than in Haldenzel, where the winter mansion was like an iron fortress.

“Lady Rozemyne, the chalices are to be handed over after the greetings, correct?” Fran asked.

“Indeed. Do prepare them.”

After receiving the chalices, I waited with Fran and Monika for Giebe Leisegang to arrive. Our plan was to take the Gutenbergs to their lodgings in the city once our immediate business here was done; for now, they were waiting inside Lessy.

“Welcome to Leisegang.”

Giebe Leisegang started exchanging lengthy greetings with Elvira, the representative of the printing industry. He was a scholarly-looking man who seemed a bit older than Karstedt, and while his eyes had been burning with the flames of ambition during our first encounter, I did not sense any such fire now. I determined that it was best to keep my guard up, purely as an extra precaution.

Once the greetings were complete, I stepped forward with the chalices. “By the grace of Flutrane the Goddess of Water, the bringer of healing and change, and the twelve goddesses who serve by her side, Geduldh the Goddess of Earth has been granted the power to birth new life. I pray from the bottom of my heart that the countless lives upon this mortal realm are filled with Flutrane’s divine color.”

“Indeed,” Giebe Leisegang replied, “Geduldh the Goddess of Earth is filled with Flutrane the Goddess of Water’s mana. Blessed be the melting of the snow. Blessed be the coming of spring.”

The chalices were delivered, and my work as the High Bishop was thereby complete. I took a step back and instructed Fran and Monika to prepare the side building while Hugo cooked for us. Ottilie would be getting my guest room ready in the meantime. As for Brunhilde, I instructed her to stay with me; she would surely benefit from seeing more of a province other than Groschel.

“Is that why you went out of your way to bring me, despite my being underage?” Brunhilde asked.

“There are many reasons,” I replied. “Did I not explain them?”

Ottilie would have struggled if she were my only attendant here, but bringing Rihyarda along simply wasn’t an option—she had served both Gabriele, who had brought about Leisegang’s decline, and Veronica, so her presence wouldn’t have been welcomed. Lieseleta was also an option, but it was much easier to bring Brunhilde, who was an archnoble and part of the family.

Brunhilde shook her head. “You did not mention that you would make me observe Leisegang’s lower city.”

“Oh, did I not? How absentminded of me. Ohoho...” I turned my back to Brunhilde and walked over to Giebe Leisegang. “Now then—although we have

not been here for long, may I ask to be guided to the Gutenbergs' lodgings?"

"Certainly."

Giebe Leisegang waved a hand, signaling one of his scholars to step forward. It was the head of their printing industry. He must have already heard about things in Haldenzel and Groschel, as he led the way without saying anything in particular about me bringing the Gutenbergs in my highbeast.

"The Gutenbergs will be staying in Fluss, only a short distance away from the summer mansion," our guide said. The mansion was located on a modest hill surrounded by forestland, and Fluss was a commoner city closer to it than any other settlement.

Once everyone was in my Pandabus or atop their highbeast, we flew over the walls surrounding the summer mansion and made our way down from the hill. Fluss felt very similar to Hasse—the commoners were primarily farmers, and the way that all those doing other jobs were concentrated around the winter mansion was very familiar.

Several of the nobles grimaced about being in a commoner city, but Wilfried and Charlotte looked more excited than anything—they were used to visiting these kinds of places for Spring Prayer and the Harvest Festival, and were commenting on how Fluss resembled the farming towns of the Central District.

"The smithy and carpentry workshop are here as well," our guide continued. "We ask that you inform the city's people of your arrival."

"Understood."

We greeted the foremen of the smithy and carpentry workshop, then left some luggage with them. It was the same process as in Groschel, and the Gutenbergs had gotten used to it.

Brunhilde, who had been watching the Gutenbergs work, suddenly looked around in wide-eyed realization. "There is no stench here as there is in Groschel, nor do I see any filth. Is there a reason for this?"

"Because this province has a bustling farming industry," I replied. Groschel was firmly surrounded by walls—as was Ehrenfest, for that matter—but Leisegang had them only around its summer mansion. This resulted in sprawling

farmland within arm's reach of the city proper. The focus on farming also meant that the population density was low, which stopped any smells from being concentrated in one location.

"Leonore, as a Leisegang noble, have you ever visited a commoner city?" Brunhilde asked.

"Indeed," Leonore replied with a nod. "As an apprentice knight, I at times left the summer mansion to hunt feybeasts on farmland and in forests. This was before I entered Lady Rozemyne's service, though, so it was only for a period of a few years."

Brunhilde was related to the Leisegangs, and she had visited the province several times before, but she had never ventured outside the grounds of the summer mansion. She muttered to herself, surprised that commoner cities could differ so much—presumably because she hadn't looked at or even thought about them before now.

"I see that other provinces truly are unlike Groschel..." Brunhilde said. It was a comparison that she could make only because she had seen Fluss in person. I proposed that she continue visiting and learning from other places, using that knowledge to improve her home province, and she responded with a confident "I shall."

"Incidentally, where is the printing workshop?" I asked.

"Next to the winter mansion," Wilfried replied, having already visited the city when performing his final checks. "I hear that printing in Leisegang is going to be done as winter handiwork."

Leisegang had many acres of farmland, and because it was in the south, its snow melted quicker than that of somewhere like Haldenzel. It had such a rich farming environment that it was called Ehrenfest's breadbasket, and the printing industry would purely be a side business, rather than its primary focus.

"The giebe said that the farming industry will remain the province's highest priority," Wilfried continued. "A natural choice for Ehrenfest's breadbasket."

Leisegang's harvest would pretty much decide what the nobles had to eat during the winter, so the province was taking special care every year to avoid

any complaints about a smaller yield than usual.

“I see you’ve been working hard, Wilfried,” I said.

“Huh?”

“I am simply impressed by how much you know about Leisegang.”

“I did a lot of research with Ignaz before we left,” Wilfried declared with a subtle but proud smile. Elvira let out a quiet “Oh my...” at this remark, while Cornelius followed with an amused “I guess Rozemyne’s her next target.”

“The Gutenbergs will be staying here during their trip,” our guide announced. We had finally arrived at the winter mansion after stopping at Fluss’s various workshops to drop off most of our luggage. The farmers were due to return to their land, so this accommodation was ideal.

“I see it was wise for us to bring our own cleaning implements,” Gil said. “Lutz, shall we begin right away?”

“Of course. Let’s go, Gil.”

They were very much used to these long trips, and after climbing out of my Pandabus, they got right to work. It was at their instruction that the Gutenbergs started unloading the remaining luggage, and as I saw how reliable they had become, I couldn’t help but smile.

“Hugo is going to be preparing our food for the duration of our stay here,” I said as Lutz and Gil continued to oversee the cleaning. “Meals should be taken in the side building.”

I returned to the summer mansion, bringing only Benno and Damian of the Plantin Company with me, since they were needed for the next stage of the agreements. We sipped tea there while Giebe Leisegang and Elvira led the discussion on the final checks, after which the Plantin Company signed a contract regarding the Printing and Plant Paper Guilds.

Leisegang had a thriving logging industry thanks to its forests and mountains, and the wood it produced was going to play a key role in the making of paper. The children of the orphanage would also be helping out, making it seem like this work could also be done by women and older people.

“Giebe Leisegang. I apologize for my rudeness, but if the printing industry is being treated as winter handiwork, is there not a chance that your income won’t exceed your investment?” Benno asked, seeming a bit concerned at how the contract was shaping up. As it stood, the printing industry would only be active for a short while, and unlike in Haldenzel, not all of the citizens would be working toward it. I was similarly concerned that Leisegang would not draw much profit, especially because they had put so much money into the endeavor.

“That is not for you to worry about, merchant,” Giebe Leisegang said. “Income is not the only thing that will make this investment worthwhile. We have no intention of canceling our contract, no matter how this fares financially.”

“Understood,” Benno replied with a nod. He then turned to Damian, who produced the necessary contract, and the required signatures were soon put to paper.

“That was the final contract we the Plantin Company needed to sign regarding the Printing and Plant Paper Guilds,” Benno said.

“I see. In that case, they may return to the other Gutenbergs,” Giebe Leisegang said. Benno and Damian stood up, said their farewells, and then departed. Coming here must have been a real test of mental endurance, especially with all the nobles around. At least now they could rest in the side building.

Now that the meeting was composed entirely of nobles, Giebe Leisegang called for fresh tea to be poured, then looked over at Wilfried and Charlotte. He kept up his peaceful smile, but his eyes seemed to be searching. I tensed up at once, eager to protect them.

“This is a rare opportunity,” Giebe Leisegang began. “I wish to hear your thoughts directly from you, rather than through a messenger. Would you indulge me?”

Wait, he’s talking to me?!

I instinctively straightened my back while blinking in surprise. Naturally, in this environment, I couldn’t refuse him. The air was heavy with suspense, affecting

not just my retainers, but everyone else in attendance as well.

"Uncle..."

Leonore tried to interject, but the giebe simply shook his head. I glanced over at Elvira and Karstedt, who returned almost imperceptible nods. They were instructing me to deal with this properly.

So, I need to prop up Wilfried and emphasize that I don't intend to become the next archduke.

I turned to face the giebe, recalling the advice that Ferdinand had given me, and said, "You may ask what you like."

"Thank you. Now, I am of the opinion that Ewigeliebe will always reach out to Geduldh when she is within his grasp. How do you feel about this, Lady Rozemyne?"

Um, excuse me...? Hold on a second. Let me decode this message.

"It certainly is the case that Ewigeliebe will always reach out to Geduldh..." I said, repeating his words almost verbatim in an attempt to buy myself more time to think.

Um... Geduldh is often used to refer to where one lives, so that probably means Ehrenfest in this case.

After some quick contemplation, I managed to guess at what he was trying to say. *"Why do you not aim to be the next aub when you are an archduke candidate with more than enough skill, mana, supporters, and accomplishments to make it happen?"* Of course, I couldn't be certain that this was his question, but I was confident that it was something along those lines.

"But I am not Ewigeliebe," I continued, "so I do not have a need for Geduldh." I was hoping to make it clear that not everyone wanted the archducal seat.

The giebe exhaled slowly. "My niece Leonore, my distant relative Brunhilde, and my half-nephew Hartmut all said the same, but I am simply not satisfied. Why do you not seek Geduldh? If you did, Lady Rozemyne, then everything would come together so smoothly."

So he said, but having a former commoner like me become the aub was

bound to cause more problems than anything else.

“Lord Wilfried was clearly on the path to becoming the next archduke, but when he entered the Ivory Tower, he lost his standing and was placed on equal footing with his younger siblings,” the giebe continued. “Now, he is once again seen as being the next archduke—but only because he is engaged to you, Lady Rozemyne. You are the one best suited to becoming the next aub, and this knowledge is eternally frustrating to us Leisegangs, as your family by blood.”

Giebe Leisegang maintained that there wouldn’t be any problems if my engagement were reversed, such that I took the position of aub instead. I tilted my head slightly and glanced over at Wilfried. He was doing his best to keep his head up, but his tightly clenched fists told me everything.

“I firmly believe that Wilfried will make the better aub, so our positions will never be reversed,” I said. Giebe Leisegang and Wilfried himself stared at me in astonishment, while the nearby retainers all did the same. Karstedt, meanwhile, looked to be very interested indeed.

“It is precisely because he was once knocked down that he knows what it takes to claw back up again,” I continued. “He is going to the widely loathed temple and assisting with ceremonies to lessen my burden as the High Bishop. He sees Ehrenfest’s people with his own eyes and possesses the feelings necessary to both protect and live with them. Giebe Haldenzel acknowledges this as well.”

“But the same goes for you, Lady Rozemyne, does it not?” Giebe Leisegang asked, stroking his chin. “You displayed the talent necessary to overcome your poor reputation as one raised in the temple, dedicate yourself to Ehrenfest as the High Bishop, and protect the duchy’s people. In your compassion, you opened your heart even to orphans.”

Well, when you put it like that, I really do sound like a saint.

I could only listen in a daze, struggling to believe that he was referring to me. Hartmut must have been spreading his legends about me to that tune. In truth, I didn’t even want to think about it.

“Giebe Leisegang... there is one thing in particular that separates me from Wilfried,” I eventually said. “To me, this one thing makes it abundantly clear

that he is better suited to becoming the next aub."

"And what is that, exactly?" the giebe asked, leaning forward a bit. I could feel everyone's eyes on me, but I merely rested a hand on my chest and smiled.

"My very life is dedicated to books and their creation. Making new paper as cheaply as possible, setting up more and more printing workshops... Everything that I do is for the sake of this solitary aim. Yes, my efforts are proving beneficial to the duchy right now, but I can assure you that I act only out of personal interest. I, unlike Wilfried, am driven only by my own selfish desires. I wish to create, read, and surround myself with books."

"I... I see..." Giebe Leisegang replied. He allowed only the slightest amount of surprise to show on his face, but it was enough for me to guess what he was thinking. News of my book obsession had probably reached his ears some time ago, but only now did he realize its severity.

The tension in the air seemed to ease, allowing Wilfried to crack a smile. "How would Ehrenfest fare under Rozemyne, who always prioritizes her own wishes above all else?" he asked. "Not well, I would say, and ensuring that it does not come to pass is the challenge given to me as the next archduke. There is still much for me to learn, but I intend to put my all into it. Giebe Leisegang—you are Rozemyne's most fervent supporter, which means you are able to help Rozemyne realize some ideas and convince her to give up on others. I request that you use this to guide Ehrenfest down a brighter path. It would be very heartening to have her blood relatives on my side."

Wilfried... Didn't you more or less just say that I would make a tyrant archduchess, and that the Leisegangs can only vouch for me to become the next aub if they learn to contain my rampages?!

I wasn't sure how much of that little speech was genuine and how much was deliberately exaggerated, but it seemed that Giebe Leisegang hadn't known about my... rampaging tendencies. Wilfried had succeeded in landing a critical hit on his spirit.

"I understand both of your positions," the giebe said. "However, in either case, Leisegang is a fair distance from the city of Ehrenfest. The degree to which we can help is limited, but we will do what we can, if allowed."

Despite having made it clear that he was my strongest backer only a moment ago, Giebe Leisegang was now taking a liberal step back and clarifying that there was only so much he could do.

“It’s just, erm... I will need to sway Grandfather’s unbreaking will first.” The giebe looked in the direction of what was presumably my great-grandfather’s room. “He was effectively made to eat dirt when Lady Gabriele married into the duchy, and he continued to suffer under Lady Veronica’s cold treatment. He has lived surrounded by hatred, and his heart has been hardened by it. I understand how he feels, as I experienced our province’s darkest days with him, but...”

Giebe Leisegang turned back to us, sighed, and then looked over all the gathered retainers with a half-smile. “There are now many Leisegangs among the archducal family’s retainers, but this was not the case five years ago. Ehrenfest winters are long and leave the north of the duchy frozen over, meaning the harvest of a southern province like ours is essential. We have used our mana to expand our farmland for generations, since long before Ehrenfest became the duchy it is today, and we have continued to protect our vast fields through the changing of the aubs through loyalty and marriages. We will remain loyal to the aub to protect our province, as we have done and shall always continue to do. In truth, my intention had been to express my loyalty to even Lady Veronica after Grandfather died.”

Wilfried stared at the giebe in disbelief. “But I was told that the Leisegangs hated Grandmother...”

“Very few people would feel otherwise about someone who treated them so poorly. However, she is still a member of the archducal family. Proclaiming our loyalty to protect our land is part of the Leisegang creed, and it remains in our best interests to continue it, even if our expressions do not come from the heart.”

Unlike his grandfather, who had stood among Ehrenfest’s top brass before being knocked down and mistreated when an archduke candidate from Ahrensbach married into the duchy, Giebe Leisegang had been mistreated from birth. He was fine with facing reality, displaying loyalty, and working on climbing his way up the ranks. His plan had been to secure bonds through marriage, perhaps having Sylvester take a Leisegang woman as his second wife, or

marrying a Leisegang woman to whoever would be the next archduke.

"And then, everything changed," the giebe continued. "Lady Veronica fell from power before Grandfather died, and as if by fate, Lady Rozemyne was baptized as Lord Karstedt's daughter and promptly adopted by the archduke."

It was when I gave everyone a blessing during my baptism and the aub adopted me that Grandpa Leisegang started getting all excited about glory returning to his house. My adoption meant that it was within my rights to become the next aub, and with the controversy surrounding Wilfried at the time, most nobles had assumed that Sylvester would give the position to me and make Wilfried my husband in order to tie his blood to mine.

The castle had gone through changes of such great substance that even giebes from faraway provinces had come to notice. These included a massive series of replacements for the scholars working in the castle, similar replacements for Wilfried's retainers, the winter playroom being completely reworked, and Lord Ferdinand and I overseeing the sale of new toys and books.

"If you become the next aub, Lady Rozemyne, then it will mark the birth of a ruling Leisegang archduchess with none of Gabriele's Ahrensbach blood. No sooner had Grandfather made the call than the Leisegang nobles previously scorned by Lady Veronica gathered and moved to back you."

However, the Charlotte kidnapping incident had occurred soon after, and for the next two years, I was asleep in a jureve. There was no way for the Leisegangs to regain their former status without a figurehead to support. Great-Grandfather had apparently screamed, "Are there no gods?!" before falling unconscious, and quite some time had passed before he woke up again.

"Even while you were asleep, Ehrenfest continued to change," the giebe said.

The Veronica faction was replaced, Leisegang nobles were assigned to increasingly important posts, and the mood in the air indicated that Wilfried and Charlotte would be competing for the aub seat. The Leisegangs had united to make me the next archduchess, but as there was no indication of when I might wake up again, there was no helping them drifting apart.

"But no sooner had we lost hope than your awakening was publicized, and you arrived for winter socializing."

Upon hearing this news, Great-Grandfather had shouted, “The gods have returned! I *will* make Lady Rozemyne the next aub!”—only to then break into a coughing fit and end up bedridden. Still, none were against helping a blood relative become the next aub, and Giebe Leisegang once again got to work organizing the Leisegangs over winter socializing.

“Incidentally, Grandfather’s wish amounted to nothing when you and Lord Wilfried were engaged,” the giebe continued. “And with a Leisegang due to become the wife of the next archduke, it felt as though history was simply about to repeat itself.”

Ehrenfest was climbing higher up the duchy rankings each year, and now, duchies that had previously never looked our way were giving us their attention. Great-Grandfather had thus assumed that another archduke candidate from a greater duchy would once again come into the picture and force me from my position as the future first wife—that I would end up suffering in spite of everything I did to improve and bring wealth to Ehrenfest. His own prediction outraged him, and the hatred that he felt for Lady Gabriele and the aub of the time was instead directed at Wilfried and Sylvester.

In order to avoid a repeat of such a great tragedy, Great-Grandfather was set on ensuring that I become the next aub, no matter what. Some say that people grow more stubborn as they age, but on top of that, he was mostly bedridden, stuck in his own personal echo chamber, blind to the changes of the outside world. To me, it seemed that he was getting too carried away, but many of the older Leisegangs apparently still empathized with him.

“Grandfather’s fall from grace is the reason that his hatred for Ahrensbach runs so deep,” Giebe Leisegang explained. “Can you and Lord Wilfried cleanse those dark feelings inside him?”

Wilfried was on the receiving end of a very challenging look from the giebe, but he merely shrugged without looking too bothered. “The most I can do is meet and speak with him; I don’t know about cleansing any dark feelings. I can assure you, though—I have no intention of allowing such a tragic history to repeat itself.”

“Thank you.”

That's nice and all, but... "cleanse" his hatred...? All of a sudden, he sounds like an evil spirit or something.

In the end, we scheduled a date for us to meet with Great-Grandfather. It was agreed that we should see him before we were due to become busy with Spring Prayer work, and with that, Giebe Leisegang turned to his attendants.

"Speaking of Spring Prayer," I said, "does Leisegang hold the same kind of ceremony as Haldenzel?" I was aware that many giebes wanted to recreate the Haldenzel Miracle in their own provinces.

Giebe Leisegang shook his head. "Leisegang has lost its stage, so we cannot do as Haldenzel does."

"Does this mean that Leisegang is one of the provinces that destroyed theirs?" I asked, frowning a little as I recalled the various problems that had arisen after I opened the bible to look for instructions on how to make the stage.

"No," the giebe replied with a wry smile. "We did not destroy ours; we truly lost it at some point amid our long history."

Leisegang had frequently changed its base of operations while establishing and growing its farmland. They had no records of their distant past, nor did they know where they had originally been situated, so they couldn't even confirm whether or not the stage was destroyed.

"Are you okay with that?" I asked.

"The speed at which the snow melts can mean life or death to northern provinces such as Haldenzel. That is why the northern giebes despair over their stages being destroyed. Leisegang is in the south, however, and the snow has very little impact on our harvest."

It seemed that the magic circle for summoning spring wasn't very relevant down here. At most, having the snow melt earlier than usual was a pleasant bonus that would increase their harvest a little.

"Your chalices will more than suffice, Lady Rozemyne," Giebe Leisegang concluded. "This year, we will once again be able to fulfill our duties as Ehrenfest's breadbasket."

Visiting Great-Grandfather

“Lady Rozemyne,” Brunhilde said, “it is time to visit Great-Grandfather.”

“Brunhilde, Leonore, Hartmut, Cornelius...” I muttered, addressing my archnoble retainers one by one. “We all share the same great-grandfather, I see. It feels strange to actually say it.”

“All nobles are connected by blood in some way or another,” Cornelius said with a shrug. “Great-Grandfather certainly likes to moan about Lady Veronica’s family, but Lord Wilfried and Lady Charlotte have archducal blood. In other words, though it may not be particularly thick, they have Leisegang blood as well.”

Leonore gave a small giggle. “But to Great-Grandfather, the thickness of the blood matters more than anything. That is why he so fervently wishes for you to become the next aub, Lady Rozemyne.”

“As my retainers, are you not dissatisfied that I don’t strive for the archducal seat?” I asked. Their response came in the form of a collective shrug—and their eyes all seemed to say that it was simply the safest option.

“I believe it would be best for you to do as you like, Lady Rozemyne,” Brunhilde said with reinvigorating warmth. “As your attendant, I will strive to support you such that the trends you birth bring riches to Ehrenfest. Attempting to change your course would surely prove fruitless anyway.”

“She’s right,” Hartmut agreed with a nod. “No matter what you do, Lady Rozemyne, I shall strive to ensure that all see you for the saint you are. You may rest easy knowing that I will allow no mistake on your part to sully your good name.” He delivered this promise with a dashing smile, but for some mysterious reason, it made me feel exceedingly uneasy.

Our conversation continued as I traveled down the hall in Lessy, and soon enough, we saw Wilfried and Charlotte waiting up ahead.

“Wilfried, Charlotte, my apologies for the wait,” I said. “Given your pensive

expressions, I assume you two must be contemplating something."

"I thought that earning the Leisegangs' aid was going to be a serious challenge, since Grandmother raised me and her blood runs through my veins, but Giebe Leisegang made it sound as though the most I need to do is convince your great-grandfather," Wilfried explained. "We were just talking about that."

Charlotte rested a troubled hand on her cheek. "Yes, but... I cannot imagine for the life of me what... series of words... or actions... would calm the former Giebe Leisegang's wrath. Do you have any ideas, Sister?"

"Not at all," I said, then gestured for us to continue toward Great-Grandfather's room. "I can only do what I did with Giebe Leisegang: express my thoughts and intentions in person, rather than through a messenger."

No matter how much Great-Grandfather wished for me to become the next aub, it wasn't something I intended to do. In fact, as a former commoner, it wasn't even possible for me. The most I could do was ask him to give up on his dreams.

"Great-Grandfather's feelings of rage and animosity are his own to deal with," I continued. "It was never my aim to do anything about them. I will simply be informing him that I do not wish to become the next aub, and that is all."

"I'm impressed that you can be so nonchalant about these things. If you, the Leisegangs' beacon of hope, make such a bold declaration to his face, I'm worried that he might just travel to the distant heights."

I thought back to the traumatizing sight of Great-Grandfather collapsing right in front of me. "That would be problematic indeed... I certainly won't be revealing that I would rather be a second wife for the sake of more free time—assuming that this lower position wouldn't stop me from getting involved in the printing industry and creating my own library."

"Not even I knew that!" Wilfried barked.

"It's the truth, though."

"Sister," Charlotte interjected, "the Leisegangs would never accept that."

"Which is why I usually never mention it. It does rear its head from time to

time, though.”

Both of my siblings let out heavy sighs. “Just watch what you say here,” Wilfried warned. “We don’t want him ascending to the distant heights partway through our meeting.”

“Indeed.”

We arrived at the side building where Great-Grandfather was staying and were escorted inside. I expected to see him lying in bed, but he was properly dressed and seated in a chair in the large, ornate room. The fact that he looked more energetic than last year might not have been my imagination.

“Ah! Aah! Lady Rozemyne! Welcome to Leisegang! It must be by the grace of the gods that we are once again given the opportunity to meet!”

Great-Grandfather rejoiced with almost comical exaggeration at my arrival, but he didn’t even acknowledge Wilfried and Charlotte. His attendant lightly tapped him on the shoulder, but he swatted the hand away with annoyance.

“I am with my siblings as well,” I said. “They are Wilfried and Charlotte. Can you see them, Great-Grandfather?”

He blinked rapidly and squinted, as if only just noticing them. “When one reaches my age, their eyes truly begin to fail them. And you are sparkling so brightly that everything around you is that much harder to see, Lady Rozemyne. My apologies.”

Great-Grandfather went on to greet both Wilfried and Charlotte, but he never actually looked at them. It was impossible to say whether he really couldn’t see them or was deliberately averting his gaze.

We were offered seats, then tea and sweets were brought in. Great-Grandfather wasn’t able to test for poison himself, it seemed, as his attendant took on the duty in his stead.

Once it was proven that our refreshments were safe to consume, the tea party began. Great-Grandfather lavished my recipes with praise and said in high spirits that, thanks to Hugo tutoring his chefs during Lamprecht’s wedding ceremony, his meals here had improved dramatically. He was especially fond of pound cake, as it was soft and easy to eat.

“One can even taste the season by having pound cake mixed with a little fruit juice,” Charlotte noted.

“Taste the season, hm? That certainly is an idea...” Great-Grandfather said. He closed his eyes and then started to tell us about the seasonal fruits and vegetables farmed in Leisegang.

“Giebe Leisegang Emeritus, there is something I must say as well,” Wilfried announced when the mood turned peaceful... but Great-Grandfather didn’t respond at all. His eyes were still closed, and he was perfectly still, so it was hard to tell whether he was pretending not to hear or had actually fallen asleep. He was a tough foe indeed. Just getting him to listen was a struggle.

“Great-Grandfather! Great-Grandfather!” I called.

“Oh! Yes, Rozemyne?” he asked, appearing to jerk awake before unsteadily turning to face me.

“Can you hear me?” I asked.

“Indeed, indeed. I can hear your exceptionally adorable voice.”

So he was just pretending not to hear Wilfried, then. No helping that. I’ll just have to be the one to talk.

“I cannot become the next aub, nor do I wish to,” I said, going straight for the most important point.

Great-Grandfather sat still for a moment, then he slowly raised a hand and cupped it behind his ear. “Hrm? Aah, my apologies... To think my ears are in such a state that I would miss even your precious voice, Lady Rozemyne. I am profoundly ashamed...”

“Great-Grandfather, I cannot become the next aub,” I repeated. “Nor do I wish to become the next aub.”

“AIEEEEEEEEE!”

All of a sudden, Great-Grandfather let out a bizarre cry. He then collapsed onto the table, where he remained completely motionless.

Did... Did he just up and die?!

“Wh... What?!” I sputtered.

“EEEEEEK!” Charlotte cried.

“This is why I told you to choose your words carefully!” Wilfried snapped. “You were too blunt!”

As we all floundered over Great-Grandfather’s abrupt collapse, his retainer stepped forward. “Please calm down,” he said. “This is nothing out of the ordinary. He became a little too excited, but he will soon regain consciousness. You may enjoy your tea until then.”

“So you say, but...”

It was hard to relax in a situation like this. I glanced around nervously and saw that Wilfried was surprisingly calm.

“This is usual, huh?” he remarked. “Still pretty bad for the heart.”

“Wilfried, how can you be so at ease?!” I exclaimed.

He raised an eyebrow at me and said, “Because I’m used to you collapsing out of nowhere all the time. I mean, look. Your retainers are even calmer.”

“What?”

It was true—Brunhilde and Ottilie were already refreshing our tea while Great-Grandfather’s attendants prepared to carry him to bed so that they could start attending to him.

“When you pass out at tea parties, I always have to do what those attendants are doing now. Consoling the guests, cleaning up after your mess...” Wilfried explained. “How do you feel, Charlotte? This is your first time seeing someone collapse in front of you like this, right?”

“I... I am fine. I will need to get used to this sooner or later,” Charlotte replied, her voice quavering. Her face was pale as she watched Great-Grandfather being taken away.

“You do *not* need to get used to this, Lady Charlotte,” Brunhilde said. “We attendants have many countermeasures in place to prevent Lady Rozemyne from collapsing.” She poured me another cup of tea, which I sipped at while watching Great-Grandfather’s retainers try to wake him.

“Now, now. Wake up. You are in the middle of a tea party with Lady Rozemyne.”

“Mnnn...”

It was some time before Great-Grandfather regained consciousness, but when he did, he was instantly raring to go. His recovery was unusually quick, based on my own experiences, and I started to suspect that he had used a secret technique. Ultimate Move: Play Dead.

Great-Grandfather coughed a few times. “My sincere apologies.”

“Giebe Leisegang Emeritus,” Wilfried said, “there is not much more I need to say.”

“Guh!”

And so, we ended up in a peculiar cycle: I would speak to Great-Grandfather, then he would collapse almost immediately after. This apparent farce continued maybe five times. His retainers made no attempt to intervene, so our conversation advanced slowly but surely.

“Mm... My sincere apologies.”

“Great-Grandfather. I see you have awoken again,” I said. “Now, where were we?”

“You had just mentioned that the king acknowledged your engagement,” Hartmut answered in an instant. I praised my excellent retainer, then moved to continue.

“Great-Grandfather, do you truly intend to oppose the king’s decision?” I asked. “Surely you would never do such a thing.”

“No, of course not...” he replied. “That said, I am simply worried about your future, Lady Rozemyne.”

“You do not need to worry, Giebe Leisegang Emeritus,” Wilfried said. “I promise to end the Leisegangs’ struggles with Rozemyne as my first wife.”

For the very first time since we had arrived, Great-Grandfather looked straight at Wilfried. It seemed that he had at last decided to face him instead of continuing this unnecessary—and outright clownish—act. The atmosphere

grew cold as the hatred within him overflowed into the room, unable to be contained. His wrinkled smile disappeared as though he had just disposed of a mask, leaving only emotionless features. Despite this vacant expression—no, *because* of this vacant expression, the hatred that had consumed him after a lifetime of suffering and humiliation became infinitely apparent.

Wilfried audibly swallowed. His hand resting on the table was trembling uncontrollably. I reached out to touch it. He recoiled at first, then looked at me and nodded. “As I am engaged to Rozemyne, I intend to do well with the Leisegangs moving forward,” he said. “There is no falsehood in that.”

“Then what will you do if an archduke candidate from a greater duchy weds into Ehrenfest?” Great-Grandfather asked in a scratchy voice.

“If one day I end up in the same position as the first Giebe Groschel, I will have Father adopt my children before she comes, to secure their status as archduke candidates.”

“The greater duchy will not be pleased about that.”

“Father has already agreed to it. He will not commit the same mistake as the aub of the past.”

“So the aub has resolve too, then...” Great-Grandfather said quietly. His eyes had glazed over; he seemed to be staring at Wilfried, but perhaps he was recounting some event from his past. We waited for him to respond again, but it was his attendant who spoke next.

“I believe that will do for today.”

We were being urged to leave, so we obliged and quietly excused ourselves. I glanced back at Great-Grandfather one last time on my way out. He was still staring into space, his eyes nonmoving... but for the slightest moment, I was sure that he was weeping.

Sitting Out the Archduke Conference

Spring Prayer was over, and our full attention was already devoted to planning for the Archduke Conference. We held a discussion at the Italian restaurant with Ehrenfest's major store owners, including Benno and the guildmaster, where we went over our findings from last year, what we had improved since, how many merchants could feasibly be taken in, and so on. We also settled some printing-and publishing-related details with the Plantin Company, including the bottom lines we needed to meet. Elvira was due to attend the Archduke Conference as a scholar of the printing industry, so we would deliver all of this information to her, whereupon she would rewrite it from a noble's perspective.

After finishing our meeting with the lower-city residents, we returned to the castle and talked things over with Sylvester.

"These are terms that Ehrenfest must not compromise on when forming our agreement with Dunkelfelger, and these are terms that Hartmut says we can be more flexible with," I explained. "If we can establish this as our precedent, future negotiations with other duchies will become that much easier."

We had already ironed out the finer details with the Plantin Company, including how we would manage translation royalties and the lending, printing, and selling of any books. I would use my modern knowledge as a basis and adjust it bit by bit to suit Yurgenschmidt's ways.

"Furthermore," I continued, "the Merchant's Guild advises against forming any new trade agreements. Ehrenfest simply does not have the capacity to accept more merchants from other duchies."

Last year, we had accepted eight companies from Klassenberg and eight from the Sovereignty. We had put up our guests in high-class inns and intended to do the same this year, but twenty companies would apparently be our limit.

"So they say, but we need to increase trade if we're going to negotiate a printing deal with Dunkelfelger," Sylvester noted. He then scrunched up his face

and added, “It’s one thing to turn down others, but turning down Dunkelfelger won’t be easy.”

“I said the same thing to the lower-city merchants,” I replied with a big nod. “We tried thinking of some good work-arounds, at which point Benno of the Plantin Company suggested that we distribute new confirmation paper. This way, we can give Dunkelfelger some of the spaces we originally would have given to Klassenberg.”

“Wait, so we’d accept fewer merchants from Klassenberg? What’s the big idea?”

I explained Benno’s thoughts. “As per my previous report, a Klassenberg merchant left his daughter in Ehrenfest upon finishing his business here. She continues to be safe thanks to the hospitality of the Plantin Company, but in Ehrenfest, hosting someone who cannot carry out their own winter preparations is by no means a simple matter.”

Starvation was a very serious risk in cases when the blizzard continued for longer than expected, which was why households needed to prepare a season’s worth of provisions and then some for each of its occupants. Hosting even one extra person meant having to acquire a great deal more food, firewood, and the like.

“We do not want Klassenberg to think we will provide for any merchant left behind or that they can use such tactics to learn more about our new products,” I said. “We must do something to ensure that the Klassenberg merchants do not repeat their mistake, which is why Benno suggested that we limit how many merchants they can send and decrease the number of companies we do business with. Each merchant from Klassenberg we reject frees up a space for a merchant from Dunkelfelger.”

We could only accommodate twenty companies this year, and if we accepted the same number from Klassenberg and the Sovereignty as before, that would only leave us with four slots. By bringing Klassenberg down to six slots, however, we could accept six companies from Dunkelfelger in total. Benno had worn a very intense smile as he suggested this; it seemed that he was finding the Karin incident to be truly irritating.

“It is up to you, Sylvester. You may elect to have each duchy send only six companies, or you can reduce this even further to five so that Drewanchel can be included as well. Ehrenfest can accept no more than twenty, but you may fill those spaces as you please.”

“Alright,” Sylvester eventually said. “I’ll give it some thought.”

Our upper limit was so low because Ehrenfest’s lower city only had so much space. As it stood, no other cities could accommodate our visitors—but we hoped to remedy this by fixing them up.

“Is Groschel still not ready?” I asked. “We would have far more leeway if other cities could house the merchants as well.”

“They’ve petitioned for entwickelns, but these things don’t happen fast.”

“I see. In that case, what if we sell the production method for rinsham at a high price, to cover for how little trade we can accommodate? Doing this will impact our duchy’s long-term profits far less than if we reveal how to make plant or identification paper. Besides, Drewanchel already seems to be researching our rinsham at length.”

We wanted to spread as many trends as we could, and it was ideal for us to prepare our cities, develop trade, and increase foot traffic as quickly as possible. The issue was that Ehrenfest wasn’t yet used to receiving visitors from other duchies, and this was causing a mountain of problems. To be frank, it was all but impossible for us to fully develop our trade right away.

“There’s no way that Ehrenfest can produce enough rinsham to supply all of Yurgenschmidt, and the rising cost of vegetable oil is already a problem within our own borders,” I said. “I truly believe that we are better off selling the production method for a high price while we still can. Ehrenfest’s future is in the printing and publishing industries, not beauty products.”

I didn’t mind surrendering rinsham to other duchies, but I wanted Ehrenfest to monopolize printing for a while longer. Printing and publishing would always drift toward the most populated areas—although it had started in Germany back on Earth, it was in Venice that it had properly flourished—but I was determined to keep our duchy at the center of them both for as long as I could.

To formulate a price for the production method, I told Sylvester the ballpark figures based on the profits we had made so far. I also added that once other duchies figured out the production method, its market value would plummet to zero.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he said. “Anyway, what about the plan to send out Italian restaurant chefs for the Archduke Conference?”

“I consulted the Othmar Company, and they said that they can send three chefs without issue, considering the season. They will even be able to sell recipes that their chefs have invented. I traded some of my recipes for theirs, and they were quite delicious.”

After trading for Leise’s newly invented recipes, I had asked Freida if she could somehow obtain rohres from Dunkelfelger. I explained that pound cake with rohre tasted especially good, and they had decided to import some alongside vize at the next opportunity.

“I’ll think about buying new recipes later,” Sylvester said. “Right now, what matters most is getting enough chefs ready.”

Regarding the duchies we couldn’t afford to make a deal with, our plan was to sell them recipes and/or the rinsham production method, depending on how much they were willing to pay. Given how many people would be trying to make contact with Ehrenfest, we would need many chefs.

Securing more attendants was easy enough—we could always contact giebes and scrape together more from among Ehrenfest’s nobles—but the chefs had to be familiar with my recipes and skilled enough to earn a double thumbs-up. I was aware that the lack of suitable chefs had proven an issue last year, which was why I had asked Freida to put extra effort into training more. Now, we were fully prepared.

“Charlotte might be the one flooded with proposals this year,” I said, which made Sylvester twist his lips to show he was not amused. If we could continue to produce trends, thereby proving that our achievements weren’t just temporary, then it was only natural that other duchies would start wanting to form long-term bonds with us. “If she receives enough proposals that we have the leeway to choose between them, please try to respect her will as much as

possible.”

Sylvester gave me a look as though he wanted to say something... but then simply lowered his eyes and nodded. “Yeah.”

Our meetings continued all the way up until the day before everyone was due to leave for the Archduke Conference. The attendants were the first to teleport, Norbert included. As the head attendant, he would be staying at the Royal Academy from the beginning of the conference until the end this year.

Incidentally, Melchior’s move to the northern building meant that the section of the main building where the archducal couple lived would be completely closed off, with everyone focusing on the Archduke Conference instead.

The next to move were the scholars and a portion of the knights. I made my way to the teleportation hall to see them off. Hartmut, who was now an adult, was leaving alongside Elvira as a scholar of the printing industry.

“I am Lady Rozemyne’s retainer, and I understand her feelings about books better than anyone,” Hartmut had said to Elvira when asking to serve as her assistant. Most printing industry scholars were laynobles to facilitate communication with commoners, but for the Archduke Conference, it was better to have archnobles to make negotiations with other duchies run more smoothly. Elvira had said that having an archnoble like Hartmut would prove very helpful.

“Thank you for assisting Mother,” I said. “I trust that you will carry out your work as skillfully as always.”

“I shall strive to meet your expectations, Lady Rozemyne.”

“With such detailed documents at hand, we will be more than fine,” Elvira said. “I, too, am very much invested in the publishing of new books. You may trust us both, Lady Rozemyne.”

This year’s negotiations would predominantly involve Ehrenfest purchasing love stories from other duchies to print in Haldenzel. Elvira was motivated, so yeah, it was surely fine to trust her.

Last to leave was the archducal couple. I said my farewells to Karstedt, who

was serving as their guard knight, while Wilfried, Charlotte, and Melchior said their farewells to the archducal couple.

"We're trusting all of you with the Mana Replenishment while we're gone," Sylvester said.

"Yes, Father. I will practice a lot," Melchior replied with a nod and a smile. His response earned a chuckle from his two siblings.

"I cannot imagine you will get too many opportunities, Melchior," Charlotte noted. "Back when I first participated in Mana Replenishment, I could not even move for some time afterward."

"Just focus on learning to use a little more mana each time," Wilfried added.

Upon hearing these warnings, Melchior looked up at his parents with worry in his eyes. They both agreed that he shouldn't push himself, which only made him tense up even more.

"Everything will be fine if you listen to Bonifatius. Oh, and Ferdinand—make sure you don't force them to meet your own crazy standards," Sylvester said, warning Ferdinand against falling into his usual Spartan habits. These were his parting words to us, as he headed to the teleportation hall with everyone else immediately after.

"Rozemyne," Ferdinand said, "as you are going to be balancing two courses from this year onward, you would do well to study as much as you can. You will cease to have time to socialize once you return for the Dedication Ritual." And with that, my fate was sealed. My days in the castle this year were to be spent studying for my third-year lessons.

"Ferdinand, were you not *just* told that you shouldn't hold us to your crazy standards?" I asked.

"These are not my standards but yours. There is no problem."

Ferdinand sure is an expert at spitting sophistry with a straight face, isn't he?

The scholar course's written lessons wouldn't be a problem, since I already knew the content. My concerns were about the archduke candidate course, which was said to be much tougher.

Charlotte's eyes widened when she heard that I was going to be studying for the archduke candidate course. "Uncle," she said, "I would like to learn alongside Sister."

"Me too," Wilfried added. "I can't study for the archduke candidate course on my own, since I don't have any study materials."

Ferdinand stared at them for a moment, seemingly as surprised as I was; neither of us had expected that Wilfried and Charlotte would want to study as well. It was only after tapping his temples in thought for a moment that he offered a response.

"The goal of these studies is for Rozemyne to finish her classes in time for the Dedication Ritual, and I have no intention of teaching either of you content that she already knows. If you end up falling behind, then you will simply have to watch. You may attend the lessons if you agree to those terms."

Wilfried and Charlotte were overjoyed to have received this approval—and their bright expressions weren't lost on Melchior, who earnestly said, "I want to join too, Uncle."

I would have approved my little brother's participation in a heartbeat, but Ferdinand didn't like his plans being interfered with. Wilfried and Charlotte were manageable, since he had spent several years with them already and knew how well they would listen to his instructions, but Melchior was more or less a fresh face. Ferdinand gazed down at him, his brows drawn together in a frown.

"I promise to be quiet and not get in anyone's way," Melchior added.

"You will be removed the very instant you break that promise," Ferdinand replied. He spoke without the slightest trace of warmth... but he had still given his permission.

Melchior cheered with everyone, openly elated. Seeing his innocent celebrations brought a smile to my face, but Ferdinand just heaved a frustrated sigh. The fact that he had conceded to the idea despite how annoying he evidently found it showed just how much his stony heart had softened.

The old Ferdinand would have rejected Melchior on the spot and said that

allowing him to participate was a waste of time, for sure.

Retainers weren't allowed to be present for our archduke candidate course study classes in the castle, in the same way that they weren't allowed to attend our classes in the Royal Academy. We each had one of our guard knights stand at the door, while Ferdinand dispersed the rest until fourth bell, asserting that they would be in the way otherwise.

"That reminds me—who are the professors for the archduke candidate course when archduke candidates can't move to the Sovereignty?" I asked. It was even more of a burning question now that we were in a classroom of only archduke candidates. "Do the lessons even have professors?"

Ferdinand, who had been preparing the usual feystones, narrowed his eyes as he thought back on his own experiences. "In my day, it was a royal—that, or a former archduke candidate married to royalty. At the time, there were many who could fulfill the role of professor... but now, I am not so sure."

As we were aware, the civil war had resulted in a drastic reduction in the number of royals. It seemed that not even Ferdinand knew who would be teaching us.

"You will see for yourself when you go to the Royal Academy," Ferdinand concluded. "For now, let us begin by separating the elements of mana. You will not be able to move on to archduke candidate practical lessons until you are able to do this."

Apparently, separating mana like this was something that all third-years were taught to do. One would divide it according to its elements and then reform it.

"As you know, it is easiest to control mana for which you have an aptitude," Ferdinand said. He went on to explain that most laynobles didn't have many elements in their mana, which made splitting and fusing it quite the challenge. That said, those with only a single element could quite easily separate it from given bits of mana.

"Archnobles and archduke candidates, in contrast, have many elements," Ferdinand continued. "They often find it easy to combine mana of their elements once taught how to, but they have great difficulty removing elements from their own mana, which is normally mixed within them at all times."

Feystones of each element were prepared for us, and we touched them one by one to understand the feeling of pulling mana of a singular element. We were then tasked with making a feystone while trying to keep the mana of separate elements from mixing.

"If you learn to control your mana freely, then you will be able to fill an empty feystone with mana of a pure, singular element," Ferdinand said. "The especially dexterous will even be able to replace the element of a feystone entirely. Separating elements from feystones acquired from fey creatures will also become a trivial matter."

I touched the feystone I was provided with and got to work separating the elements of my mana, but when I showed my attempt to Ferdinand...

"They are mixed. Do it again."

The three of us received the same disheartening response over and over again. Charlotte was the first to tap out, as she was the least used to controlling her mana. She had also only recently learned to use mana compression, which meant she had the smallest capacity of us all. Wilfried was trying his best, but he also dropped out once he started feeling sick.

"Drink a rejuvenation potion and recover your mana," Ferdinand instructed. "There is Mana Replenishment to be carried out after dinner."

Wilfried mumbled something in response while reaching for a rejuvenation potion on his belt.

"You presumably have mana to spare, Rozemyne," Ferdinand said. "Focus."

I focused on my feystone, while Ferdinand glared at me. The task he had given us was surprisingly hard, since controlling one's elements felt nothing like controlling one's mana in general.

Maybe I can base this on an established method for separating a mixed substance, I thought, racking my brain for ideas. The clearer a visual one had, the easier it was to control one's mana. *Separation... Separation... A centrifuge, maybe? Oh! Back in high school, we learned about paper chromatography during biology! Can I use that knowledge here?*

In the end, I decided to swing my hand around and picture the elements going

into different fingers.

“Rozemyne, what is that hand motion?” Ferdinand asked.

“My way of visualizing the separation process. I’m separating my mana while doing this.”

“It is... unsightly.”

Ferdinand thought very little of my idea, but I didn’t care; it ended up working like a charm.

Mana Replenishment was performed after dinner, though it seemed to have been quite a struggle. Charlotte was just going to be sitting and watching any of our practical lessons that required mana from tomorrow onward, though she would participate fully in any that didn’t.

“Once you have learned to separate and combine mana, what comes next is neutralizing feystones with mana and turning them to gold dust,” Ferdinand said. “Of course, as you have mistakenly done this countless times already, Rozemyne, there is no need for me to teach you. We shall instead move on to practicing entwickeln.”

Ferdinand was holding a small box containing the kind of feystones used for foundational magic. In class, students were tasked with using them to create a miniature city—but in order to accomplish that, one first needed to draw a blueprint of sorts.

“In practice, the most common approach is to use existing buildings and make only small changes to them,” Ferdinand said. “One cannot risk failing when it comes to a large-scale effort such as creation magic. Not to mention, trying to prepare blueprints from scratch is an exhausting endeavor.”

One could always have scholars help with the blueprints, but it was absolutely crucial that an archduke be knowledgeable enough to identify any potential errors. Thus, we were all made to practice drawing them together. Our first task was to make our ideal room.

“I’m good at blueprints,” Wilfried crowed as he eagerly got to work. He was presumably designing something from scratch, whereas Charlotte intended to

recreate her existing room in excruciating detail. Melchior was holding his pen with a smile, but given how shaky his lines were, his attempt probably wouldn't function as a room.

My ideal room, hm?

The first thing that came to mind was a room with bookcases on every wall and an abundance of reading material on every shelf—my own personal library from my Urano days. It reminded me of my inglorious death back then, and I couldn't help but groan. It was weird just thinking about it.

"Rozemyne, is this truly that difficult for you?" Ferdinand asked.

"The first room I envisioned was overflowing with books," I replied, "but then I imagined them all tumbling down and crushing me to death, which made me question whether it truly is ideal..."

"In any case, complete the blueprint in time for our lesson tomorrow."

Ferdinand dismissed my agonizing with a cold remark and set the question as my homework. This brought us all the way up to fourth bell, which marked the end of our class for the day.

We all made our way to the dining hall for lunch. Bonifatius was surely struggling as he dealt with the office all on his own, but he was helping out anyway. As we ate, he said that not offering his assistance would have been shameful, especially when I was coming first-in-class while doing temple work on top of everything else.

"I will strive to meet your expectations, Grandfather."

Even while eating lunch, my head was filled with thoughts of a book-filled room. My top priority had to be ensuring that the books wouldn't fall from their shelves during an earthquake. Everything else could come later.

As I continued to mull things over, the door to the dining hall opened. It seemed that we had a visitor. "Lord Ferdinand, there has been an urgent summons from the Archduke Conference," the messenger said. "Please head to the Royal Academy at once."

Our preparations for the Archduke Conference had been severely lacking last

year, but even then, none of us had received a summons. Ferdinand appeared gravely serious as he quickly finished his meal, while Justus instructed the attendant and the knights with him.

“Bonifatius, if you will excuse me, I must depart. I leave the rest to you.”

“Go on. I’ll take care of them.”

Ferdinand exited the dining hall at a brisk walk. It was unusual to see him in such a rush, and I could hear the drone of urgent conversation outside the room after he went. My heart pounded in my chest; his harsh expression had somehow resembled the one he had made when facing down the Sovereign knight commander in the Royal Academy’s library, which made me feel even more uneasy than I could put into words.

Apparently, Ferdinand returned the same night he was summoned. Our lessons continued the next day as though nothing had happened, and seeing his usual stony face in all its expressionless glory made me sigh in relief. It was a quiet sigh, of course; I didn’t want to risk him hearing me.

“So, why did you get summoned yesterday?” I asked.

“It does not matter. It is over,” Ferdinand replied, but he was clearly more displeased than usual.

Our lesson continued, but the atmosphere was exceedingly tense. Melchior seemed to be a little frightened by the intensity that Ferdinand exuded, while Wilfried was wearing a stiff expression, trying to gauge how our teacher was feeling.

Eventually, it came time for us to have lunch. Bonifatius must have had exactly the same thought as me when he saw what an absolute state Ferdinand was in, as he asked, “Ferdinand, what incident brought you to the Archduke Conference yesterday?”

“It is over.”

“It does not seem ‘over’ to me,” Bonifatius replied with a glare. “Something is weighing on you, I assume. Spit it out.”

Ferdinand sighed. “Ahrensbach has petitioned the king for a male archduke

candidate of adult or near adult age to be married into their duchy.”

“Wait, what?” I asked. “Would they be marrying Lady Detlinde?”

“Who else?” Ferdinand asked, fixing me with a stern look that made me shut my mouth at once. He had a good point—Ahrensbach only had two archduke candidates. One was Detlinde, and the other was a little girl called Letizia, who was too young to even be attending the Royal Academy.

“They requested it, but we declined for several reasons,” Ferdinand continued. “My absence would leave Ehrenfest with even fewer adult archducal family members; I am your guardian; my relationship with Veronica... No woman from Ahrensbach would make for an equal trade, as there are none who can take my place and work as a representative archduke.”

It seemed that Sylvester had valiantly fought against Ahrensbach’s archducal couple and refused their petition. In response, they had expressed their suspicion that Ferdinand was still suffering from Veronica’s grudge against him, since he was continuing to serve in the temple.

“Georgine ultimately asked for me to share my stance in person, as she thought it obvious that I would rather be married to the next aub of a greater duchy than continue serving as the High Priest against my supposed will in Ehrenfest.”

So, that was why Ferdinand was summoned.

“But you aren’t serving as the High Priest against your will, are you?”

“Hence why I am saying the matter is over.”

This response calmed me down... but several days later, Ferdinand was summoned again, this time by the king. I saw him off, sympathizing with his struggle of getting dragged to and fro. He shook his head with exasperation and stepped onto the teleporter to the Royal Academy.

“He’s been gone a lot longer than last time...” I mused aloud. “Has he gotten caught up in something?”

Two days had passed since Ferdinand had been summoned, but he still hadn’t

returned. We couldn't continue our preparatory lessons for the archduke candidate course without him, so I was being made to practice sewing for my bridal training and focus on my harspiel practice. To be honest, studying for my practical lessons sounded way more preferable.

"Rihyarda, could Grandfather not teach me?" I asked.

"Lord Bonifatius has his own work to do as the acting archduke," she replied. "He does not have time to spend on your extracurricular lessons." The duchy's key scholars were going to the Archduke Conference, and there weren't many scholars staying behind in general, so he was apparently in quite a rough situation.

"I shall assist him, then."

"You cannot fool me, milady. You are making the same face that Lord Sylvester makes when attempting to escape his duties."

Eep. She saw right through me.

I had no hope of deceiving Rihyarda when she had spent decades honing her eyes and keeping Sylvester, a regular offender, from running away yet again. In other words, I would need to rely on a more direct attack.

"Rihyarda, I would rather read than sew, even if the book is not an enjoyable one. I just want to prepare for my next year at the Royal Academy. Please do allow me to read."

"Lady Rozemyne has to leave partway through the term for the Dedication Ritual, so she needs to study at every opportunity," Philine and Roderick added, trying to back me up. "Also bear in mind that she's taking both the scholar course and the archduke course next year."

Rihyarda shot the idea down with a stern expression. "She finished studying for the scholar course at the Royal Academy, if you recall, and studying for the archduke candidate course is on hold until my boy Ferdinand returns. Tell me, what will she even be preparing for?"

I slumped my shoulders. Rihyarda had an unrivaled understanding of all my activities in the Royal Academy, meaning I had no choice but to continue my embroidering.

Bonifatius joined us for dinner, as per usual. He looked exhausted, maybe because he was having to shoulder all the work alone without Ferdinand here to help.

“Grandfather, are you doing okay on your own?” I asked. “I can always help out, if you like.”

“No, no. There’s no need to worry. I am fine,” Bonifatius replied, dismissing the idea with a wave. Then, he looked up with a start. “Hrm... Wait. I... I see. You would help me, Rozemyne?”

“Yes. I assist Ferdinand with his work in the temple, and Sylvester in the winter, so I do believe I can be of at least some help to you.”

“Rozemyne, you’ve been helping Father in the winter?” Wilfried asked, staring at me in surprise. I explained the situation to him—that I had been summoned back to Ehrenfest quite some time before the Dedication Ritual and had assisted Sylvester in the interim—at which point he turned to Bonifatius with determined eyes. “Lord Bonifatius, I would like to help as well. At this rate, Rozemyne will take all the archduke work for herself.”

“Worry not—I shall do nothing of the sort,” I replied. “In fact, I would prefer that you take my share of archduke duties as well. My ultimate aim is to read, not work—do take care to remember that.”

In any case, I didn’t expect them to have the leeway to educate Wilfried when they were already suffering from a lack of manpower. I watched as Bonifatius fell into thought for a moment and then nodded.

“Very well, then,” Bonifatius said. “If you’re to be the next archduke, then you’ll need to learn this work sooner rather than later. Sylvester struggled a great deal due to his father passing away while he was still so young.” He had very deftly omitted the fact that Sylvester’s struggle was mostly related to his tendency to shy away from his work.

Wilfried was motivated, so it was decided that he and his scholars would all help out as well. Bonifatius was confident that having adult scholars on board would ensure that the process went smoothly.

“I admire your willingness to train a successor while you’re so busy yourself, Grandfather,” I said. “I cannot help but view you in contrast to Ferdinand, who immediately cuts off anyone he deems to be useless.”

Ferdinand was still quite new to the idea of training successors. He had started off with Kampfer and Frietack in the temple, but even then, he tended to do all the work on his own, since it was much faster. There was no way he would take the time to teach a kid while caught up in such an extremely busy period.

“I see. So you admire me, huh?” Bonifatius muttered, nodding to himself again and again with a broad grin.

Melchior raised a clenched fist into the air and said, “I want to help too!”

“I understand that you wish to join us,” Charlotte interjected, “but you are still too young to help Lord Bonifatius.”

Upon hearing this, Melchior slumped over in disappointment. “I know that I’ll only slow things down, but I want to be with all of you...”

“I am sure there are some things that Melchior can help with,” I said.

Charlotte let out a sigh. “Sister, it will take you and Lord Bonifatius quite some time just to find work for him to do. Melchior, please sit this one out. In return, you may study in the corner of the office. I will sit nearby to ensure that you do not interfere. Will that suffice?”

I was moved—Charlotte had put forward precisely the kind of solution that a big sister would come up with to help her little brother after living with him for such a long time. I was a fake in comparison; I tried to grant Melchior’s wishes in any way that I could, but Charlotte actually acknowledged and respected the feelings behind them, even when she refused him. When it came to our big sister power levels, she was miles above me.

“I accept this,” Bonifatius said. “Study well, son.”

“Sir!” Melchior replied happily.

Charlotte watched on with a warm smile that reminded me of the one that so often graced Florencia’s lips. It left no room for doubt that they were mother

and daughter.

We started helping Bonifatius in the afternoon the very next day. We had spent the morning focused on our studies, and after finishing my harspiel and dedication whirl practice, I headed straight to the archduke's office. Our presence would probably make things harder to begin with, so I needed to delegate the workloads as much as I could in the morning.

"This work here can be done by Wilfried, this by Charlotte, this by Melchior, and this by me and my retainers," I said. "As for this work, I am afraid you will need to do it yourself, Grandfather. Of course, Charlotte and Melchior are only here to study today, but as their scholars are present as well, do not hesitate to distribute work to them."

Bonifatius's eyes widened at the now-organized mountain of paperwork. "You know what level of work their retainers are capable of doing?" he asked.

"Not exactly," I replied. "I only know the ability of the apprentice scholars I've seen working in the Royal Academy. I intend to use today to gauge how the others do, and if they perform well, we may trust them with more work from tomorrow onward."

I didn't really know how much work Wilfried's scholars could be trusted with, so the pile for my retainers was taller than any other. Considering how fast my retinue worked in the temple, however, I was fairly confident that they could have this workload finished by the end of the day.

Once the work was distributed among archduke candidates, I started distributing mine among my retainers. "These are for Roderick, these are for Philine, these are also for Philine, these are for Roderick, these are for Damuel..."

"Wait, Rozemyne," Bonifatius said. "Was that not a knight's name?"

"Hm? Yes, but I don't see that as an issue; all of my knights, save for Angelica, do the work of scholars in the temple. Erm... Or is that a problem in the castle?"

Damuel wasn't the only knight capable of doing scholar work—Cornelius, Leonore, and Judithe all helped out in the High Priest's office when I was there.

“Hmm...” Bonifatius frowned. “There’s no precedent for using knights as scholars, but it shouldn’t be an issue during the Archduke Conference. Given the shortage of manpower, I can’t imagine anyone protesting. We should use what we can.” He had a surprisingly flexible attitude, and my affection points for him were shooting up.

“I am glad that we get to work together, Grandfather.”

We all spent the afternoon doing our work, but the archduke’s office wasn’t big enough to hold Bonifatius, Wilfried, Charlotte, Melchior, me, and all of our retainers at once. For this reason, we moved to a meeting room and worked there instead. Charlotte was busy watching Melchior practice math.

Bonifatius turned to Melchior’s retainers and said, “If you all do your work properly, Melchior will not feel so useless. Your tasks today are for the sake of your lord. Do them well.”

It wasn’t long before Charlotte’s and Melchior’s retainers were delving into their paperwork for the day. Bonifatius was instructing Wilfried’s scholars as they continued their work.

“Now then, I suppose we should begin as well,” I said.

“Do we really have to do scholar work here too?” Cornelius asked with a grimace. “The other guard knights are either standing behind their archduke candidate or guarding the door, like Angelica.”

“There is only a manpower shortage during the Archduke Conference,” I replied. “Lord Bonifatius said that he will allow this.”

My retainers had so much more work to do than anyone else, but we got through it much faster because my guard knights were helping and we were all so used to the process from our experience in the temple. The other scholars were having to learn new things to get the work done.

“I have finished this, Lady Rozemyne,” Leonore said. “May I ask you to look it over?”

“Is the math here correct?” Judithe asked.

“This part... Hm, the flow of money doesn’t seem quite right. We should

investigate it carefully," Damuel said, having discovered what seemed to be embezzlement. We ultimately decided to wait until Sylvester and the others got back before looking into it any further.

At fifth bell, we took an extended break and enjoyed the tea and sweets that our attendants brought in for us.

"You're all so amazing. I want to be useful soon too..." Melchior said, looking at me with respect in his eyes while eating a sweet. Receiving such praise from my little brother really did warm my heart. I needed to keep up the hard work now and forever.

"Ferdinand certainly is putting your knights through their paces at the temple, huh?" Bonifatius asked. "To be honest, I never thought knights could manage to do scholar work so effectively."

"Back at the Royal Academy, I kept hearing that her scholars are on another level than mine, but I never thought her knights would be this impressive too," Wilfried said. Charlotte was nodding along with him.

"Lord Wilfried, it is not the duty of a knight to do paperwork. Please do not take after Lady Rozemyne and start making unreasonable requests of us," Lamprecht said, eliciting a firm nod of agreement from Cornelius. "There is much you can learn from observing how Lady Rozemyne trains her scholars, but you should allow your knights to stick to their own duties."

"Indeed," Bonifatius added. "Wilfried, you must have your scholars do more work."

Wilfried shook his head in protest and said, "But I am. They are doing more printing work by the day."

It was true that printing was going to be Ehrenfest's primary industry going forward, but Wilfried wasn't actually that involved with it. Out of all of our retainers, the only one deemed fit enough to accompany Sylvester to the Archduke Conference was Hartmut.

"If you are motivated, then I can ask Elvira to send more and more work your way," I said. "Most of the scholars involved in the printing industry are laynobles, and she has been talking about wanting to have more archnobles

and mednobles to bring to future conferences. Perhaps you could train them in preparation for next year?”

Our plan was to announce printed goods during next year’s Archduke Conference, and chaos was bound to ensue. The more people we had there, the better.

“If we can send as many of our adult retainers as possible, I am sure it will make all the difference for us in the future,” I continued. “It will also be heartening for our retainers to have a grasp on how the Archduke Conference functions before we must go there ourselves. I am very much looking forward to Hartmut’s report.”

Wilfried looked over his own retainers, a competitive fire burning in his eyes. “Alright,” he said. “I’ll make sure mine are good enough to attend the Archduke Conference next year.”

Okay! Perfect! New recruits for the printing industry!

We got used to the new work over the next few days and soon reached the point where we could talk casually during breaks. According to Cornelius, the grades of the apprentice knights were steadily rising thanks to the Rozemyne Mana Compression Method.

“Matthias is very impressive, then, for keeping up with them while working so desperately to compress his mana on his own.”

Leonore nodded. “He can give orders in my place and possesses more mana than average for a mednoble. We would ask you to take him as a retainer, but he is unfortunately of the former Veronica faction,” she said with a troubled smile. “We have been struggling to find a suitable guard knight to replace Traugott.”

“Gerlach’s son, hm?” Bonifatius asked with a grimace. “Rozemyne, no matter how skilled this boy is, and no matter how much you might wish for his service, you must not take him as a retainer unless he gives you his name. He is too dangerous otherwise.”

The way that Bonifatius spoke made it sound as though he knew something

that I didn't. I gazed at him quizzically, urging him to elaborate, but he just shook his head and repeated that the former Veronica faction was dangerous before changing the topic.

"More importantly—your mana compression method is something else, Rozemyne. Well done for thinking that one up," Bonifatius said, describing how much progress the knights were making amid some generous words of praise. "That layknight guard of yours"—he glanced over at Damuel—"probably wouldn't have lasted this long if not for that technique. He was lucky that his growth period ended so late, and when coupled with your mana compression method, it meant he could increase his mana capacity far more than anyone would expect from a laynoble."

I seemed to recall my omega blessing being the primary reason for Damuel making so much progress, not his late growth period, but that was a secret between Karstedt and me.

"Is Damuel still growing?" I asked.

"No, his capacity has been relatively stagnant over the past year or two. No matter how late it started, his growing period must have stopped by now. Of course, that just means his vessel has stopped developing. He can keep compressing his mana to fit more into the space he's working with, and he can get better at fighting by using his noggin."

It seemed that Damuel now had the average mana capacity of a low-or midtier mednoble. Considering how small it had originally been, that was a massive upgrade.

"I wouldn't expect any more dramatic improvements from him," Bonifatius continued. "The boy's reached his peak. Knowing this, will you still use him as your guard knight?"

I noticed Damuel tightly clench his fist out of the corner of my eye and nodded at once. "His mana is not his main strength. If not for Damuel, my retainers would not be anywhere near as organized as they are now. I have no intention of relieving him of duty, whether that be now or in the future."

"I see. Then I will continue whipping him into shape."

Damuel met this news with a hard expression, but he would suffer even more without Bonifatius's training. The road ahead was going to be tough for him, so I wanted him to keep working hard. He knew too many of my secrets; if circumstances ever led to him being let go, there was a very real chance that everyone around me would try to silence him for good. I didn't want to have to stress over that.

"Please whip the other apprentice guard knights into shape as well. They are now coordinating more, but they still fail to understand the contribution scoring system," I said, explaining Judithe's reaction to the fish slaughtering.

"I see," Bonifatius replied. He looked over the gathered apprentice knights with a wide grin. "Seems like I'll need to rethink their training."

"Grandfather, what was the Royal Academy like when you were there?" I asked on another day. The civil war had resulted in many tremendous changes, and things were now very different from when Ferdinand had attended. I was wondering whether going all the way back to Bonifatius's years would reveal even more dissimilarities.

I mentioned the old diary that Solange had allowed me to borrow and the various ways that things had changed compared to when it was written. Then, I asked Bonifatius what he remembered about his days in the Royal Academy.

"The Academy, huh?" he said. "The most I remember is people running around for treasure-stealing ditter."

According to Bonifatius, the scholars would desperately start making rejuvenation potions from the very moment they learned how to—and when they weren't making such potions, they were creating magic tools necessary for ditter. Attendants would focus on the information war, with some even flying around on highbeasts to refill magic tools and the knights' rejuvenation potions. My initial assumption had been that Bonifatius was the type of person to charge ahead of everyone else to strike first in battle, but as an archduke candidate, he had instead focused on taking command and moving troops.

"Of course, I made sure to show off the power of my fists whenever the opportunity arose," Bonifatius made sure to note. He went on to explain that he

had been friends with archnobles from Dunkelfelger and the now-gone Werkestock, and that he had sometimes taken the apprentice knights out hunting. “Oh, that reminds me—I once destroyed a shrine on the Academy’s grounds in the heat of a ditter game.”

“That’s terrible!” I exclaimed. “Wait, so is one of the Academy’s twenty mysteries actually about you?! The one about the delinquent students who played pranks at the shrines to the gods dotting the Royal Academy’s grounds?!”

“No, no. A story like that can’t be about me,” Bonifatius said, rushing to defend himself. “I only broke one, and I reported it immediately. It should be repaired by now. On a more important note, what’s this about twenty mysteries? It’s news to me.”

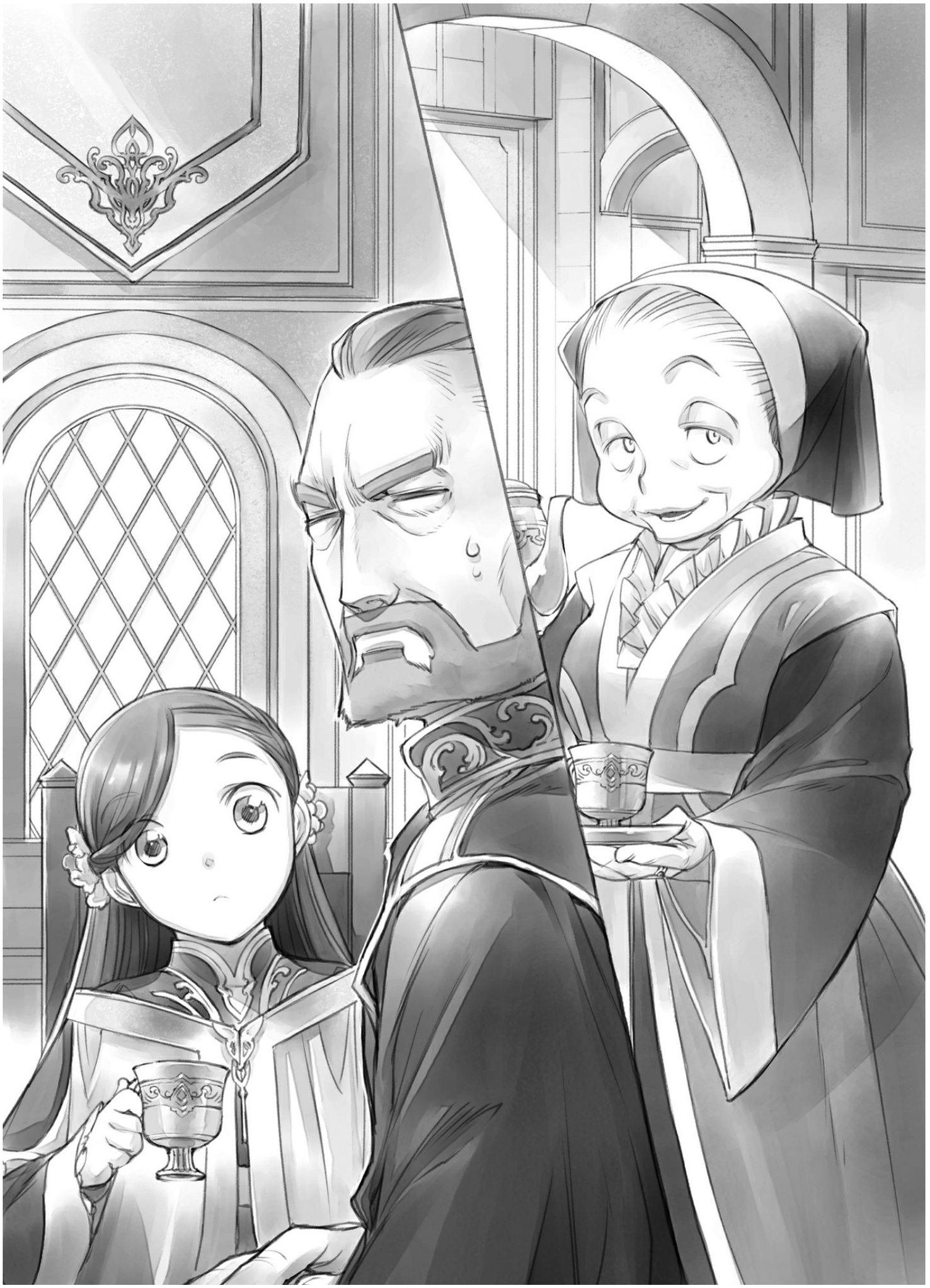
I didn’t expect him to know about it, but I told him one of the twenty mysteries I had heard from Solange. Melchior and Charlotte, among others, listened with great interest.

“Wait, what do you mean it *should* be repaired by now?” I asked. “Did you not check, Grandfather?”

“It’s not my fault. There are rarely any opportunities to return to the Royal Academy after you graduate.”

Rihyarda chuckled as she refreshed my tea. “You mustn’t be deceptive, Lord Bonifatius. Did you not visit the Royal Academy every year for the Archduke Conference when serving the previous archduke as the knight commander?”

“Rihyarda!” Bonifatius exclaimed with an awkward grimace. She was about his age, meaning she was old enough to know his past—and his secrets.



“I shall check on the shrine in your place then,” I said. “Do you remember where it was?”

“Hm... I would expect it to be covered in snow during the winter. It should only be visible during the Archduke Conference, when the grounds are clear.”

In short, I was unlikely to be able to find it while I was actually at the Royal Academy. How unfortunate. Incidentally, I took this opportunity to ask him whether he knew anything about the forbidden archive.

“I can’t say I recognize that name,” he replied. “I always sent scholars to get what I needed from the library and never went there myself.”

To me, Bonifatius had always come across as something of a maverick who would break boundaries wherever he went... but it turned out that he had been a surprisingly ordinary archduke candidate.

“Lord Bonifatius,” Rihyarda interjected, “would it not be more accurate to say that you rarely used the library at all?”

“Rihyarda.”

Bonifatius fell into a sullen silence. His pouty expression was admittedly quite cute, and everyone who had been listening couldn’t help but laugh. It turned out that it was hard to talk about your past when someone who shared that knowledge was standing nearby.

Report on the Archduke Conference (Second Year)

We spent our days peacefully until, soon enough, the Archduke Conference came to an end. Word arrived that the archducal couple's attendants had returned and were preparing to welcome their lord and lady. I was worried about Ferdinand, since he hadn't come back from his second summons, so I went to welcome them at the teleportation circle. Wilfried, Charlotte, and Melchior were naturally with me, excited to see their parents again.

"Father! Mother!" Melchior cried, brimming with excitement. The archducal couple had returned. Florencia was wearing her usual smile, but Sylvester was almost completely expressionless. He looked so stoic that it was hard to even imagine a smile on him.

After saying our greetings, I turned to Sylvester. "Did something happen during the conference?"

"I'll explain during our meeting. Gah... That idiot," Sylvester said, offering only the briefest response. He then clicked his tongue and muttered a few crude words about this unknown person.

"Sylvester," Florencia said, chiding her husband. He let out a sigh, put on a smile for the kids, and urged us out of the teleportation hall.

"Come on, now. Let's get a move on. We need to make way for the next teleportation," Sylvester said. And indeed, a few moments later, the teleportation circle flashed. It was Ferdinand.

"Welcome back, Ferdinand," I said.

"Indeed. It is good to be back," he replied, wearing the most brilliantly fake smile I had ever seen in my life.

"Hartmut, did something happen to Ferdinand...?" I asked once we were back in my room. Unfortunately, it turned out that he had only been allowed to attend the negotiations with Dunkelfelger; he hadn't been permitted to

accompany Ferdinand to wherever he was summoned.

"The most I saw was the aub shouting in the dormitory and Ferdinand silently brushing him off," Hartmut explained. "Based on the few snippets I overheard, I believe they received a royal decree from the king that they cannot refuse."

From there, Hartmut gave a report on the meeting with Dunkelfelger. Negotiations about the royalties and translations had panned out mostly as expected.

"Dunkelfelger's first wife is a fearsome woman indeed," Hartmut noted. "Although she could not provide any details, she seemed to have deduced the existence of printing."

"How did she do that?"

"She examined the book that Lady Hannelore borrowed and observed that the handwriting was so consistently neat that it couldn't possibly have been done with a pen. She looked at the ink surrounding the letters and noted that it differed from what she was accustomed to from handwritten works. And as her most impressive feat, she took the knowledge that we want to sell our books and deduced that we have created technology capable of producing multiple copies of the same work."

Eep... The first wives of greater duchies sure are scary.

It had been scary enough when Drewanchel immediately deconstructed and analyzed the trial portion of rinsham I gave them, but Dunkelfelger's first wife figuring out the existence of printing technology simply by looking at a book her daughter had borrowed was absolutely terrifying.

"Now, if you will allow me to move on—Dunkelfelger's scholars came to understand the royalty and translation fees much quicker than our own," Hartmut continued, "The skill gap between our duchies was made apparent once again."

It was not an easy task to absorb completely new ideas and concepts. In a world where books being handwritten was not only the norm but literally the only option, people simply could not understand the concept of paying anything *per copy* of a book. It generally took quite some time for the laynobles of the

printing industry to grasp everything. Elvira, in contrast, had understood quite quickly, as she was making the books firsthand.

“Overall, it was quite a tense meeting. There were two sharp eyes on me at all times, trying to determine whether I am a fitting partner for Clarissa.”

Clarissa’s father had been among the guard knights, and he had spent the entire meeting fixing Hartmut with a stern glare. Things had gotten so unnerving that Hartmut had apparently started to worry that Clarissa’s father would suddenly charge over and cut him down.

“The shield of Wind that you produced during the attack on the awards ceremony seems to have garnered quite a bit of attention,” Hartmut continued. “It came up even during the conference.”

“You didn’t fan the flames, did you?”

“I spoke only of the legends that I have already made public. I understand when to hold my tongue,” he replied. He had wanted to spread the more recent legends about the first ternisbefallen hunt and the recovery of our duchy’s gathering spot, but he had thankfully exercised some control.

“I would ask that you learn even more self-control and outright cease your efforts to push exaggerated tall tales as saintly legends,” I said.

“That would mean limiting myself to the more restrained tales, which won’t be quite as satisfying... but if such is your wish, Lady Rozemyne, then I shall obey.”

Our meeting about the Archduke Conference was held the day after everyone returned. The archducal family, their retainers, the Knight’s Order, and the majority of the high-ranking scholars were in attendance. Wilfried, Charlotte, and I were there as well, and we promptly took our assigned seats.

“Uncle seems to be in a good mood for once. D’you think it has something to do with the Archduke Conference?” Wilfried asked. He was sitting next to me and commenting on Ferdinand, who was seated almost across from us.

I had been trying to avoid looking at Ferdinand, but I eventually conceded—and my blood immediately ran cold. His smile truly was faker than any he had

ever worn before, and that was precisely why it was so scary. I didn't have a clue what was going through his head or what he was so angry about.

"You must not be fooled, Wilfried. That is the expression he makes when he is exceptionally displeased."

"Is that so?" Charlotte asked, surprised. She was sitting on my other side.

"I've never seen him smile like that before, though..." Wilfried said, looking between Ferdinand and me with suspicion.

"He can disguise most emotions beneath an expressionless mask, but when he gets very angry or is in especially great pain, he overcompensates with the most exaggerated smile so that those around him cannot detect how he truly feels."

"Rozemyne," Ferdinand called, deepening his smile before raising a hand to cover his mouth. I understood that as him telling me to shut up, so I placed both of my hands over my mouth and nodded repeatedly.

He's always scarier when he's smiling.

"Everyone's here, I see," Sylvester said. He had entered with Florencia once everyone was ready, and just like last year, the meeting commenced. "A lot changed this year, so our gathering here won't be brief. Don't let your minds wander or you'll miss a lot of very important decisions."

After these initial words, one of Sylvester's scholars began by announcing our place in the duchy rankings this year. Ehrenfest was now eighth, meaning we would be using the doors and rooms marked eight in the Royal Academy next year.

"Rozemyne's Mana Compression Method is producing excellent results among children still in their growth period," Sylvester said. "Furthermore, the children are collectively working together to improve not just their own grades, but the grades of the whole duchy. Their accomplishments can be seen through how many honor students we have attained and the fact that our grades at the Royal Academy have risen significantly. Keep up the good work."

Wilfried frowned, adopting a slight pout. "I thought we'd go higher than that..."

“Getting a higher rank through grades and trends alone seems unlikely,” I replied. “We have just about reached our limit, unless Ehrenfest begins to hold more influence within the Sovereignty. Those above us now are middle duchies with royal family members and greater duchies that have more influence to begin with.”

If we wanted to climb beyond eighth, we would not only need to keep up with the trends, but also send people into the Sovereignty to converse with and sway fellow Sovereign nobles. The problem was that this latter point would immediately put Ehrenfest in dire straits. We just didn’t have the manpower to spare.

“So we need to train new people, then?” Wilfried asked.

“I imagine it will be many years before we can send skilled workers while maintaining our current grades,” Charlotte said, looking equally as troubled as her brother. Ehrenfest’s population was on the smaller side for a duchy of our size, meaning it would take us quite some time to produce people skilled enough to work in the Sovereignty.

“Our business deals this year have increased our influence with Klassenberg and the Sovereignty, even if only by a small amount,” Sylvester continued. “Next year, we plan to finally start spreading printed goods at the Royal Academy. Keep your guards up and do your jobs.”

Sylvester then went on to explain the deals that had been made during the conference. We had settled on doing business with Klassenberg, the Sovereignty, and Dunkelfelger.

A scholar looked around the room, then started to give more details. “We have given permission for eight companies from the Sovereignty to come; six from Klassenberg, as they caused problems in the lower city last year; and six from Dunkelfelger. As for the duchies we were once again unable to sign with, Lady Rozemyne permitted us to sell them the production method for rinsham and certain sweets. This should help contain the rising price of plant oil. Increasing trade is important, but we have been made painfully aware that our entire duchy must be prepared, not just our city.”

There was a limit to how many merchants could be accepted into Ehrenfest’s

lower city, so it was outright impossible for us to take any more trade partners without either expanding the city or increasing the amount of accommodation available in the cities alongside the main trading route, such as Groschel.

That said, sorting out large-scale infrastructure projects is a job for Sylvester, not me.

"Next, I shall report on the printing industry," the scholar said. "We held a meeting to discuss our acquired right to publish the book on Dunkelfelger history." He then repeated what Hartmut had already told me before signaling for another one of Sylvester's retainers to bring forth a box.

"These are the winnings that Ferdinand secured alongside the rights in question through his ditter match," Sylvester said. The box apparently contained the ingredients that Heisshitze had promised. Ferdinand checked its contents to confirm, then handed the box to Justus.

Another scholar stood up. "As Lord Wilfried and Lady Rozemyne are now engaged, it is Lady Charlotte who was flooded with marriage proposals this year."

Apparently, there had been a truly shocking amount. There were requests from greater duchies for her to be a second or third wife, and even requests from top-ranking middle duchies asking her to be a first wife—something that would have been unthinkable just a year ago.

"We postponed our answers, as this is not a matter to be settled on the spot, and intend to consider these options with Lady Charlotte's thoughts in mind."

Ehrenfest hadn't yet decided which duchies it wanted to maintain or establish connections with. We would need to consider whether it was best to establish a relationship with a greater duchy with Charlotte as a second or third wife or whether it was best to have her be a first wife, which would allow her to attend the Archduke Conference.

"Some duchies also offered Aub Ehrenfest second and third wives," the scholar noted. "These, too, will receive careful consideration."

Sylvester had publicly declared that he didn't intend to marry anyone but Florencia, but the times had changed, and Ehrenfest was no longer in a position

where we could keep to ourselves. Now, we had to use marriages to form bonds and increase our influence with other duchies.

"Those requests will also be put on hold for now," Sylvester said with a bitter grimace. Florencia, who was sitting beside him, merely shook her head and shrugged, as if to say that she did not mind him having more wives and wished he would stop avoiding the subject.

Sylvester coughed, stood up, and waved a hand to change the subject. "I think it's time we move on to announcements about royalty. Prince Hildebrand had his debut. He's the son of the king's third wife from Dunkelfelger, but he's being raised as a vassal. It seems safe to say that Prince Sigiswald is going to take the throne."

This announcement resulted in some low muttering among those gathered. "The child of the Dunkelfelger wife seems more competent and mana-rich than that of the Gilessenmeyer wife," one person said, "so I am surprised that Dunkelfelger stood down so easily."

Another nodded in agreement. "They must be prioritizing avoiding another civil war above all else."

"Furthermore, Prince Anastasius's Starbind Ceremony with Lady Eglantine was completed without issue," Sylvester continued. "The hairpin she wore was one she received from Ehrenfest. It drew much attention, and we expect further orders for hairpins from greater duchies and royals."

That made sense. I thought of the archduke candidates who would be graduating next year and considered the possibility that Lestilaut from Dunkelfelger might order one.

I wonder what Lady Detlinde will do? Aub Ahrensbach asked for a husband for her, but Ferdinand refused.

"One last thing—and this is going to impact Ehrenfest more than anything else mentioned thus far," Sylvester said. His voice lowered, and his expression disappeared as if to contain his emotions.

Is this the most important thing that happened at the Archduke Conference? I wondered, leaning forward out of curiosity. In contrast to my enthusiasm, all

those who had returned from the conference were wearing similarly flat expressions.

Once all eyes were on Sylvester, he began to speak. “The king has ordered that Ferdinand and Lady Detlinde of Ahrensbach be joined in matrimony. They are to be engaged posthaste, and their marriage will take place as soon as Lady Detlinde graduates from the Royal Academy.”

But... I thought the matter was dealt with! What’s this about the king ordering it?!

I glanced over at Ferdinand without a moment’s hesitation. He was wearing the same fake smile that he had been using to mask his feelings ever since he returned from the Royal Academy.

“An engagement? How wonderful. To think love would return to Lord Ferdinand...”

“I would never have expected a greater duchy such as Ahrensbach to seek a former temple priest. What an honor.”

“The king must have remembered and favored Lord Ferdinand from when he came first-in-class so many years in a row.”

The attending nobles exchanged words of celebration, which Ferdinand received with a polite nod and the same exaggerated smile. It was clear that he hadn’t wished for this marriage—in fact, he had outright told me that he had refused it. I knew that the more guarded of a smile he put on, the angrier and more dissatisfied he was on the inside... but everyone was celebrating this news as though Ferdinand was over the moon himself.

Just how much pain does Ferdinand have to endure in his life? Now he has to marry Lady Detlinde, who’s more or less a young version of Lady Veronica, the woman he hates most? Will the world ever let him be happy?

Just seeing Ferdinand smile like that made me so frustrated and sad that I wanted to cry. Sylvester must have felt the same; his eyes wandered to Ferdinand, and immediately his flat expression morphed into a deep frown. Florencia gave him a light jab in the side a beat later, prompting him to become stone-faced once again... but I could see his true feelings through the cracks in

his mask.

Sylvester looked around the room, seeming a little frustrated. “I ask for quiet,” he said. The words of celebration stopped, and all eyes turned to him. “It has been decided that Ferdinand will move to Ahrensbach after Lady Detlinde’s graduation, and their Starbind Ceremony will be held straight away during the following Archduke Conference.”

Normally, an engagement like this would sit for a year following one’s graduation; there was a lot to prepare when it came to moving duchies. Marrying right after one’s graduation was very strange, and there must have been some dire circumstances behind it.

“Thus, Ferdinand will be removed from his position as High Priest, and we will need to assign someone to take his place,” Sylvester said.

The room began to stir; those looking to climb the social hierarchy had much to gain from supporting me as the High Priest. The problem for them was the temple’s reputation. Although its image was slowly improving due to my retainers’ and my regular visits and the occasional phenomenon like the Haldenzel Miracle, nobles were still very clearly loath to get involved. I could see them all grappling with their pride as they weighed up the pros and cons.

“Aub Ehrenfest, I humbly ask that you assign me to be the High Priest.”

This request came from Hartmut, of all people. He listed reason after reason why he was suitable for the job: he was already familiar with the temple through visiting it so often, he would be able to hit the ground running due to his experience helping Ferdinand, and it was the job of my retainers to assist me in the first place.

“But Hartmut, you... Are you not getting married in a few years?” Ferdinand asked, furrowing his brow. One naturally could not enter the temple after inviting one’s marriage partner to the duchy—nobody in the temple was married, for priests and shrine maidens could not get married. That was precisely why I, myself, would only be serving as the High Bishop until I came of age.

Hartmut smiled as though this weren’t an issue at all. “I do not intend to abandon my position as a noble; I am simply prioritizing assisting Lady

Rozemyne above all else. When she comes of age and leaves her post, I will do the same and get married. Indeed, there is nothing to worry about—if Clarissa does not wish for me to enter the temple, I will simply cancel our engagement."

That... That would be a problem in itself! Clarissa and her parents will have a lot to say about you entering the temple after *promising to marry her. And she's, like, the only girl in the world who would actually marry you, Hartmut! So what are you going to do if this falls through?!*

I would be coming of age four years from now, by which point Clarissa would be eighteen. That wasn't old enough for people to say that she had married late, but it was a bit too long to make her wait, in my opinion.

Besides, I don't need any more retainers who refuse to get married!

My internal screams went unanswered, and Sylvester really had no choice but to select the lone candidate for the job. "In that case, I hereby assign you to the position of High Priest, Hartmut. You will serve as a retainer in the castle, but in the temple, you will take on your new role. It will prove exceedingly difficult, and you will have much to do in order to take over in so short a time... but the duty is now yours."

"I graciously accept," Hartmut replied.

This marked the end of the meeting. The room was abuzz, and most people left with bright expressions, pleased to have some good news to talk about. Of course, there was one particular group of people who weren't so happy...

"This was another hectic year," Wilfried said.

"Indeed," Charlotte replied. "The printing industry will shift greatly next year, so perhaps it would be wise for us to greet Elvira and ask her to start sending us more work to complete."

And so, they both headed over to Elvira, having decided while working with Bonifatius to increase their scholars' workloads. I watched them go, then stood up with a clatter and approached Ferdinand, whose smile remained unfaltering. "We need to talk," I said, glaring up at him.

To my surprise, the voice that followed didn't belong to Ferdinand; Sylvester had appeared next to us, and with unmistakable anger he said, "Good timing. I

need to talk to Ferdinand too. Both of you, come to my office.” I almost shouted, “Don’t lump me in with him!” on instinct, but I thankfully managed to hold my tongue.

A More Private Meeting (Second Year)

“I’m clearing the room,” Sylvester said. “Out.” He waved everyone away, then plopped down into his seat. I could tell from his posture and the sharp glint in his dark-green eyes that he was in an incredibly bad mood. “Hurry up,” he growled as the retainers shuffled out.

“I can talk with Ferdinand later; don’t let me interrupt you,” I said, attempting to escape this terrifying atmosphere... but Ferdinand grabbed me by the shoulder and secured me in place. He leaned in close, still wearing that false smile that made my skin crawl.

“Stay here,” he said. “I expect that both you and Sylvester will ask the same questions anyway, so it will save me time to have you both in one place.”

Nooo! My escape plan, torn to shreds!

Soon enough, my retainers were gone as well, leaving me at Ferdinand’s mercy. I could only watch as the door shut behind them.

“Now, speak,” Sylvester said. “What were you told when the king summoned you? Why was the marriage decided without my consultation?!”

“What?! Our aub was absent?!” I shouted. Archducal permission was always necessary when deciding on marriages between duchies, and with Ferdinand being a member of the Ehrenfest archducal family, it was absolutely unthinkable that Sylvester hadn’t been there.

“If you hadn’t been so stupid and consented while being questioned, I could have turned them down a thousand ways,” Sylvester said. “But because you did, the matter was settled before I was even told about it.”

To my disbelief, Ferdinand had been summoned under the pretense of discussing the severe casualties that had resulted from the ternisbefallen attack, and it was during this meeting that the king had broached the topic of marriage.

“It’s normal for people to be questioned separately during inquiries,”

Sylvester said. “That’s the only reason I sent you off without a second thought. Had I known that Ahrensbach intended to discuss marriage, I never would have let you go. I don’t want you to suffer any more than you already have, Ferdinand!”

Sylvester’s worried cries made my chest pang with emotion, but Ferdinand seemed to be unmoved. He crossed his arms, looking down at the aub with cold eyes. “I moved things along before you could get involved precisely because I knew you would protest as you are now, even when given a direct order by the king. You should know how foolish it is to defy him—or, what, did you intend to put our entire duchy at risk for my sake? Good grief... You are as soft on your family as always. Did you learn nothing from the incident that ultimately forced you to convict your own mother?” He paused for a moment with his eyes closed and then muttered, “There is no choice but to obey a king’s order. You understand that, Sylvester, do you not?”

“If you hadn’t accepted on your own, we could have put forward so many reasons to refuse,” Sylvester said. He then started to list all of the excuses he had first used to reject the request from Ahrensbach.

Ferdinand crossed his arms and scoffed. “Saying that we are neutral may be pleasing to the ear, but consider this—Ehrenfest has shot up through the ranks while making no effort to assist the king. Meanwhile, Ahrensbach is being ravaged by a mana shortage, having even been forced to demote two of its archduke candidates to archnobles. One can deduce without a moment of thought which duchy the king would prioritize.”

It was generally said throughout Yurgenschmidt that Ehrenfest’s rise through the ranks was due to the duchy having escaped punishment through its neutrality and thus having the leeway to grow. We were resented by many duchies that had lost in the civil war and were suffering for it, as well as many duchies that had won but were still struggling with mana shortages due to the purge and having to offer up their nobles to the Sovereignty. At the same time, we were seen as being dangerous, for our influence was rising despite our loyalty to the Sovereignty and the king remaining so uncertain.

“It is important that we demonstrate our willingness to listen to the king—that we have no intention of opposing him,” Ferdinand concluded.

“That’s not a good enough reason for you to accept a proposal from... from *Ahrensbach*, of all places!” Sylvester protested. “There are plenty of duchies above Ehrenfest in the rankings that could have provided a fine husband for Detlinde. They must have men closer to her age and without a reputation for being in the temple.”

Another duchy certainly would have been able to provide a better husband. Ehrenfest had only recently started to climb the ranks, and many loud voices still claimed that our success was temporary. Many would surely view a greater duchy accepting a spouse from Ehrenfest as very unreliable in the long term.

“My involvement with the temple was a problem as well, you know. The king seems to have heard rumors from various sources that I am being mistreated here,” Ferdinand said. Despite coming first-in-class every single year at the Royal Academy, he had ended up in the temple almost immediately after his graduation and the death of the former aub. And then there was me; I was serving as the High Bishop despite similarly coming first-in-class and being adopted by the archduke.

“The king heard many pleas,” Ferdinand continued. “‘Ehrenfest never sends children of the first wife to the temple, but all others are abused.’ ‘It is unthinkable that they would crush such young talent.’ ‘Please, save them from Ehrenfest.’ It would seem they were quite convincing.”

Wilfried and Charlotte were helping with Spring Prayer and the Harvest Festival, but this information wasn’t widely known. Not to mention, Ferdinand and I would return to the temple whenever we had the opportunity. I enjoyed the relaxing atmosphere there a lot more than the tension of the castle, and Ferdinand similarly got enough leeway there to enjoy his hobby of researching.

“I suppose that other duchies wouldn’t know we’ve been turning down requests to spend more time in the castle so that we can stay in the temple,” I said. “Still, who were making those pleas anyway?”

“I am told they came from many in Dunkelfelger and Drewanchel,” Ferdinand replied. “The king is surrounded by powerful people, many of whom were telling him to rescue me from the temple and marry me to a greater duchy so that I might stand upon the stage once again.”

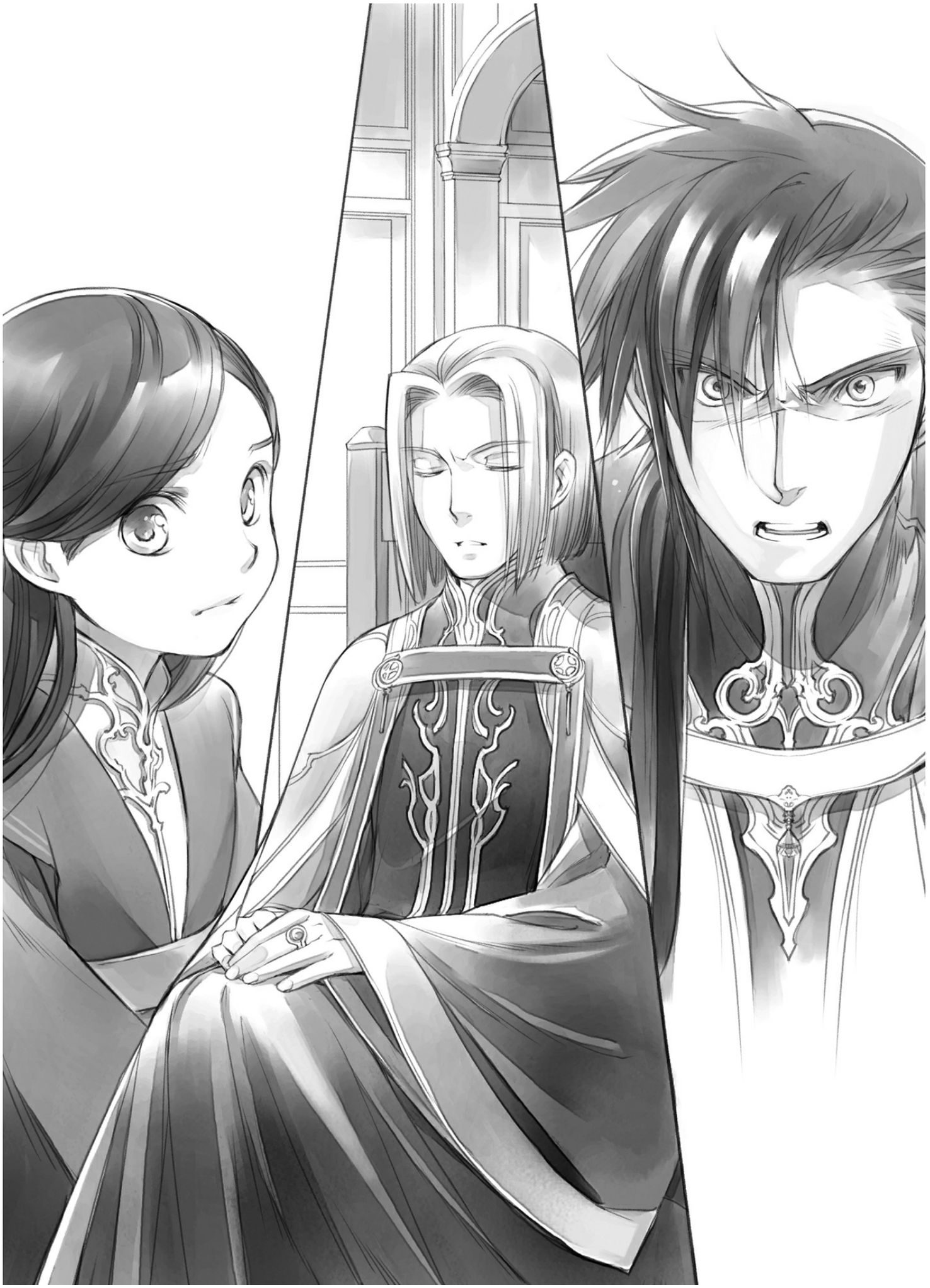
Okay, I guess they were acting with good intentions... but wow, that certainly backfired.

I was well aware that my opinion of the temple was far from the norm, but I still wished that everyone else had just minded their own business. I also felt that Ehrenfest's information management skills were severely lacking in areas, since we hadn't managed to guide these other duchies in a way that would benefit us.

"If you were to ignore the will of the greater duchies and oppose a marriage ordered by the king, your reputation as Aub Ehrenfest would plummet," Ferdinand noted. "You understand the consequences of that, surely."

Sylvester's eyes shot open. "Do you seriously care more about my reputation than the marriage you'll be spending the rest of your life in?! To begin with, I find it hard to believe you'd let rumors like that impact anything. You would have knocked them down on the spot. You're hiding something. Something happened after the first time you refused the marriage that forced your hand, didn't it? Spit it out. You've got a bad habit of trying to shoulder everything yourself."

Ferdinand let out a single sigh, then looked away. "I would rather not discuss it, as its veracity is uncertain."



“Quit stalling. Tell me.”

“My information here comes from Justus, who compiled the vaguest rumors from unknown sources, so I cannot speak to their accuracy...” Ferdinand said, speaking in far more words than were necessary. He then looked around slowly and continued in a low voice. “Aub Ahrensbach... is not long for this world. If what Justus has told me is true, he will most likely ascend the towering stairway to the distant heights while Detlinde and I are still engaged.”

“Excuse me?”

Ferdinand and Detlinde were only due to be engaged for a year before their marriage. In other words, Aub Ahrensbach didn’t have much time left at all.

“Again, at the current moment, I have no means by which to confirm this rumor. If we assume it is true, however, then I can understand why Aub Ahrensbach feels the need to brute-force the issue and use the king to achieve his goals. It explains his obstinate pushing for me to marry into his duchy.”

Indeed, if Aub Ahrensbach were to die before Detlinde got married, Ahrensbach’s archducal family would consist only of an underage girl just about to graduate, an archduke candidate too young to even go to the Academy, and a widowed first wife. It would prove immensely difficult to support a greater duchy under these circumstances.

“Ahrensbach must be in desperate need of an unmarried, adult archduke candidate with the mana and bureaucratic experience necessary to serve as the representative aub of a greater duchy,” Ferdinand said. Of course, he was the only person in Yurgenschmidt who fit this description. Most nobles married within years of coming of age, and there understandably weren’t any unmarried archduke candidates with years of ministerial experience under their belts. The entire country had a shortage of nobles, to the point that archduke candidates and archnobles were being told to get married and start having children especially early.

“For him to have decided to petition the king himself, Aub Ahrensbach truly must be backed into a corner,” Ferdinand continued. “I assume the duchy’s land is not meeting the bare minimum of mana requirements. You saw the border during Lamprecht’s Starbinding, no? It is very likely that all of Ahrensbach is just

as bad.”

I recalled the distinct border between Ehrenfest and Ahrensbach. The difference in greenery had actually been surprising.

“Ahrensbach is in a terrible state,” Ferdinand said. “The aub doubtless has old Werkestock at the very bottom of his priorities—assuming he has not abandoned it entirely.” Given how Werkestock was being seen as a hotbed of terrorism after the recent attack, I could understand why the king would want to resolve things as soon as possible.

“Can the Sovereignty not take control of old Werkestock?” I asked.

“They would if they could,” Sylvester replied. “The royals and Sovereign nobles must not have the necessary manpower. We barely have a fraction of the royals we had before the civil war, and even if they want to fix things, they don’t have the tools they’d need at their disposal.”

It seemed that the mana shortage plaguing Yurgenschmidt was even worse than I thought.

“The problem is universal, but truth be told, I care not for the mana circumstances of the Sovereignty or Ahrensbach,” Ferdinand said, then sighed. “The problem is what comes next. Who in Ahrensbach will hold the most power once Aub Ahrensbach climbs the towering stairway, leaving behind two underage archduke candidates? I believe you know the answer.”

Sylvester fell silent and glared at Ferdinand. Power would obviously end up in the hands of Aub Ahrensbach’s first wife, Georgine.

“Can you predict what she will do when Aub Ahrensbach is in the distant heights and Ahrensbach is ravaged by an even greater mana shortage?” Ferdinand asked, speaking in a flat voice as though the matter was of no interest to him. “Do you think she will show Ehrenfest any consideration, even with a husband from another duchy supporting them? It is in our best interests to have someone there who can gather intelligence, however minor, and work to constrain her.”

“*That’s* why you’re going?” Sylvester sputtered. “To Ahrensbach, the very name of which makes you grimace? To marry a girl who resembles Mother so

much that you said just looking at her pains you?”

“Yes. Given that I must prepare successors here while grasping Ahrensbach’s current state of affairs, we have little time. And most of all, I have determined that I am the best person for this job.”

“If you aren’t being forced into this, and you made the decision because you think it’s for the best... then I won’t say anything more. Though I’m not happy that you’re still trying to keep everything secret and do these things on your own, as usual.”

“I am glad you understand,” Ferdinand said. It seemed that he intended to leave things at that, but while Sylvester may have been in agreement, I certainly wasn’t. It was beneficial for Ehrenfest, maybe, but what about for Ferdinand himself? That was what mattered most.

“I understand that you are best suited to this job, Ferdinand, but is it what you want?” I asked.

“We will display our loyalty to the king, earn favor with both Ahrensbach and the Sovereignty, and gain means to better contain Georgine. Furthermore, my position as the husband of Ahrensbach’s next archduchess will most likely spur the former Veronica faction to approach me and reveal their hand. Make no mistake—I have no intention of leaving Ehrenfest in a state of uncertainty with lingering threats. I shall obtain the proof we need and eliminate them all. This will be for the good of our duchy.”

I could feel the anger bubbling up inside of me as Ferdinand mentioned one advantage after another, maintaining his fake grin all the while. Once again, he was seeking ways to benefit the duchy and those around him while completely ignoring his own needs.

“Ferdinand, I did *not* ask whether this is best for Ehrenfest.”

“What?” Ferdinand replied, blinking as if to say that he didn’t understand what I meant.

“I want to know whether *you* want this marriage.”

“I...” His fake smile deepened as he caught my gaze. That jerk. He was planning to trick me to get out of answering honestly.

“If you are going to say that you truly wish for this marriage, then at least drop that fake smile of yours first,” I said, mimicking Rihyarda and pointing a sharp finger at him. “You are *very* mistaken if you think you can trick me in that state.”

Ferdinand furrowed his brow, allowing the smile to vanish from his face, and glared at me with clear dissatisfaction in his light-golden eyes. “Is this not what you wished for too?”

“What do you mean...?”

“You said that you want Ahrensbach, no? I shall take it, just as you asked,” Ferdinand said, now putting on a smile fit for the Lord of Evil.

“I was talking about fish, not... Oh, and their books, but... Wait, you know that’s not what I meant! And my wants don’t matter here! Your true feelings take priority!”

Ferdinand let out a chuckle, then sighed. “I do wish to be positioned in Ahrensbach to better grasp their situation and inform Ehrenfest, but I do not wish for the marriage itself. It is, however, essential to my goals. I will go because I must. I would like for you to understand this.”

That was almost the full truth, and Ferdinand rarely ever voiced his true thoughts, so I was somewhat satisfied with his response—but only somewhat. His fake smile returned after our brief exchange, which made me feel that he was still trying to hide something.

“Sylvester, I have much to do regarding my successors, so Rozemyne and I will reside at the temple for some time,” he said. “Send an ordonnanz if you need anything.”

“Alright,” Sylvester replied.

It seemed that our conversation had reached its natural conclusion, but Ferdinand was still wearing traces of a false smile. I gave him a fixed stare, at which point he arched an eyebrow as if recalling something. He looked at Sylvester and said, “The time has come for Ehrenfest to forge relationships with any and all top-ranking duchies through marriages, while carefully considering the influence they will have with us. You need a second or third wife, even if

you do not wish for one. Consider this matter carefully."

"Yeah. I will. Now get out already," Sylvester said, impatiently waving Ferdinand out of the room.

Damuel and Angelica were waiting outside as my guard knights, and no sooner had I exited than the latter went to summon the rest of my retainers. I stayed with Damuel as they gathered, while Ferdinand attempted to beat a hasty retreat with Eckhart and Justus. I grabbed him by the sleeve before he could escape.

"Rozemyne, this is inelegant behavior."

"So, Ferdinand... I think a private discussion is in order once we return to the temple," I said.

His expression hardened a bit, making him appear even more on guard. "It is poor form for two people engaged to others to talk alone. Give it up." But no matter what he said, I had no intention of relenting.

"Sylvester seems to be satisfied with your reasoning, but I am not. There are so many doubts and suspicions in my heart, and if we do not address them, I might feel compelled to start questioning certain other people. About, oh, you know... the seed of Adal-something. Are you certain there is no way for us to talk?"

It was a deliberate attempt at blackmail on my part, delivered with the most knowing smile. It was just a gut feeling, but it seemed to me that the "seed of Adalgisa" stuff that Raublut the Sovereign knight commander had mentioned was related to why the king had ended up giving this order.

Ferdinand glared at me, looking exceptionally displeased. As expected, more had gone on in that meeting room than he had reported to Sylvester. "Only once we return to the temple," he said. "Ask nothing of anyone before then."

"Of course."

He gave me a doubting look, and it was then that I noticed that the fake smile had vanished from his face. In truth, it came as quite a relief.

Decisions

I had wanted to return to the temple straight away, but things weren't that simple. Ferdinand was being swamped with requests for meetings now that his engagement to Ahrensbach was settled, I was being forced to partake in tea parties with Elvira and her friends as they barked and growled with frustration, and there were letters pouring in from scholars who wanted to get involved with the printing industry starting next year.

I suggested that Elvira and her friends channel their outrage into a story and worked my way through meetings with the scholars. Wilfried and Charlotte were taking work from Elvira and distributing it to their own scholars, so I decided to leave printing matters to them to some degree.

"There is much else I need to do."

Indeed, there was so much that Ferdinand needed to teach me: my temple work, my Royal Academy studies, and rejuvenation potion lessons. He and I returned to the temple once he had worked through his meetings—or at least, worked through as many as he intended to endure.

After arriving back at the temple, I forced my way into the High Priest's chambers. Ferdinand met me with a demonic glare, but I didn't even falter as I said, "Shall we talk?" If you asked me, it was a show of bravery that deserved a lot of praise.

Ferdinand trudged over to his hidden room and opened the door, evidently not pleased about it. Once inside, I made brisk work of cleaning the brewing tools and ingredients from my usual bench, giving myself somewhere to sit.

"I'm glad we can finally talk," I said.

"I cannot say that I share in your gladness," Ferdinand replied venomously as he sat in his chair. "Now, what do you wish to ask?"

"First of all, I want to know more about the state of Ahrensbach. That's where you'll be going, after all."

Ferdinand must have expected me to ask about the Adalgisa stuff, as the tension seemed to very subtly drain from his rigid shoulders. “I believe I spoke of Ahrensbach already.”

“Not enough! You said that Aub Ahrensbach isn’t long for this world, but isn’t there a chance Justus is wrong? Couldn’t he end up living for ages like Great-Grandfather? In that case, will Lady Detlinde actually become the next aub? Lady Letizia from Drewanchel has stronger backing and a more steady faction, so I would think she is better suited to the role.”

Letizia had support from the faction of Ahrensbach’s previous, deceased first wife, who by all rights should have been alive, and from her blood mother in Drewanchel. Georgine had abruptly become first wife after being married into the duchy from Ehrenfest, and Detlinde had never even been considered a successor before then. The answer as to who was a more suitable candidate to become the next aub was clear to see.

“You are correct,” Ferdinand said. “The purge forced Ahrensbach to reduce two of its archducal sons to archnobles, so the king formed a plan to save the duchy: Aub Drewanchel’s daughter will be adopted into Ahrensbach, then she will marry Prince Hildebrand once he comes of age.”

During the prince’s debut, it had apparently been announced that he would marry upon coming of age. This was of course news to me.

“This was all well and good when Aub Ahrensbach expected to see Lady Letizia come of age,” Ferdinand continued, “but he has since learned that his days are numbered. Now, tell me—what will happen to Lady Letizia if the aub dies before she becomes an adult?”

“Um... As there won’t be an archduke candidate of adult age, the first wife will take over for the short-term, and the next archduke candidate to come of age will become the aub. In Ahrensbach’s case, Lady Georgine will take over, then Lady Detlinde will rule the duchy when she comes of age,” I said. This was all founded in what I had learned while studying for the archduke course.

“Very good,” Ferdinand replied with an affirming nod. “It appears to be law in Ahrensbach for existing archduke candidates to be reduced to archnobles when the aub is replaced. Lady Detlinde becoming the next archduchess would

thereby result in Lady Letizia being demoted to an archnoble—that is, unless she were adopted by the archduke, in which case she would remain an archduke candidate. In short, the duty expected of me is to marry Lady Detlinde, then adopt Lady Letizia and train her in preparation for her marriage to Prince Hildebrand."

Ferdinand continued, "In truth, it would have been ideal for me to begin training Lady Letizia right away, but Lady Detlinde will need that training more if she is to support an entire greater duchy. Her rule will only be temporary, but having her serve at all is an absolute last resort for Aub Ahrensbach. He is in extremely dire straits."

Ahrensbach needed someone who was skilled enough to support the duchy *and* train Letizia. It seemed that Ferdinand was perfect for both jobs, considering that he was already the Saint of Ehrenfest's guardian and had successfully boosted Ehrenfest's grades on a wide scale.

"I feel bad for Letizia," I said. "Please be gentle with her. You mustn't treat her like you treat me."

"Why are you showing concern for an Ahrensbach archduke candidate?"

"Wouldn't it be a disaster if you were to crush one of their precious few archduke candidates with your intensive training? Philine cried many times after you glared at her and demanded that she redo her work."

"She did...?"

Philine was now used to this treatment, but she had grown painfully depressed around the time she had first come to the temple. Hartmut and Damuel had often needed to console her.

"So, what did the king say to finally convince you?" I asked. "Being married to the aub of another duchy is one thing, but I can't imagine many would agree to becoming a stopgap for the future aub. That would have given you plenty of reason to refuse, I would think."

"To put it simply, the king expressed that he was testing Ehrenfest's loyalty."

The king and those of the Sovereignty were very uneasy about a neutral duchy like Ehrenfest shooting up through the ranks, especially when it wasn't

yet known where its loyalties lay. Their plan to marry Eglantine, a woman of such royal blood, to the next king to form a strong connection to Klassenberg had been crushed; the incident about the incomplete bible had driven yet more wedges between royalty and the Sovereign temple; and then, to top things off, we had refused the king's request for me to grant the blessing at the graduation ceremony.

"Um, doesn't that mean they're mostly suspicious of us because of me?" I asked.

"The incident with Prince Anastasius was entirely the result of one of your rampages, but all you did was advise him. The blame ultimately lies with Prince Anastasius, who abandoned his claim to the throne, and with the king and Klassenberg, who relented to the decision. You were only following my instruction during the bible incident, and finally, it was Sylvester who declined to allow you to perform the blessing. They seem to be under the impression that I was controlling you from the shadows in all of those cases, so... I suppose you could interpret this wedding as the king testing not Ehrenfest's loyalty, but mine."

Ferdinand shot me a glance, no doubt wondering how much he could get away with omitting. I returned a smile and said, "I suppose this test is related to the seed of Adalgisa business?"

"...Correct. In their eyes, I am a seed of Adalgisa, building you up as a saint, dramatically improving Ehrenfest's grades, and sowing seeds of uncertainty around royals, all in service of some plot they cannot even begin to fathom. It only makes sense that they would tear me from my duchy and bind me somewhere else, no?" Ferdinand asked, sounding resigned. His light-golden eyes cautiously examined me, doubtless trying to decide whether I was friend or foe. This was clearly a topic that he hadn't wanted to discuss with anyone.

"Ferdinand, what is a 'seed of Adalgisa' in the first place? I don't believe the bible mentions it, so it must be something uncommon."

"How have you interpreted it?" Ferdinand asked in response. "I assume you kept your silence for a reason." He was watching me like a hawk, trying to gauge how much I was aware of... and whether I was hiding anything or trying

to trick him.

“I wasn’t able to piece it all together at the library, when it came out of nowhere, but after carefully thinking it over and considering the context... You replied that Ehrenfest is your Geduldh, no? I concluded that it likely had to do with where you were born, then. And given that it was something the Sovereign knight commander knew and felt comfortable saying in the presence of others, I subsequently deduced it was a secret phrase indicating somewhere in the Sovereignty.”

Ferdinand put on his fake smile in place of a response. I sighed; that meant I was right.

“I’m told that you were brought to the castle at your baptism, but thinking back, I don’t recall ever hearing anything from before then,” I said. “Were you raised somewhere the Sovereign knight commander knows about, then? Just what is this Adalgisa place?”

Ferdinand fell silent and didn’t speak for some time. I understood this as him not wanting to answer, but I couldn’t back down now—otherwise, our coming here would have been for nothing. I joined him in silence, patiently awaiting his next words... and soon enough, he gave in.

“‘Adalgisa’ is the name of a princess once gifted a royal villa, where I assume the knight commander once served,” Ferdinand explained with downcast eyes. “I did not think anyone knew of my past there, so to be honest, his words caught me off guard.”

I wasn’t surprised to hear that he was connected to royalty—I had expected as much upon learning that he was from the Sovereignty. His presence in Ehrenfest was clearly abnormal; there was his above-average mana capacity to begin with, as well as many more reasons than I cared to list.

“So, Ferdinand... Is this Princess Adalgisa your mother?”

“No. We are unrelated. Adalgisa was given the villa hundreds of years ago, so my mother is someone else entirely. Though their circumstances were similar.”

“Circumstances?” I muttered, tilting my head.

Ferdinand waved a hand at me. “It has nothing to do with you.”

“But I want to know. Isn’t it unfair that you looked into my memories and pried into all the secrets of my past life, but I still know so little about you?”

“Fairness is irrelevant; this is something that you simply do not need to know. Not even Sylvester is aware that I was raised in the Sovereignty before my baptism.”

“Well, what Sylvester knows is irrelevant. *I* want to know more about you, Ferdinand,” I declared, punctuating my response with a very indignant “Hmph!”

Ferdinand promptly looked away, his face blanched. “To be more precise, Adalgisa is the name of the villa I was raised in. It houses the Lanzenave princess who is sent to Yurgenschmidt once every few generations. That is the most I can say.”

“Lanzenave is the sugar country, right?”

“Sugar... You are not wrong, but your understanding of things is so unconventional that it is at times disconcerting...” Ferdinand said, rubbing his temples. “Speaking to you gives me a headache, so I hereby end this discussion.”

“Hold it right there! There’s no point in you even trying to escape. If you do, I’ll just force my way in again. Now, let’s see... Since you were raised in this special villa, Ferdinand, it’s safe to conclude that you’re royalty with foreign blood, right?”

Ferdinand gave me an annoyed grimace. “I have relatively thick royal blood, yes, but as I was baptized in Ehrenfest, I am not royalty myself. My father is the former Aub Ehrenfest, and I do not have a mother.”

“Why were you baptized in Ehrenfest?”

“The Goddess of Time’s guidance... or so my father said.”

“Um... Excuse me?” It was a very uncharacteristic response for Ferdinand, so I couldn’t help but make a weird noise. He seemed to have expected my reaction, however, as he gazed downward, recalling the distant past.

“I should have died before my baptism.”

“What...?”

According to Ferdinand, female seeds of the Adalgisa villa were raised as Yurgenschmidt princesses, but male seeds received much harsher treatment. Only one boy would return to Lanzenave, while the rest were secretly disposed of, since having a bunch of men with claims to royalty would cause nothing but problems.

“Those who are disposed of can survive if they are taken in by a father, but most nobles would refuse,” Ferdinand explained. “The men would not be able to tell whether the child is really theirs, and they tend to have wives, which inevitably breeds conflict.”

And whenever Ferdinand would ask his father why he had agreed to take in such a child, the late Aub Ehrenfest would say it was by the Goddess of Time’s guidance.

“He said with complete certainty that my presence would benefit Ehrenfest,” Ferdinand concluded.

“I see. That’s quite strange, but also true; if not for your being here, Ehrenfest wouldn’t be the way it is now. If the Goddess of Time truly was involved, I would expect nothing less from her.”

Ferdinand gave me a dumbstruck look and said, “You would believe such a ridiculous story?”

“What? I mean, this is a world where you pray to make spring come early and turn little sticks into weapons of Darkness. Ridiculous things happen left, right, and center. At this point, why would I not believe something so mundane as the Goddess of Time fiddling with things?”

Ferdinand stared at me in utter disbelief. “I knew that it was pointless to think too deeply about your conclusions, but once again, I find myself caught off guard.”

“Neat. So, what did they say about you being a seed of Adalgisa?” I asked, getting us back on track.

“I see your focus does not stray so easily...” Ferdinand muttered, sounding vexed. “Although I am from Ehrenfest and continually express no interest in the throne, that does not change the fact that I am a source of extreme danger to

the current Grutrissheit-less king. After all, I am of the blood royal and appear to be using a saint to search for the Grutrissheit."

"What?"

"You mentioned it to Prince Hildebrand, did you not? The archive that only royalty can enter?"

"Wait, so... this is all my fault?!" I put my head in my hands and screamed, "NOOOO!"

Ferdinand gave a tired sigh. "I was told to display my loyalty to the king through action. To this end, I was presented with two choices: eliminate Sylvester and take his position as aub, or wed into Ahrensbach."

An archduke could not become royalty—Eglantine had mentioned this when talking about her search for a way to avoid getting involved with the royal family. Ferdinand was being asked to either become the next Aub Ehrenfest or marry the aub of another duchy in order to sever his tie to royalty for good.

"If you needed to display your loyalty in that way, couldn't you have become Ehrenfest's aub temporarily until Wilfried came of age? I would rather you stay in Ehrenfest forever, Ferdinand, and will you not be much happier here than with Lady Detlinde? Considering that she resembles Lady Veronica and all..." I was sure that Sylvester would agree if we explained things to him.

Ferdinand shook his head. "Now that the king knows I am a seed of Adalgisa, it is best for me to step away from Ehrenfest. It is impossible to say whether I will end up embroiled in some major incident, but I can say with all certainty that I will *not* bring this duchy down with me." His eyes wandered to his hands, which were balled into tight fists. "I gave my father my word that I would make Sylvester the archduke and dedicate my life to Ehrenfest to support him. I could never break that final promise we made. If my only other option is eliminating Sylvester and taking the archducal seat myself, I would much rather marry into Ahrensbach. He must never know that there was an alternative."

Ferdinand treasured his memories with his father, and now that I knew how much he valued their final promise, I couldn't bring myself to say anything that might keep him here in Ehrenfest.

“So what you truly want to protect is your promise with your father?” I asked.

“Correct. I assume that you understand how I feel, at least to some degree, considering how much you treasure your true family and your promises with them.”

I had promised Dad that I would protect our family and Ehrenfest with it. Tuuli had promised to become a first-rate seamstress and make my clothes. And Mom... It was hard for me to repeat my promise with her, but I remembered it. It was very, very precious to me, and just thinking about it brought tears to my eyes.

“I can understand,” I said. “I get it. I don’t want you to leave, Ferdinand, but I understand how much that promise means to you.”

“Why are you crying?”

“I remembered my promises with my family. And when I think about how I’ll need to part ways with you as well... I just couldn’t hold them back.”

Ferdinand responded with an exceptionally loud—and exceptionally annoyed—sigh, then unclenched his fists and spread his arms a bit. I climbed onto his lap and embraced him tightly, relieved to have that feeling of touching someone that I hadn’t felt in a truly, truly long time. Hugs had completely vanished from my life.

“You don’t mind...?” I asked.

“I did promise to praise you when you came first-in-class. Though this will most likely be the last time...”

It took me a while to calm down, and when I did, my mind was flooded with worry. I had a strong feeling that Ferdinand would spend his future suffering—that he would focus entirely on his promise with his father and endure all the pain and suffering that being in Ahrensbach would doubtless burden him with. Ferdinand didn’t even ask his closest allies for help when he was overwhelmed with work, so I couldn’t imagine him seeking assistance from anyone in Ahrensbach, even in a life-threatening situation.

I can’t let that happen. But he probably won’t keep any promises he makes with me, so...

I needed something that would more or less force him to keep a promise between us—something that went beyond words. As I racked my brain for ideas, Ferdinand said, “If you have calmed down, get off me.”

“Hold on,” I replied. “I don’t think I’ll ever get another chance to talk to you like this, Ferdinand, which means I’ll have to blackmail you here and now.”

“What are you even saying?” Ferdinand asked, looking far from impressed.

I gazed up at him and smiled. “Promise me you won’t give up on everything and submit to a life of suffering for the sake of your father. Promise me you’ll call for help if you’re ever truly in pain. I’ll come save you right away.”

“I... do not understand. I am going to Ahrensbach. Would you come save me at the cost of making an enemy of the entire duchy? Do not be so foolish.”

I nodded without batting an eye. “Yes, I would. And not just Ahrensbach. I’ll save you no matter what, even if doing so means making the Sovereignty and the king himself my enemy.”

“What the...” Ferdinand trailed off, then started rubbing his temples in complete disbelief. “I tore you away from your family and forbade you from contacting those of the lower city, remember? You must not be right in the head. It makes no sense that you would go to such lengths to save me.”

This guy really doesn’t understand how much he means to other people, does he? Or how much we worry about him.

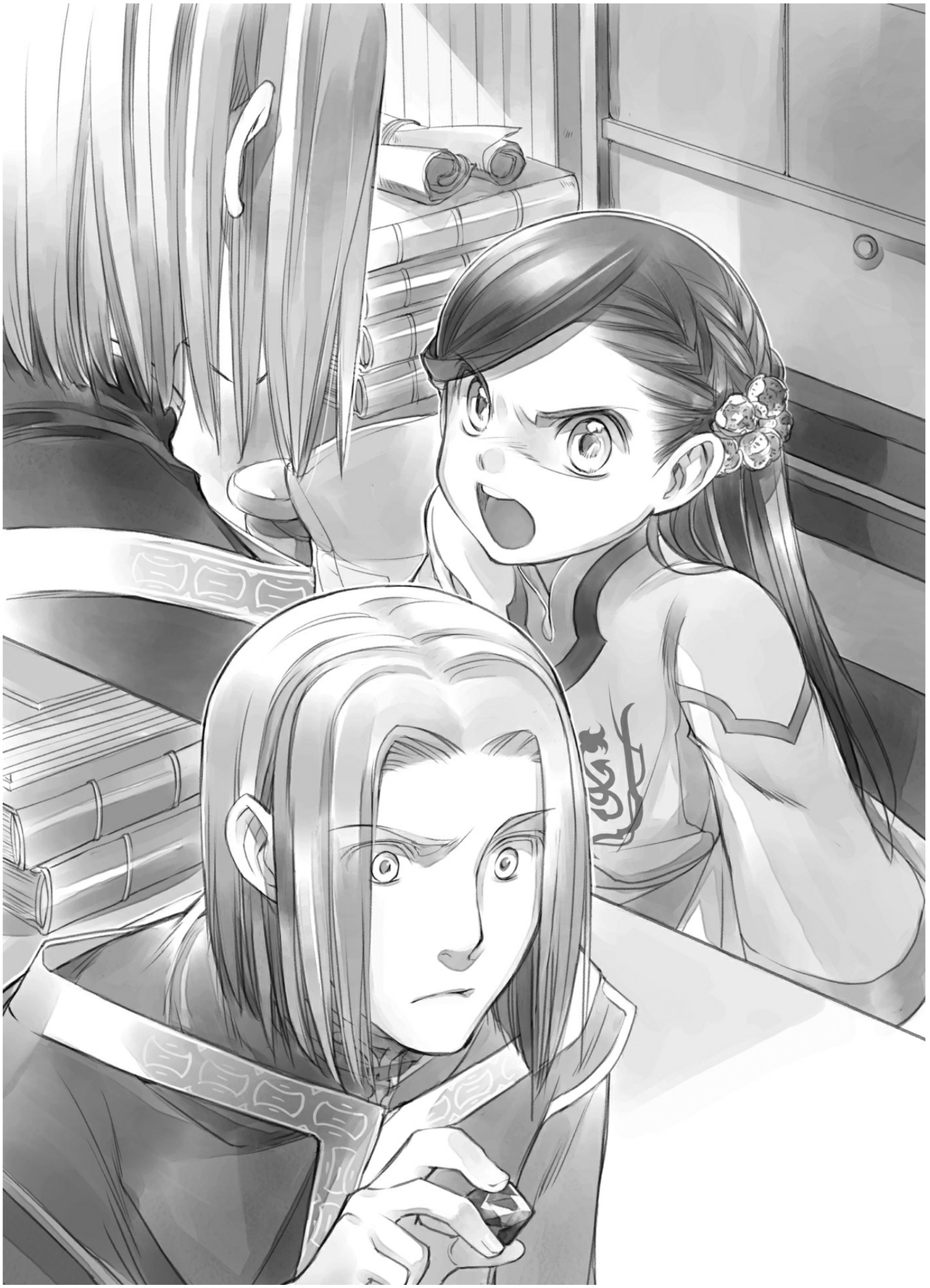
Ferdinand was probably oblivious to how much Sylvester, Karstedt, Elvira, and I didn’t want him to go to Ahrensbach, and we were far from the only ones who would mourn losing him. He seemed so convinced that his absence wouldn’t affect us in the slightest, since it was best for Ehrenfest, and that thought outright infuriated me.

“Do you really mean that?” I asked. “Do you really mean what you just said?”

“Contain yourself, Rozemyne! Your eyes have begun to change color! You are losing control of your mana!” Ferdinand exclaimed as he rummaged through his pocket and pulled out a feystone. He smacked it against my forehead with such force that it made a noise, and although the dull ache and the feystone draining my mana served to calm me somewhat, I was still furious.

“Listen here,” I said. “You’ve taught me a lot as my guardian. You’ve looked after me and gone to great lengths for my sake, haven’t you? You made me potions and charms, and out of all the nobles in Ehrenfest—whether it be Sylvester, Florencia, or even my fiancé Wilfried—you’ve cared for me more than *anyone*. Isn’t it obvious that I think of you as family? Why can’t you understand that?”

Ferdinand stared at me in astonishment, not even pointing out that I wasn’t speaking like a proper noblewoman. “A-As family?” was the most he managed in response.



“Yes, as family. You sure are dense when it comes to how other people feel about you, huh?”

“I may not have noticed, but I refuse to be lectured on perceptiveness by the densest girl I have ever met,” Ferdinand replied spitefully, looking away with a hand over his mouth. This was my first time seeing him with such an expression.

“In any case,” I continued, “you are that precious to me. To save you, I wouldn’t even mind stealing the Grutrissheit and becoming queen.”

“What are you saying, you fool?!” Ferdinand snapped, his eyes wide. To me, it was the perfect idea; I could read the Grutrissheit to my heart’s content, save Ferdinand, and then return the book to the king. Everybody wins.

“The commoner daughter of a soldier became the adopted daughter of an archduke to save her family,” I said. “Compared to that, an archduke candidate stealing the Grutrissheit and becoming queen can’t be too much of a stretch. And as long as I use my new position to protect Ehrenfest and all of Yurgenschmidt, I wouldn’t be breaking my promise with my dad, so there wouldn’t be any problems.”

“There would be *countless* problems!” Ferdinand cried. “There really must be something wrong with your head!” He was getting emotional, which was a good sign. I just needed to keep the momentum going until he made a promise that I could hold against him.

“I will dedicate my life to ensuring I can read in peace. That is my reason for living.”

“I recall you saying the same thing when you saved the orphans...”

“That’s right. I don’t want there to be bad things happening around me when I’m trying to have a good time. My point is that I need you to be happy as well, Ferdinand. There’s no way I can relax while you’re giving me cause for concern. That’s why I need you to contact me on a regular basis, even once you’ve gone off to get married. Just so you know, if enough time passes and I haven’t heard from you, I’ll come fight to save you with every fiber of my being.”

Ferdinand gave me a sincerely troubled look. “I have seen you go berserk for those you consider family many times before. Do you mean to say that you

would go on such a rampage for my sake?”

“That’s right. Didn’t I make it clear from the outset that I intend to blackmail you?”

“This could not be worse. I cannot think of a single person who would stand a chance of putting a stop to your efforts to save me.”

It was true—neither Sylvester, Karstedt, nor Elvira were capable of stopping me in the heat of a rampage... although they would most likely be the ones telling me to save him in the first place.

“Not even I know what I’ll do if you end up miserable, Ferdinand. You have two choices here: either you can find a way to be happy all the time, or you can be honest and ask for my help when you need it. Pick one.”

“This blackmail is as unavoidable as it is unexpected, I see,” Ferdinand said with a chuckle. He repeated over and over again that the situation couldn’t be worse... but in the end, he promised to send me regular letters.

Successors

After healing my puffy eyes with a quick spell, Ferdinand accompanied me out of the workshop. Everyone was hard at work in the High Priest's chambers; Roderick was struggling with his math while watching Philine and Damuel, while Hartmut was discussing something with Justus and Ferdinand's other attendants. Also grouped together in conversation were Cornelius, Eckhart, Leonore... and Angelica. In a surprising twist, Judithe was guarding the door today.

What could have happened to make Angelica give up her usual post?

"Oh? Have you finished your discussion?" Justus asked, noticing us before anyone else.

Ferdinand nodded while heading to his desk, then clapped his hands together a few times and said, "Attention, everyone." He announced to his attendants that he would be leaving Ehrenfest, with Hartmut taking his place. "At the order of the archduke, Hartmut will work as both a scholar and the High Priest. Keep this in mind and strive to prepare the arrangements for a successor."

"Understood."

The attendants didn't seem very surprised, perhaps because Hartmut had told them about it already. They prioritized the documents necessary for the succession and got to work. In a way, the feeling in the room was no different from usual. Angelica switched places with Judithe, and everyone started working in silence.

"Ferdinand, give me more work," I said. "Isn't the burden on Hartmut a bit too much?"

"No, I do not intend to give you more than you already have," Ferdinand replied, shaking his head. I had attempted to help at the cost of my own time, only to be struck down immediately.

I pursed my lips. "But why?"

“You will step down from your post upon coming of age. Aub Ehrenfest seems intent on assigning Melchior to take your place as High Bishop when the time comes. Moving forward, he wishes for the position to focus on supplying mana and managing the blue priests, the orphanage, and such. Paperwork will cease to be a necessary part of the role; rather, the main job that you and Hartmut have is shifting such work to the blue priests.”

The gray priest attendants serving Ferdinand understood their duties more than well enough, but it was beyond them to control the blue priests and force them to work. Thus, it was going to fall to the High Priest and High Bishop to distribute tasks to the blue priests and ensure their proper completion.

“Of course, in order to carry out such checks, you will need to have an understanding of every part of their workload,” Ferdinand continued. “It will not be easy, but prepare well so that Melchior can succeed the role without issue.”

“Understood.”

From there, Ferdinand started talking to Hartmut about how the High Priest would function moving forward. They discussed things like whether he would sleep in the temple, whether he would commute from his home in the Noble’s Quarter, and whether he needed new chambers as the High Priest or would continue using the current ones as they were now.

“I will not be able to bring the furniture here to Ahrensbach,” Ferdinand said, “so it will all remain. You may use it as you please. It will save you having to move documents and such around.”

“Thank you,” Hartmut replied. “I shall graciously accept and keep the chambers as they are now. Am I also permitted to use your attendants? I will feel most comfortable working with those who know your job well.”

“Certainly. My attendants should manage most of the work themselves. I would hesitate to entrust them to someone who would regard them with suspicion and try to take their work, but you should be fine.”

In the end, Hartmut decided to continue commuting from his home in the Noble’s Quarter, since he was going to keep up his scholar work. Of course, he would sleep in the High Priest’s chambers during the Dedication Ritual and

such.

Fourth bell rang while we were ironing out the details, and everyone promptly started cleaning up. Ferdinand watched them for a moment, then announced our immediate plans.

“Hartmut’s fealty ceremony will take place in the High Bishop’s chambers this afternoon. Make the necessary preparations.”

“Understood.”

By the time I returned to my chambers, the shrine was almost ready. Gil, Fritz, and Wilma had worked hard while we were gone.

“Now we need only bring in the divine instruments,” Monika said. “As this room is going to be busy with the ceremony, lunch has been prepared elsewhere.” She then took me to where my retainers usually had their meals. Eating was done according to status, so I ate first with my archnoble retainers Hartmut, Cornelius, Leonore, and Angelica. Judithe, Roderick, Damuel, and Philine would eat after we finished.

“That reminds me, Angelica—I was surprised to see you leave the door in the High Priest’s chambers,” I said as I was eating. “What topic was so important that you decided to leave your usual post?”

“Lord Eckhart is moving to Ahrensbach as well, so we were talking about that.”

It seemed that Ferdinand was going to have his two name-sworn retainers with him, following the example that Aurelia had set when she moved to Ehrenfest. It was presumably fine for him to bring even more retainers than she had, since archduke candidates ranked above archnobles, but Ferdinand didn’t have that many people he could trust.

“Lord Justus is a scholar, isn’t he?” Judithe asked nervously. “Is it really okay for him to go along?”

“I’ve been told that skilled scholars are rarely allowed to accompany departing nobles for fear of them leaking information to their home duchy,” Philine added from where she was standing behind me.

“It is easy to forget due to the fact that he almost exclusively does scholar work, but Justus is actually a proper attendant,” I noted. “Official forms even note that he graduated from the Royal Academy as an attendant. His scholar work is simply a hobby to him.”

“One would take a second course as a hobby...?”

“I am more or less doing the same,” I said. As someone who intended to take the scholar course on the side just to become a librarian, having Ferdinand and Justus as precedents for that being acceptable was very heartening. “So, Angelica—how did your talk with Eckhart go?”

“He said that I could either accompany him as his partner or cancel the engagement and stay in Ehrenfest. It seems that he will respect whatever decision I make.”

Angelica and Eckhart were engaged, so their future was a natural and very important thing to talk about—at least on paper. In reality, they seemed so unlike a couple that it was kind of strange to think that they were actually discussing it.

“Have you decided on your answer, Angelica?”

“I will cancel the engagement and stay in Ehrenfest. Because I am your guard knight, Lady Rozemyne.”

“But will that not tarnish your reputation?” I asked. Angelica looked completely unperturbed, but canceling her engagement and staying behind would result in various rumors and make it exceedingly difficult for her to find another partner.

Cornelius shrugged. “I expect that Mother and Grandfather will take action to make sure that doesn’t happen. Grandfather was the one who pushed for their marriage in the first place.”

Rather than looking relieved, Angelica received this news with downcast eyes. “I really admire Lord Eckhart, since he’s so strong and always helps me with my training... Our engagement being canceled has left me very... very...” She paused, faltering as her gaze wandered around the room and her hand rested on Stenluke.

“I believe ‘heartbroken’ is the word you are looking for, master,” the manablade said in Ferdinand’s voice.

“Right. Heartbroken. I am so heartbroken that I am not yet ready to think about finding another partner. I wish to be left alone to grieve—that is what I intend to tell Lady Elvira. How does it sound...?” Angelica asked. She looked very serious, so I chose to answer seriously in turn.

“Well, if you add a line about how you wish to keep your love for Lord Eckhart alive for as long as possible despite the trials and tribulations fate is slinging at you, I am sure that Mother will feel moved enough to leave you alone. It will also delay her writing a story based on your and Eckhart’s lost love. Though this all depends on you actually being able to remember these lines.”

Angelica nodded. “I will do my best,” she said, her hand on Stenluke’s feystone.

After lunch was my first fealty ceremony since becoming the High Bishop. I sincerely hoped that I would manage, and as my attendants brought in the divine instruments, I focused on memorizing the lines and the course of events that Fran had written out for me. My retainers were eyeing the instruments with great interest, perhaps because they so rarely had the chance.

“The black cape at the top is the symbol of the God of Darkness, representing the night sky,” Philine said. “The gold crown is the symbol of the Goddess of Light, representing the sun. I already know about them, but this is my first time seeing them up close.”

“This explains why Lady Rozemyne’s shield is round,” Leonore observed.

“Can you morph your schtappe into all of the divine instruments?” Judithe asked.

I shook my head. “I cannot morph my schtappe without knowing the necessary spells. I would not know how to create the Goddess of Light’s crown, for example.”

“I see.”

Ferdinand must have finished eating too, as he soon arrived with his attendants. He checked that the altar was ready, then came over and taught me

how to use the incense burners. I gripped them by their chains and gently swung them, causing the scent used in the ceremony to fill the room.

“Now, the oath,” Ferdinand said.

I dropped down onto my right knee, bowed my head, and crossed my arms in front of my chest. Hartmut adopted the same position alongside me.

“Hartmut, repeat Rozemyne’s words after her.”

“Understood.”

I slowly inhaled, feeling entirely different from when I had attended my own ceremony. Back then, I hadn’t believed in the gods existing at all. It was surprising to see how much my mindset had changed since then, but at this moment, my main focus was the prayer.

“O mighty King and Queen of Darkness and Light, most righteous and divine rulers of the wide heavens. O splendid gods of the Eternal Five, most righteous and divine rulers of the vast mortal realm. Goddess of Water, Flutrane. God of Fire, Leidenschaft. Goddess of Wind, Schutzaria. Goddess of Earth, Geduldh. God of Life, Ewigeliebe.”

Hartmut was repeating after me.

“King and Queen, show your divine power that extends throughout the wide heavens and vast mortal realm. Eternal Five, bless us of the vast mortal realm with your divine power. In eternal gratitude for your heavenly powers, I shall worship thee for eternity. I shall live with just hearts, calm hearts, and resolved hearts. I shall have faith in thee as the true and just gods. I vow that I shall pray to thee, gods of nature; I shall thank you, and I shall prepare offerings for thee.”

After we finished the prayer, Ferdinand’s attendants quietly stepped forward and dressed Hartmut in his blue robes, which made his scarlet hair stand out even more. He had a golden sash, since he was of age, and a belt to hold rejuvenation potions and such just like the one Ferdinand wore.

“Now then, let us offer our prayers to the gods,” I said. I had been completely unable to get into the right stance when I attended my own fealty ceremony, but Hartmut had no problems whatsoever.

“Very good,” Ferdinand said. “Hartmut, from this point onward, you are to wear blue robes within the temple at all times. Fran, Zahm, take care to inform the blue priests that a new High Priest has been assigned.”

“Understood.”

From there, Ferdinand explained the ceremonies and yearly events within the temple. The spring coming-of-age ceremony would be our next responsibility, then the summer baptisms right after that.

“I will be carrying out these ceremonies as the High Priest,” Ferdinand said to Hartmut, “but you will attend as a blue priest. Observe carefully to see what manner of work is expected of the role you are taking on. Between the summer coming-of-age ceremony and the autumn baptisms, you will work as the High Priest. I will serve as a blue priest during this time and observe you to see whether you are capable enough to carry out your duties. Wilfried and Charlotte have been managing Spring Prayer and the Harvest Festival with my attendants, so those will pose no problem.”

Hartmut gave a bright smile. “Now I can participate in religious ceremonies and stay by Lady Rozemyne’s side. This I am looking forward to.” He seemed excited, since he previously hadn’t even been allowed to enter the chapel, but he was forgetting something important.

“Erm, Hartmut... Not to spoil your good mood, but you are aware that you and I will not be traveling to the same places for Spring Prayer and the Harvest Festival, correct?” I asked. The blue priests were all sent out at once, so it made no sense for us to visit the same locations.

Hartmut froze, staring at me with wide eyes. “Wait... Does that mean I won’t be able to see your ceremonies?” he asked, slumping over as all the motivation drained from his body.

Ferdinand shook his head in exasperation. “You will still be together for the Dedication Ritual, baptisms, and so on. Surely there is no need to be so disappointed.”

“True. In that case, I must burn the sight of her performing those ceremonies into my mind and settle for that.”

Alongside our preparations for the succession, we sent letters of summons to the guildmaster and the Plantin Company, since we needed to report to them about the Archduke Conference. We also met with Wilma, as Hartmut had mentioned wanting to greet those from the orphanage. Before we knew it, the day of the assignment ceremony had arrived.

The assignment ceremony was held internally and was the same as when I had first become High Bishop. It was a debut in the chapel with all the blue priests, their attendants, and the baptized gray priests and shrine maidens.

Ferdinand was leading the ceremony. He began with a simple description that he was leaving for Ahrensbach due to an engagement and that the next High Priest had already been assigned by the archduke.

“By the will of the archduke, the new High Priest shall be not one of the blue priests, but the archnoble Hartmut,” Ferdinand continued. “The change will occur when I leave the temple, but as he intends to visit often over the next year, I am debuting him now.”

The door opened on cue, at which point Ferdinand signaled me with a look. I turned to the audience from the stage and said for everyone to welcome the new High Priest with prayers. The gray priests and shrine maidens chanted “Praise be to the gods!” in unison and assumed the usual prayer pose while Hartmut made his entrance, dressed in blue priest robes and wearing a smile. He climbed onto the stage and stood next to me.

“Thank you all for gathering here today. I am Hartmut, the new High Priest. Aub Ehrenfest has bestowed this role upon me on this serendipitous day, ordained by the waters of change flowing from Flutrane the Goddess of Water. As I am Lady Rozemyne’s retainer, I will only be serving as High Priest until the day she leaves her post as High Bishop. During the short time until then, we intend to change things so that all temple work is dealt with by blue priests. We must all strive to ensure that Lady Rozemyne, the esteemed Saint of Ehrenfest, is not burdened with unnecessary work. And as the High Priest, I will dispose of any dead weight holding her down.”

It was quite an impactful announcement. I was standing in a daze, but Ferdinand seemed to have predicted this turn of events, as he showed no sign

of surprise. He even added, “As you can tell, the new High Priest will prioritize the High Bishop above all else. Listen to him well, and work to serve with all you have.”

The former Bezewanst faction had all turned sickly pale; they had not exactly been kind to me, and this was not a good sign for them.

I didn’t tell him to say that!

Part of me wanted to cry out, but now that Hartmut had declared that he was my retainer, everyone would think that I was simply forcing his hand. I had no idea how to control him at all, and as that thought stormed through my mind, Hartmut ended the announcement with his own prayers.

“Let us offer our prayers and gratitude to the mighty King and Queen of Darkness and Light, most righteous and divine rulers of the wide heavens. To the splendid gods of the Eternal Five, most righteous and divine rulers of the vast mortal realm. Goddess of Water, Flutrane. God of Fire, Leidenschaft. Goddess of Wind, Schutzaria. Goddess of Earth, Geduldh. God of Life, Ewigeliebe.”

Everyone could tell that a monstrous new High Priest had been thrust upon us.

Incidentally, Hartmut made his debut at the orphanage using similar language to when he had thrown the blue priests into fear and despair. “Let us pour our all into the printing and paper-making industries for Lady Rozemyne, the Saint of Ehrenfest,” he had said. Everyone there had accepted his words as totally normal, which left him looking very satisfied.

Another Discussion and Making Rejuvenation Potions

The day of our talk with the lower-city merchants had arrived, and as Ferdinand was going to be in attendance, we had to meet in the noble's section of the temple. Also attending were the guildmaster, Freida, and their Othmar Company attendants; Benno and Mark from the Plantin Company; and Otto, Theo, and Tuuli from the Gilberta Company. It was unfortunate that Lutz had gone to Leisegang and not come back yet.

We all exchanged lengthy greetings, then sat down and reported on the decisions made during the Archduke Conference.

"Gustav, there are going to be eight merchants from the Sovereignty, six from Klassenberg, and six from Dunkelfelger coming this year," I said. "I imagine that trying to accommodate even more people than last year will prove to be a challenge, but I trust that you will manage well."

"I will strive to meet your expectations, Lady Rozemyne," the guildmaster replied with clear relief. He had most likely been relieved that the number stayed within agreed-upon bounds and that he did not have to give in to unreasonable demands.

"We owe much to the chefs the Othmar Company dispatched for the Archduke Conference," I noted. "I thank you ever so much, Freida."

"I am told they were extremely moved by the different environment," Freida said with a smile. "They exchanged new recipes with your chefs, Lady Rozemyne, and returned far more skilled than before. Some of the nobility sent requests to purchase the recipes, even, and the Italian restaurant is currently more lively than ever. Please do visit when you have the chance."

Visiting the Italian restaurant with Ferdinand sounded like a good idea for a breather if we ever had the time.

The Gilberta Company had hairpins to deliver in the summer, so Tuuli showed

me two she had made: one for normal use, and another, fancier one for use in ceremonies.

"Tuuli is the one who makes your hairpins, Lady Rozemyne, but the other craftspeople are steadily developing their skills," Otto said, explaining that a small number had gotten good enough to make hairpins for nobles. Hairpins were very popular in the summer when the merchants from other duchies came, so the craftspeople were apparently in quite a busy spell at the moment, trying to prepare as many hairpins as possible ahead of time for both nobles and commoners. "That said, Tuuli is the only one capable of fulfilling orders from royalty; the other craftspeople still cannot compare to her."

I purchased the hairpins, pleased that Tuuli was being praised, then informed the Gilberta Company that I would be summoning Corinna to prepare new clothing when I returned to the castle.

"Furthermore, as we will now be spreading our printed goods, I ask the Plantin Company to make solid preparations for next year and beyond," I said. "Though I am sure you are already on top of things, Benno."

Benno gave a confident smirk. "With you in charge, Lady Rozemyne, we aren't at all concerned about book sales. We will make sure everything meets your expectations." I quickly understood this as: "I'm gonna prepare so many books, so make sure you actually sell 'em." Somehow, *I* was the one feeling under pressure now.

Once the primary reports were concluded, Ferdinand began to speak. "I have a report as well," he said, causing all the merchants present to sit up straight and watch him carefully. "It has been decided that I will marry into Ahrensbach, as I am the archduke's younger brother. Ahrensbach was not included in this year's trade deals, but I imagine that relations with them will increase in all other areas."

Benno's expression changed in an instant. Ferdinand noticed this, and a grin played on his lips as he said, "Indeed, it was an Ahrensbach noble who attacked Rozemyne a number of years ago. Keep this in mind when making trade deals and gathering intelligence."

It was a noble with close connections to Ahrensbach who had been primarily

responsible for my two years spent stuck in a jureve. That was all Ferdinand could say in front of the scholars and guard knights, but an Ahrensbach noble—specifically Count Bindewald—had also been the reason for my becoming the archduke's adopted daughter. The Plantin and Gilberta Companies knew that much already from Dad and Otto, so they all looked at me with palpable discomfort.

"We are aware that Lady Rozemyne was once harmed by an Ahrensbach noble," Benno said, speaking for the others. "Will she perhaps be targeted again?" His eyes were blazing with the resolve to face down a foe, while Tuuli's were gleaming sharply.

"I cannot guarantee that she will not be," Ferdinand replied. "I intend to leave only after disposing of as many dangerous elements within the duchy as I can, but any who arrive after I am gone will be outside of my vision and reach. I can learn about noble politics from retainers, but nobles struggle to gather intelligence on the lower city. The intelligence from merchants of other duchies was not to be scoffed at, and the information you brought me proved useful indeed."

Ferdinand was praising Benno and the guildmaster, as well as the others who had brought him intelligence. I had seen this intelligence myself, but I had no idea how or where it had ended up being useful. Even thinking back, I couldn't put the pieces together.

As far as I remember, most of it was just them saying how well things were selling.

As I blinked in confusion, Ferdinand slowly exhaled, eyeing the gathered commoners one by one. Freida, the guildmaster, his attendant, Benno, Mark, Otto, Theo, Tuuli... They all knew me from my time as a commoner.

"You have all associated with Rozemyne since her time as a blue shrine maiden, and there is not a single noble in the entire duchy who is so close to you and yet also so powerful," Ferdinand said. "She is irreplaceable to each and every one of you."

Of the nobles present, only Ferdinand, Justus, Eckhart, and Damuel knew me from my days in the lower city and therefore understood my relationships with

those gathered. And when Ferdinand moved to Ahrensbach, it would only be Damuel.

“You also hold her close to your hearts, do you not?” Ferdinand asked.

A normal noble would never bother to set up meetings like this and seek the opinions of commoners. For the most part, the merchants in attendance could only speak properly with laynobles, but I was the archduke’s adopted daughter and on track to become the next first wife. And above all else, I was connected to all of the products being spread to other duchies as new trends.

The gathered commoners nodded along as Ferdinand chose his words very carefully, saying only that which was acceptable for our retainers to hear.

“I must ask you all to work your absolute hardest to protect Rozemyne,” Ferdinand continued. “There are some things that we nobles cannot reliably track ourselves, such as whether any suspicious individuals have entered Ehrenfest and the recent goings-on of other duchies. Should anything happen that could pose a threat, I would appreciate you telling Rozemyne or her retainer Hartmut, the soon-to-be High Priest.” He then looked at Hartmut, who was dressed in his blue robes and nodded in response.

“We shall do as you command, High Priest,” the merchants replied.

“Of course, Ahrensbach is not the only potential risk,” Ferdinand said. “I ask that you keep a close eye on the workings of other duchies and even the Sovereignty as well.”

Benno’s expression softened into a slight, sympathetic smile. “This strengthening of the bond between Ehrenfest and Ahrensbach is likely to be celebrated, but we will miss the comfort of you being at Lady Rozemyne’s side. You have provided her with so much education and assistance, all while so generously striving to convey our words to the archduke. We deeply regret your departure.”

Ferdinand gave a half-smile in turn and said, “I can understand the reason for your concern; Rozemyne is nothing if not unpredictable.” Those from the lower city were all too familiar with my rampaging tendencies, and they quickly averted their gazes as they held back their laughter.

Am I right to assume that Benno means he could relax with Ferdinand keeping me in check but is now concerned about there being nobody to rein me in? And now he wants some reassurance that things are going to be okay? Hm?

The air seemed to relax a little as everyone acknowledged their mutual concern of me sowing chaos. It was unbelievable! Of course, I couldn't protest no matter how much I wanted to, so the discussion continued without me. Benno, Otto, and the guildmaster reported on their current preparations and thoughts on the future while Ferdinand listened intently.

I could deduce from the conversation thus far that Ferdinand had been listening to my opinions and reports, then conveying them in part to Sylvester. Now that he was leaving Ehrenfest, I would need to do that on my own.

"High Priest," Otto said, "I apologize for the rudeness, but there is a question I wish to ask."

Ferdinand arched an eyebrow in response, then permitted him to continue.

"If you are going to be married to a woman with archducal blood, will you be needing a hairpin this year?"

"I will think about it in the event she asks for one," Ferdinand replied, waving the idea away while looking entirely devoid of enthusiasm. "Only a fool would think of Ewigeliebe in the summer."

It seemed that Ferdinand was perfectly content with ignoring the suggestion, even though it was diplomatically unthinkable for someone being married into another duchy from Ehrenfest to not gift their partner a hairpin. I couldn't imagine that Tuuli and the Gilberta Company shared his reluctance, though; a last-minute order would only end in disaster, as they would need to come up with a design and prepare the necessary thread at such short notice. Tuuli shot me a glance as I thought this, confirming my suspicions.

I went to interject, but Ferdinand raised a hand before I could say anything. "I do not care to speak of the matter now. More importantly: Gustav, have you found out whom the feystone store in the lower city sells its goods to?"

"It seems that their largest and most lucrative customer was Viscount Joisontak," the guildmaster replied. "Since his death, they have struggled to find

someone so interested in their products, so they are now working on selling more to their regular customers.” He produced a list of all the nobles who regularly purchased from the business, having looked into the matter very thoroughly since being asked.

Ferdinand examined the list and then said, “You have done well. This is very expertly researched.” His expression betrayed his true personality as the Lord of Evil.

The hairpin for Ahrensbach received no further mention throughout the remainder of our discussion, so after our meeting came to a close and everyone had left, I decided to confront Ferdinand about it.

“Lady Detlinde was quite interested in acquiring a hairpin last year,” I said. “Furthermore, as hairpins are an important Ehrenfest trend, not giving her one will damage your reputation. I do not want the people there speaking ill of you.”

Ferdinand seemed about to disregard me, but he must have been struck by some realization, as he suddenly looked down at me with a suspiciously bright smile. “Fascinating... I shall leave the matter to you, then. Make one as you wish.”

“What?! You’re perfectly capable of picking out accessories and whatnot for girls. You can do it yourself, without my help. I am sure Lady Detlinde would appreciate that far more. Perhaps you could begin your relationship by asking her about her preferences.”

It was true that Detlinde looked very much like Veronica, but they weren’t the same person. Perhaps socializing with her would ease the contempt that Ferdinand was feeling... although it also risked making it worse.

“You are essentially my family, no?” Ferdinand asked. “I see no issue with you assisting me. Prepare something that will not bring shame to me, then.”

It really feels to me like you’re just using this whole family thing to your own advantage!

I pursed my lips and started thinking of colors that would suit Detlinde, at which point Ferdinand poked my head and added, “You may order one for

yourself at the same time."

"What?"

"Consider it a farewell gift. You are leaving the nest of my protection, after all."

I would have said that he should prepare it himself, but he wasn't even interested in having one made for his future bride, so there was no point in trying. Instead, my focus shifted to the words "farewell gift" and how final they sounded.

It could be worse, I guess. I've at least got time to prepare my heart, which is more than I can say for when I had to leave my lower-city family.

I shook my head to dispel my glum feelings, then looked up at Ferdinand. "I'll prepare a farewell gift for you as well. Perhaps some Ehrenfest food to bring comfort to your stay, like what Aurelia brought from Ahrensbach. If we can use that time-stopping magic tool, I think it'll be a worthwhile endeavor; it's always nice to have the flavors of your home nearby. You tend to skip even essential meals when you're busy, Ferdinand. Rejuvenation potions are important, but food is absolutely necessary. Plus, if you fill the magic tool with fish and send it back when you're done with it, we can work on improving our recipes here in Ehrenfest."

"You are simply after the fish," Ferdinand said, exasperated. In my opinion, it was a perfectly reasonable transaction—Ferdinand got to be healthy, and I got my fish.

"I shall prepare other farewell gifts for you as well," I continued. "For example, I will use a voice-recording magic tool to preserve a clip of me saying, 'Are you eating properly? Sleep is important.' Justus can play it for you every now and again, and—"

"There is no need," Ferdinand said curtly. "I would toss that out the window. It would only exhaust me further." His response reminded me of something a friend from my Urano days had said before moving to a college far away from mine.

"You may not know this, Ferdinand, but when one moves far away from

home, one starts to long for familial love through home cooking and motherly chiding.”

“I have never heard of that in my life.”

Okay, probably not...

Ordonnanzes weren’t able to cross the barriers along duchy borders, so relying on the voice-recording magic tool was our only option.

“I will need to ask Raimund to modify them to be smaller...” I said. “Will there be enough time, I wonder?”

“Rozemyne, Raimund is my disciple, not a retainer of yours to be used as you please.”

“But as you are my teacher, are your disciples not like older brothers to me? Or younger brothers, even, since I came first? Either way, we are bonded together, so I should be safe to make requests of them. Professor Hirschur similarly uses me at her convenience.”

Ferdinand sighed, perhaps visualizing his old teacher doing as she pleased. “This talk about farewell gifts is of very little relevance. Let us focus on how to make the final rejuvenation potions before I must leave.”

“Right...”

There was still a lot that Ferdinand needed to teach me, but most important of all was the remaining lessons on making rejuvenation potions. Up until now, he had prepared mine for me, but I would need to start brewing my own henceforth.

“I intend to teach your retainers as well,” Ferdinand said. “Put on your brewing clothes and gather in the workshop of the High Bishop’s chambers.” He ordered that Hartmut and Cornelius accompany me, since they were the only ones who met his two specifications: they had enough mana to endure the taxing brewing process, and they were men who wouldn’t need to leave my service due to weddings or pregnancy.

My greatest obstacle when it came to brewing was my own stamina; I simply didn’t have the vigor necessary to keep stirring the ingredients. On the bright

side, the recipes themselves were simple once you had all the necessary components—one just needed to cut and measure them, add them in the proper order, then pour in enough mana and stir until ready. Still, though...

“My arms are starting to hurt,” I said, tears in my eyes.

Cornelius, who had carefully been checking the elements of the ingredients and the required mana, replied with a bemused smile. “The mana quantity and control are where people normally struggle, but in your case, strength really is the issue. Will you even make it through the scholar course’s practical lessons?”

Passing the scholar course was essential for becoming a librarian, so I refused to give up no matter how poor my stamina was. I continued to stir, scolding my throbbing arms all the while.

“Royal Academy lessons are trivial compared to what I go through with Ferdinand,” I replied. The brews we made in class weren’t complicated, and the stirring didn’t require anywhere near as much time or mana.

“Your control over your mana truly is splendid, Lady Rozemyne; to think you can manage brewing while simultaneously pouring mana into your enhancement tools...” Hartmut said while taking notes on the recipe. The stark contrast between his serious expression and enthusiastic compliments was as astounding as ever, but he wasn’t wrong—I was now able to reliably pour mana into both my enhancements and my brewing while making the ultra-nasty rejuvenation potions.

“Put your finished rejuvenation potions in here and cover them with cloth,” Ferdinand said, indicating a largish pot.

I did as instructed, then covered the potions with cloth to protect them. There was enough here to last me quite a while, even if I collapsed, but once these ran out, that was that; I didn’t have the ingredients to make more.

“What should I do when these are all gone?” I asked.

“I have summoned Cornelius here today so that he knows what is required to make more,” Ferdinand replied. “Cornelius, you will memorize the mana capacities and elements of the necessary ingredients and then gather them. Gathering ingredients is the job of a knight, is it not?”

It certainly was the case that knights were expected to gather—even those still in the Royal Academy—but the ingredients required for the ultra-nasty potions were so rare and of such high quality that the thought of searching for them made Cornelius grimace. It wouldn't be a simple process.

"I intend to leave the bulk of my ingredients in your workshop," Ferdinand continued. "They should last for about five years. The rest you will need to handle yourself."

"Will you truly be leaving this fortune's worth of ingredients here, Lord Ferdinand...?" Hartmut asked, eyeing them in complete shock. I didn't recognize all of the ingredients, but it seemed that quite a few of them were especially valuable.

"I do not expect to have the time to perform research with them. I am not even sure I will have a workshop in Ahrensbach."

"Wait, what? Won't you be needing potions there way more than I need them here?" I asked. It was hard to imagine him enduring the intense duties expected of him without rejuvenation potions.

"I will, but I intend to leave the brewing to Justus," he replied with a nod. Justus had a massive trove of ingredients, apparently, so Ferdinand wouldn't need to bring any of his own.

"I can only imagine how many ingredients Lord Justus must have if even this is unnecessary in comparison..." Hartmut said in a daze. As always, Justus was quite the man of mystery.

"Well, this concludes our rejuvenation potion lesson," Ferdinand announced. "Rozemyne, all that remains is for you to take care with how much you drink. Your understanding of using these potions is still vague at best, so trust the measuring to Hartmut. Hartmut, Rozemyne will fall ill if you give her too much, so take extra care."

"Understood," Hartmut replied, straightening his back.

With that settled, Ferdinand placed two ingredients and some clear feystones that didn't contain any mana in front of me. "I am now going to teach Hartmut. In the meantime, you must practice removing others' mana and transferring it

into feystones. This is an ingredient mixed with a variety of mana, and this is one that I removed the excess mana from. I am certain that you will soon begin sensing the mana of others."

It seemed that my next task was to touch the lined-up ingredients, sense their proper and original mana, then remove the excess.

What the heck?! This is so tough!

I touched the two ingredients as instructed and noticed that they didn't feel the same. Indeed, I could tell that one contained a bunch of mixed-up mana.

"One of them contains a mixture of mana, while the other contains only the ingredients' and my mana," Ferdinand said. "Can you feel the difference between them?"

"Yes."

"Then gradually start pushing a very thin stream of mana into them while forcing the excess toward the feystone."

I did as instructed, trying to spread my mana as thinly as possible before channeling it into the ingredient. My plan was to imagine a filtration device of sorts, letting the ingredient's proper mana stay while filtering out the excess.

In the meantime, Ferdinand taught Hartmut how much of the potion to give me, how to use it, how Rihyarda managed it, and so on. He was going through a long list of minor details.

"I did it!" I exclaimed. It had taken me an exceptionally long time, but pride and satisfaction swelled in my chest as I showed the feystone to Ferdinand.

"Let me see," Ferdinand said. He touched the feystone with his brow furrowed, then stared at the ingredient. His examination continued for longer than I expected, so I started to feel uneasy.

"Um, is something wrong with it?" I asked.

"No, this is fine. The excess mana has been purged." Ferdinand returned the feystone, then set a fairly small wooden box in front of me. "Now remove the mixed mana from these ingredients," he said, placing in front of me a flammerzung fruit, a quellweide leaf, a winfalke hide, and glanzring powder.

“These are the ingredients you stole—I mean, *won* from Heisshitze in the ditter game, aren’t they?” I asked. “I thought they were your precious spoils of victory.”

“Indeed, they are highly valuable and of exceptionally high quality—which means they are perfect for your jureve. You will not have time to gather more yourself, and you will need to make another jureve before I leave for Ahrensbach.” He spoke casually, but I remembered that Heisshitze had seemed absolutely devastated when giving them up, like he was surrendering his life savings. They were bound to be *extremely* valuable.

“Is it really okay for me to use these for my jureve?” I asked.

“In the first place, I added the glanzring dust to my demands precisely for this purpose,” Ferdinand replied. “Only so many ingredients can be gathered in Ehrenfest, and the kind that students can find while attending the Royal Academy will not suffice for you. Above all else, we do not have a year to spend on finding ingredients.”

I understood his position, but these were the ingredients he had won after I had more or less forced him to play ditter. “You really, really don’t mind...?”

“Cease your complaining and accept them already. We truly do not have much time. After making your jureve, we will need to resume your studies for the Royal Academy. You must not allow your grades to drop once I am gone; to do so is to invite great shame upon yourself. I will see to it that you come first-in-class in both the archduke course and the scholar course next year,” Ferdinand declared with a hard glare.

I took in a sharp breath and said, “So, I *have* to come first-in-class now?” I didn’t have a clue what was running through his head, but this was scary.

“I will have an easier time in Ahrensbach if, on top of the renown I obtained at the Royal Academy, there is evidence of my tutoring having produced a student who excels above all others. If you truly view me as family, then you will do me this kindness, no?”

Dad! Help! The Lord of Evil has appeared before me!

I screamed on the inside, but I did want to help Ferdinand as much as I could,

even if my work didn’t amount to much. He had done so much for me, and returning the favor would require more than just a little effort.

“Okay, okay. I’ll do it. I’ll come first-in-class and make the jureve.”

“Then remove the mixed mana from all of these ingredients. Such is your task for today.”

I took a deep breath, then faced the ingredients. First was the flammerzung. I focused on pouring my mana into it and started extracting the mixed mana.

The next day, I dyed the ingredients completely. I ended up with feystones of the seasonal colors, just like when I had made the jureve before.

“Very good,” Ferdinand said, looking at the completed feystones. “These should suffice for the jureve.”

Hartmut's First Ceremony and Another Jureve

As we now had the feystones, I got straight to work making my jureve. Accompanying me today were Angelica, Damuel, and Cornelius. They were all adults, which meant they had learned to make jureves in the Royal Academy. Of course, I already knew what to do; my guard knights were simply here to double-check the process.

The scholars who normally would have been helping out were in the High Priest's chambers. It seemed that Ferdinand was spending his time ensuring that the handover process went as smoothly as possible. He had told me to summon him when the jureve was complete.

"You can already make jureves, Lady Rozemyne?" Cornelius asked, balking at the intensity of Ferdinand's training. "I only learned to make them in my fifth year."

Angelica puffed out her chest and said, "I made one in my fifth year too." This wasn't much of a surprise; despite her academic track record, she was actually pretty skilled when it came to doing practical lessons.

"It took me until my final year," Damuel admitted with a conflicted smile. "Making one is such a rare occasion that I chose to use the best ingredients possible, which meant I only finished dyeing them at the very last moment. I actually regret putting so much effort into it; with all this extra mana I got from Lady Rozemyne's compression method, I want to remake it entirely."

As it turned out, laynobles often needed to gather their ingredients as soon as possible, since it took them so long to dye them.

"The jureves made in Royal Academy classes tend to be of a fairly low quality," I noted. "Apprentice knights can gather their own ingredients from their home duchies and the Royal Academy, but others aren't always able to do this, which limits the final product." In other words, scholars often ended up with worse jureves, since they had to hire and rely on apprentice knights for gathering instead of doing it themselves.

“That said,” I continued, “you can reduce the drop in quality by removing the mixed mana from the ingredients.” I was just repeating what Ferdinand had taught me, but my guard knights replied that they couldn’t wield enough mana or control it precisely enough.

“It requires a lot of mana just to push the mixed mana out, Lady Rozemyne,” Damuel explained. “Laynobles would struggle to do that and then dye the ingredients afterward. We aren’t as capable as you, and we do not need jureves of such a high quality.” He shrugged. “Our job here is merely to oversee the process. Shall we start?”

Damuel and Cornelius had made jureves before and understood the process well. Angelica had already forgotten what we needed to do, but she was getting help from her manablade Stenluke. He really was quite helpful.

And so, I made the jureve while following Stenluke’s instructions. It was a very familiar experience, considering that he spoke in Ferdinand’s voice. My arms started getting heavy, but I sucked it up and continued to carefully mix in the feystones. Unlike last time, I was using a schtappe morphed into a mixing stick, which was overwhelmingly more efficient when it came to conducting mana. I was moved.

“Put that amplification potion in next,” Stenluke said, prompting Cornelius to take out the pitcher it was being stored in. It was a very practical size—most people could easily pour from it with one hand while stirring with the other—but when he went to hand it to me, he suddenly stopped. He must have realized that I was a special case.

“Lady Rozemyne, shall I pour the potion in for you?”

“...Please do.”

The black liquid was poured into the pot, causing the contents to puff out considerably. I continued stirring until Stenluke said, “It is time for the finishing touch.”

Damuel plucked a tiny bottle from the table and added a drop to the concoction. An instant later, the surface of the potion shone brightly, indicating that the jureve was finished. “I shall inform Lord Ferdinand,” he said, then exited the workshop.

Cornelius peered into the pot. “So, when will you be using this?” he asked.

“Good question... After Ferdinand leaves for Ahrensbach, maybe? He said that he plans to remove as many dangerous elements as he can before then, so perhaps I’m better off waiting until things are safe.”

I was so busy with my studying for the Royal Academy and with the work I was doing to help prepare for the succession that even my reading time was being shaved down to nil. I didn’t think we had time right now for me to be sleeping in a jureve. In truth, I wasn’t that keen on the idea of going back into one either; I was happy to delay it for as long as I could.

Soon enough, Ferdinand came in with his retainers and with Fran, who was holding a net containing many feystones.

“Rozemyne, you are to get into the jureve immediately,” Ferdinand said as he started pouring it into the large white box. “There are still clumps of mana inside your body. The sooner they are dissolved, the better. Get changed while we prepare.”

I really hadn’t expected this to happen as soon as it was ready. My heart wasn’t at all prepared, and my blood suddenly ran cold. I instinctively shook my head and replied, “No. I don’t want to.”

“Rozemyne?” Ferdinand asked, furrowing his brow in confusion. All eyes fell on me, and I took a step back without thinking.

“I don’t want to be left behind again. I don’t want to wake up to find that everyone looks even older than me. And if another two years pass, then y-you... you might already be gone, Ferdinand.” I had already endured the Urashima Taro experience once, and I didn’t want to go through it all again. I was finally developing some stamina too, and doing this would set me all the way back to square one.

“You will only be in there for a few days,” Ferdinand assured me. “It will not be like before.”

“But... I’m scared.”

Last time, I had been told that I would only be asleep for a season, yet my time in the jureve had ended up lasting two whole years. Maybe that had

simply been because of the poison, but still, there was no way for me to confirm that I really would wake up in a few days' time.

"Rozemyne, I want to ensure that all of your mana clumps are dissolved while I am still here to serve as your doctor. Only then will it be safe for other doctors to see you. Furthermore, do you not want to start growing?"

"I do, but that can wait until after you've left for Ahrensbach. I don't want to wake up to find that you're already gone."

"Rozemyne... I agree that you should use it before you go back to the Royal Academy," Cornelius said after some thought. He was speaking honestly as my brother, rather than politely as my guard knight.

"Why?" I asked, gazing up at him.

"Lord Ferdinand said that you collapse from excitement because clumps in your mana stop it from flowing properly. If you dissolve them, won't that get rid of the problem entirely?" he asked gently, looking down at me and patting my head. "Seeing you collapse reminds us of when you were poisoned. It's really bad for our hearts. And now that I've graduated and can't keep an eye on you in the Royal Academy anymore, I want you to be as safe there as possible. Lord Ferdinand wishes to do all that he can for you before he must leave... and this feeling is something I understand painfully well."

The only people who had actually seen me poisoned and unconscious were Bonifatius, Cornelius, and Ferdinand. My heart ached as I realized just how worried about me they were, and with this newfound understanding in mind, I reached out and grabbed on to Ferdinand's sleeve.

"You're confident that I'll only be in the jureve for a few days? I won't wake up to find that everyone's grown up even more, I've lost control of my body again, and you've gone, right?"

"I will not leave before you wake," he said, his light-golden eyes fixed on me. "I promise."

I nodded, then turned around and said, "I'll go get changed."

I made my way out of the workshop and asked Monika to help me change into thin, white clothing. I also needed to take off my socks so that the mana

lines that would appear on my legs would be fully visible. So long had passed since the last time I wore shoes without socks that the sensation threw me off a little.

Once I was ready, I returned to the workshop, where the other preparations had already been finished. The large, white box was filled with the translucent blue jureve, and Fran was standing beside it so that he could put in the feystones. Also near the white box was a bench, which Ferdinand pointed to.

I sat as instructed and took the presented cup with both hands. Inside was more jureve. I drank it, then Fran took off my shoes for me.

“Rozemyne,” Ferdinand said. He picked me up like he had done for my first jureve and sat me down inside the white box. In an instant, bright-red mana lines appeared on my skin. “The process will take three to four days. You will wake in time for the coming-of-age ceremony.” He traced his fingers along the lines on my arms and nape, and as he carried out his inspection, I felt my eyes growing heavy.

“Ferdinand... You’d better not leave, no matter what happens...”

“Enough already,” Ferdinand replied, a half-smile on his face as he covered my eyes with a large hand. “Sleep.”

I could feel my body gently sinking into the jureve... and soon enough, the world around me faded into nothingness.

“Awake, I see.”

No sooner had this familiar voice reached me than I was pulled up out of the jureve. I was taken aback for a moment, but my surprise gave way to a relieved sigh as I realized it was Ferdinand in front of me.

“How long has it been?” I asked.

“Four days, as I expected.”

Fran, Monika, and my retainers were here as well. They certainly all looked and seemed the same.

Ferdinand checked the flow of mana in my arms, legs, and neck. “They have

all dissolved without issue, it seems. Now... a bath has been prepared. Once you are clean, spend the remainder of the day resting. You will be busy once again starting tomorrow."

Fran carried me to the bath, and from there, Nicola and Monika helped me in. "You can still sit and stand," Nicola observed, "so it must not have been too hard on your body, Lady Rozemyne."

"We were very worried, since you were completely unable to move last time," Monika added.

I nodded with a smile. Apparently, I would collapse less now that the mana clumps had dissolved, but I still needed to wear my mana-absorbing necklace from Ferdinand. I had compressed my mana so many times that I now had far too much, and although getting overexcited wouldn't make me collapse, it was still pretty bad for me.

"I still need to train my body, though," I said. "I can't say that I feel all that much better."

"It may be a while before you start to see results," Nicola noted. "You say that you feel mostly the same, but compared to before when you could not move at all, I would say that you are doing much better."

"Ah, right..." I replied. "Even reading was a struggle back then."

"Still, I think a little exercise will do you a lot of good," Monika said with a smile.

"I will consider it."

I steadily advanced through my studying for the Royal Academy, feeling relatively unchanged in terms of my health. It had been decided that the High Bishop would not receive much work going forward, partly to make things easier on Melchior when he succeeded me, so my time was divided between the jobs I absolutely had to do and preparing for the next academic term.

Some of my time was spent working on my various assignments. For entwickeln practice, I made a tiny box garden, adjusted the strength of the barrier surrounding it, then added a hole that would serve as the border gate.

“Thinking about it like this, the foundational magic is like a really big feystone with a ton of magic circles carved into it,” I said.

“Indeed; it is a sizable magic tool with feystones of every element built into it,” Ferdinand replied. “I believe there is a blueprint somewhere in these documents.”

For the most part, my studying for the archduke candidate course was done in my workshop after my retainers were shooed out of the room. Wilfried and Charlotte sometimes came to participate, but it was normally just Ferdinand and me. I was glad that we were getting to spend some time together when his departure was coming up so soon, but I noticed that Ferdinand often looked quite sick, as though he was forcing himself quite a bit.

“Ferdinand... You’ve been cutting down on sleep, haven’t you? Are you getting enough rest?”

“Somewhat.”

“Do you mean to say that you’ve been cutting down on sleep somewhat or that you’re getting somewhat enough rest?” Either way, I decided that it was best to warn Justus, and then it occurred to me—I hadn’t actually seen him or Eckhart in the temple as of late. “Could it be that Justus and Eckhart are busy too?”

“They are doing work that only they can do, since your retainers are here to carry out everything else,” Ferdinand replied. I pursed my lips; he was acting like it was normal for him to give orders to my retainers in the temple.

“If you’re going to complain about me using Raimund, then don’t use my retainers as tools.”

“I could say the same to you. If you are going to use Raimund, then do not complain about me using your retainers.”

It was all a matter of perspective, and when Ferdinand put it like that, there wasn’t much I could complain about.

“Now then, practice what you have learned well,” Ferdinand said. “We will practice dividing the duchy into provinces next—a necessary technique for granting land to giebes.” As he spoke, he started gathering what we would need

from a teleportation circle on the floor. My workshop was getting more and more cramped as he brought in everything we needed for our lessons.

And so, I continued my studies every day until the end of spring. It was almost time for the coming-of-age ceremony, which was going to be Hartmut's first religious ceremony.

"Now that I think about it... Hartmut, what are you going to do for ceremonial clothing? Even if we order it now, there's no way that it'll be ready in time, is there?"

It had taken Benno quite a while to sort out my ceremonial clothes—and mine had taken less time than usual to make, since the seamstresses hadn't needed to weave the cloth. Getting something ready for Hartmut would take even longer.

"There are many ceremonial robes from previous blue priests that fit me," Hartmut replied, "so I will use those until the clothes I ordered arrive."

One would prepare their own ceremonial robes under normal circumstances, but Hartmut naturally didn't have the time, so we were lending him some from the many that the temple had in stock. This hadn't been an option for me because of my commoner origins, and none of the clothes had come close to being my size.

"I am looking forward to the ceremony," Hartmut said, having spent yesterday in a room we had previously used for guard knights. He ate with me in the High Bishop's chambers, then moved to the High Priest's chambers, where his future attendants were going to help him get dressed.

I got changed into my High Bishop ceremonial robes and called for Fran.

"The chapel has been prepared. Let us go."

Several blue priests had entered the chapel already. Eckhart was waiting by the door, so I took this opportunity to ask him about Hartmut.

"I see you've come to the temple today, Eckhart. I was wondering—does Hartmut seem nervous, what with this being his first religious ceremony?"

“He seems more excited than anything. Pretty sure he wants to see your blessing,” Eckhart replied. First ceremony or not, it seemed that Hartmut was the same as always. “Still, he’s a competent one; he memorized the flow of the ceremony in no time at all, and even Lord Ferdinand finds him easy to work with. You found yourself a solid retainer, Rozemyne.”

Eckhart was basing his judgment of my retainers on how useful they were to Ferdinand, despite them being *my* retainers. It was a bizarre thing to witness. In a way, he was very similar to Hartmut.

“High Bishop. Enter.”

Ferdinand gave the order, at which point some gray priests opened the door. Lined up in front of the shrine were blue priests waving sticks, producing a melodious ringing sound that echoed through the chapel. Hartmut was among them, and I could tell from his eyes that he was conscious of my entry. He watched closely as I leisurely ascended the stage, with Ferdinand taking my hand as usual.

From there, Ferdinand spoke of the gods, then I prayed and offered a blessing. The coming-of-age ceremony itself ended without incident.

Mom and Dad came to the door and watched me with worried expressions; they must have heard from Tuuli that relations with Ahrensbach were resuming. I couldn’t wave to them or contact them overtly with Hartmut watching like a hawk, so instead, I balled my right hand into a fist and tapped the left side of my chest twice, making it look like part of the ceremony. Other than that, the most I could do was shoot them glances while pretending to watch the new adults leave, and I did just that until the gray priests shut the doors.

“Hartmut, do you understand the workload expected of the High Priest now?” I asked after Ferdinand helped me down from the stage.

“He helps you climb onto the stage, reads the bible in your place, accompanies you until the doors have been closed, helps you down from the stage... In short, the High Priest is one who takes care of you, Lady Rozemyne.”

“Not quite. Ferdinand did other things as well, no?” He had clearly been registering medals, among other things, but when I tried to explain that,

Ferdinand simply shook his head.

“That is the work of all blue priests, not just the High Priest,” Ferdinand said. “In truth, I did not need to help in this way with the previous High Bishop. The bulk of my assistance is simply ensuring that you do not cause the ceremony to fail.”

“I am confident that I will complete it perfectly next time and from then onward,” Hartmut declared. Ferdinand nodded in response, noting that he didn’t doubt this in the slightest.

I didn’t need to know that the High Priest’s job during ceremonies is pretty much just to babysit me...

“D-Do you have any other thoughts on the coming-of-age ceremony?” I asked.

“I do,” Hartmut replied without missing a beat. He clenched his fists, suddenly looking quite upset. “Were there not more blessings here today than there were at the Royal Academy’s coming-of-age ceremony? I wish you had been the one to bless mine, Lady Rozemyne.”

He went on to grumble about commoners having all the luck, which I didn’t quite understand; would he consider it fair if everyone received my blessing?

“You have been tackling a tremendous workload with great diligence, Hartmut, so if your wish is simply for me to bless you, then I will do just that,” I said. “Though the nobles’ coming-of-age ceremony is over, and the season has changed...”

“Truly?!” Hartmut exclaimed, his eyes brimming with hope. He dropped to one knee, crossed his arms, and said, “Please do, then. I will gratefully accept the blessings of the winter gods.”

He had said the winter gods, but it was the very end of spring; by this point, the God of Life had been washed away completely. I elected to go with the Goddess of Earth instead. I was pretty sure she was overseeing the growth of new life in this season.

“O Geduldh, Goddess of Earth, hear my prayers. May you grace those who have newly come of age with your blessing. May those who offer their prayers

and gratitude be blessed with your divine protection.”



I channeled mana into my ring as I prayed, and red light rained down upon Hartmut. I moved to leave as soon as the blessing was done, but he remained on one knee. “Is something the matter?” I asked him.

“I am moved.”

“Hm?”

“I am beyond grateful to experience the bliss of monopolizing one of your blessings,” Hartmut said, looking happier than I had ever seen him. He reached out and pressed the back of my hand to his forehead. The whole point of my blessing had been to cheer him up, but seeing him rejoice this much was making me a little uncomfortable.

“Ferdinand...” I said, seeking his help.

“He is your retainer,” Ferdinand replied, averting his gaze. “His loyalty is unquestionable, at the very least, so he will make for a strong ally if you use him properly.”

“And if I handle him improperly?”

“Disaster. I experienced as much with Eckhart.”

Um, Eckhart?!

A Visitor and Counterstrategies

“Next up is the Starbind Ceremony,” I said to myself as I checked my schedule. The summer baptism ceremony was now over and done with, and after holing up in my workshop, I had finally managed to complete my archduke candidate studies.

Ferdinand made a face. “I am told that Georgine and Detlinde are visiting Ehrenfest between the Starbind Ceremony and autumn. They wish for our duchies to interact as much as possible before the marriage, it seems.”

“Are they really allowed on such a long trip while Aub Ahrensbach is ill...?” I asked. My understanding was that he was on death’s door, and those from the duchy wanted a successor to be trained at once.

“Rozemyne, we do not know whether Aub Ahrensbach is truly ill,” Ferdinand replied with a grimace.

“What?”

“As I told you, it was intelligence from Justus; we cannot trust it entirely. It might also be something that Ahrensbach is purposefully hiding from others. In any case, you would do well to not speak of the aub’s health so carelessly. We do not wish for you to draw undue suspicion to yourself, put others on guard, or inspire a hunt for our source.”

It seemed that an archduke being ill was not something that duchies generally wanted others to know, as it often meant the changing of an aub. I was told not to ask Georgine or Detlinde about Aub Ahrensbach’s health under any circumstances.

“So, Ahrensbach considers it top secret information, then? And you want to keep our source hidden because you know who they are?”

“I can say only that it should not be blindly trusted,” Ferdinand said with a light shrug. He didn’t seem to trust the source very much himself, but given the situation, he had determined that it was likely correct nonetheless.

“Still... if there’s a chance of the aub dying while you’re still engaged, Ferdinand, then he must be fairly ill.”

“Death does not come only from illness; there are many other reasons one might believe their life to be in danger,” Ferdinand said. He was being deliberately vague, but I could guess at what he was implying. It was so scary that I couldn’t bring myself to press him; instead, it seemed wise to change the subject at the next opportunity.

“In any case, I’m kind of surprised that you and Lady Detlinde can get married at all.”

“What do you mean?”

“In my old world, my country made it illegal for uncles and nieces to marry,” I said. This seemed to pique his interest, so I decided to elaborate. “Each country had its own laws, however, so such unions were considered more acceptable elsewhere. Does Yurgenschmidt not have rules for marriage?”

“Of course we do,” Ferdinand replied. “A baby’s mana is mostly dependent on its mother, so her bloodline is prioritized. Detlinde is both Sylvester’s and my niece, but of the two of us, she can only marry me. This is because Sylvester was born to Veronica, whereas I was not.”

For siblings, their ability to marry was largely dependent on whether they shared a mother. The rules were more relaxed with cousins, who could marry even if their mothers were from the same family.

“Even siblings can marry, as long as they do not share a mother,” Ferdinand continued. “You and Wilfried are an example of this, no?”

“I thought that was because I was adopted, not because adopted daughters are considered the same as paternal half-sisters,” I said, blinking in surprise. It had been quite some time since I last felt the culture gap between our worlds this strongly.

“Filling in the many holes that remain in your common sense certainly will prove troublesome...”

“Who are you going to tell before you leave?” I asked. “About my previous life in another world, I mean.”

Ferdinand paused for a moment, considering my question carefully, then shook his head. “Your image as the Saint of Ehrenfest has become so widespread that it would not be wise to inform any others. I cannot even imagine how you might be exploited if your past became known. Legends of sainthood were convenient when arranging for your adoption, but now that the Sovereign temple has its eyes on you, they are nothing but dangerous.”

I thought back to the scary look in the Sovereign High Priest’s eyes and nodded quietly. “But who can I turn to when I have questions like this, then?” It seemed inevitable that my lack of common sense in this world would continue to cause migraine-inducing problems.

Ferdinand once again fell into thought, then headed over to a nearby shelf. “Use this to write letters,” he said, setting the bottle of disappearing ink in front of me. “Ink that responds only to its creator’s mana should make it across duchy borders without issue.”

Ordonnanzes couldn’t cross duchy borders, which meant interduchy communication was generally done by letter magic tools. These were inspected at the duchy border and then allowed to continue on their way if no issues were found.

“Use the disappearing ink to write your questions, then pen an innocuous message above it with regular ink,” Ferdinand instructed. “I will similarly use your ink for my response.”

“Secret letters, then. Hm... Is this like how Lady Georgine and Bezewanst used to communicate?” They hadn’t used disappearing ink, so it wasn’t similar in that regard, but Georgine had sent Bezewanst more than enough letters to indicate that he was a great pillar of support for her.

Lady Georgine must really hate me...

Bezewanst had presumably been her Ferdinand, so it made sense that she would despise me from the bottom of her heart for driving him to his death. It occurred to me that she probably hated Ferdinand for the same reason, and, in an instant, her visit and the upcoming wedding became a lot more terrifying.

“I suppose our lessons are going to be put on hold for a while, what with their visit...” I said.

“Indeed... I expect my schedule to be filled with invitations to meals, tea parties, and such during their stay. If only I could do something to make them leave sooner,” Ferdinand muttered in response, looking notably disgusted. I couldn’t help but pity Detlinde, knowing that her fiancé was intending to welcome her with such contempt. It wasn’t like she had done anything to him personally.

“Don’t look so glum; let’s be optimistic about this,” I said. “Try to focus on the silver linings, like... maybe Lady Detlinde will have some Ahrensbach books. Or perhaps she’ll offer us some fish. In your case, why not try to think that she might bring research materials with her?”

Ferdinand looked down at me with cold eyes, then sighed. “You are too honest with your desires.”

“All you have to do is repeat these thoughts again and again in your head. It’s a trick for staying optimistic. You won’t actually be asking them for these things, so why not give it a try?” It would have been overbearing to actually make such requests, but simply thinking them wouldn’t bother anyone.

“Your obsession with books aside, they might actually bring some fish if you ask.”

“Really?!” I exclaimed, looking up at Ferdinand with a beaming smile.

His lips curved into a grin. “But I am sure they would think of you as overbearing if you actually made such a request, no? You will have to go without.”

“You gave me hope just to take it away again?!” I exclaimed, furious. “That’s so mean!”

Ferdinand merely scoffed in amusement. It was like I was a toy to him—something he could effortlessly bat around whenever the mood took him.

“Oh, but if we’re making requests, could we perhaps ask them to bring Raimund along?” I said. He would make for a good source of conversation during tea parties and meals, and if Ferdinand was unable to put aside his disdain for Detlinde, then he and Raimund could talk while Charlotte and I discussed hairpins and such.

“Raimund...”

“He is your disciple as much as he is Professor Hirschur’s. They may bring him if you say that you plan to take him as a retainer in Ahrensbach.”

I wanted Ferdinand to be in a good mood for his first meetings with Detlinde so that they were more likely to get along. It was important that his new life in Ahrensbach be at least reasonably comfortable. He would want to be on guard, but he also needed to break some of the ice on his own.

“Rozemyne, there is much that I must observe and investigate,” Ferdinand said. “How this marriage will revitalize the former Veronica faction, who Georgine trusts most here in Ehrenfest, her reason for returning to our duchy... I will not have the time to leisurely discuss research with Raimund. There is no knowing what Georgine might be doing in the shadows while we are preoccupied with Detlinde.”

Ferdinand was focused more on Georgine than Detlinde, and while he had good reason to be, this visit was meant to be his chance to bond with his future wife.

“In that case,” I said, “you would be wise to request my mothers’ help sooner rather than later.”

“Lady Florencia and Elvira?”

“Yes. Lady Georgine and Lady Detlinde are both women, so I expect they will participate in women-only tea parties. You will not be able to gather intelligence there. My mothers were able to form an information network all the way back when the Veronica faction was at its peak, and now that said faction is crumbling more by the day, their efforts should prove fruitful without Justus needing to cross-dress. Why not meet with them and tell them what you wish to know?”

I was pretty sure that Elvira would put her all into getting any information that Ferdinand wanted—and one could tell that she was a skilled information gatherer from the abundance of love stories she had written.

“Asking for help, hm...?”

Ferdinand was reluctant to trust others and so talented that he could do most

things himself, so it was exceedingly rare for him to ask for help. Thus, he always struggled in situations like this, when he needed to deal with someone other than his target.

“We’re preoccupied with our own matters, so perhaps we could ask them to shorten their stay in Ehrenfest,” I said. “Furthermore, we will need to ask them to bring those with whom we wish to speak. There is still time before their visit, and we gain nothing from simply waiting around in a daze. Ahrensbach negotiations are going to keep us very busy indeed.”

“I think you mean to say they are going to keep *me* busy. Good grief... You would have me do more than I do already?” Ferdinand asked while looking over the progress of my studies.

“But you don’t have to do anything at all, Ferdinand. This is a talk between duchies; could you not tell Sylvester to do it and then leave things to him? You should try to step back from castle work as much as possible. This is going to be an important part of your successors’ training.”

“You truly do adopt only the worst aspects of your guardians...” Ferdinand muttered. Although he sounded exasperated, in the end, he conceded to my suggestion. He told Sylvester his request for Ahrensbach, asked Florencia and Elvira for their help, and started dedicating his time to my archduke candidate lessons in particular.

The lower city was bustling with merchants from other duchies come summertime, and soon enough, it was time for the Starbinding. An emergency family meeting was held sometime prior to the ceremony, during which the cancellation of Eckhart and Angelica’s engagement was discussed.

“Master Bonifatius, Lady Elvira, I am heartbroken to be losing Lord Eckhart,” Angelica said, acting the part of a sorrowful young woman. “I wish to be left alone for a while.” She was no doubt reciting lines fed to her by Stenluke.

“Oh my! Angelica!” Elvira exclaimed, her eyes sparkling as she started scribbling down the tale of their lost love.

Angelica and I glanced at each other, then exchanged a discreet fist pump and appreciative nods.

Elvira continued writing for quite some time, making me question what exactly she was noting down. When she eventually stopped, she looked up with a smile and said, “Angelica, I understand the pain of your heart, but reality is nothing like love stories.”

“Bweh?”

“If you wait until your broken heart heals then you will struggle to find a new partner. My family will shame your parents if you are not at least engaged.”

Bonifatius nodded along in agreement, as someone who wanted Angelica to marry into his house. Her broken heart was unfortunately deemed irrelevant, and the search for her next partner began immediately. She had done all that practice for nothing.

“You should marry her, Lamprecht,” Bonifatius said. “You need a second wife.”

Lamprecht shook his head without the slightest hesitation. “As much as I agree with you, I cannot start discussing a second wife while Aurelia is still pregnant. I would prefer to wait for at least a number of years.”

His request was reasonable enough—it was normal for second wives to be taken years after the first, and we wouldn’t want to introduce any uncertainty during Aurelia’s pregnancy. Not to mention, she had married into our duchy, and Lamprecht didn’t want to risk offending Ahrensbach by taking another wife at this juncture.

“Cornelius, then.”

“I am already engaged to Leonore. I don’t believe it would be acceptable for me to marry someone older than her before we are officially wedded,” Cornelius replied, avoiding taking Angelica as a second wife by desperately clinging to noble traditions.

Having been refused on both fronts, Bonifatius muttered that Traugott was the only remaining option.

“I understand that this is selfish of me,” Angelica said, adopting a terribly sorrowful expression, “but there is one thing I truly desire in a husband. He does not have to be as strong as Lord Eckhart, but I would ask for someone who

is at least as strong as Lord Cornelius. I do not wish to be with a man weaker than me."

Upon hearing this, Bonifatius clenched a fist and declared, "Then I have no choice but to beat Traugott into shape!"

"But how long will that take?" Elvira asked, ever the realist. "You must consider, Lord Bonifatius, that Angelica will only be in her prime for so much longer."

Bonifatius frowned. "If reforming Traugott can't be done in time, then either Karstedt or I will need to take responsibility. I have no other descendants who can even hope to match Angelica. Nikolaus is too young, as we know."

"I could not bear to see Angelica become Father's or your wife," I interjected without a second thought. "She is much too young." I turned to her, expecting to see her distraught about such a suggestion... but she was smiling from ear to ear. In fact, she looked happier than I had seen her all day.

"I have no problem with that."

Wait, you don't?! You're perfectly fine with marrying my grandfather? Even though he's that much older than you? Hold on a second, Angelica... Your taste in men is way *too focused!*

It seemed that Angelica was happy to marry anyone as long as they met her one condition—be it Traugott, Karstedt, or even Bonifatius himself. I wasn't the only one left in a daze by this news; Elvira was cradling her head, ready to put a great big "X" through the Eckhart and Angelica notes she had been making.

Karstedt turned to Bonifatius. "I assume you've resolved to take responsibility for Angelica if your plans for her fall through, Father. If not, then I seriously recommend that you put your all into training Traugott," he said, bringing the family meeting to a swift close. I could tell that he was desperately trying to push the thought of marrying Angelica from his mind.

The Starbind Ceremony arrived in the blink of an eye, and once the lower city's ritual was complete, Ferdinand and I moved our home base to the castle. We had no plans to return to the temple until after Georgine and Detlinde's

visit.

We went on to perform the Starbind Ceremony in the Noble's Quarter. It was mostly uneventful and concluded without incident, although there was some buzz when it was announced that Georgine and Detlinde would soon be visiting. Most were already aware that Ferdinand was getting married, since it had been mentioned during the meeting following the Archduke Conference, but some of the nobles who worked under giebes evidently hadn't known. The former Veronica faction had abruptly been revitalized, and the Ehrenfest leaders were observing carefully to see how people reacted.

"How glorious. To think Lord Ferdinand is marrying into a greater duchy..."

"Lady Georgine is so deeply compassionate, allowing someone who once entered the temple to marry her daughter."

Ferdinand watched with a fake smile as some praised his good fortune and others rejoiced that relations with Ahrensbach would soon resume.

Elvira was wearing a wonderfully false smile herself, and in a hushed voice she said, "Lady Georgine is exceptionally skilled at turning Ehrenfest on its head, so we must greet her with great attention. Your requests are always quite a handful, Lord Ferdinand, but they are very worthwhile." She then murmured about how much she had struggled when she had needed to take me in and train me enough to be a respectable archnoble girl.

"I very much look forward to hearing about your success," I said, smiling at both Elvira and Florencia. I sensed that this was going to be a feminine battle far too great for me to participate in. They would need to fight it all themselves.

"We do not mind you entrusting Lady Georgine to us, Rozemyne, but you must stick as closely to Lord Ferdinand as you can," Elvira said. "The more he speaks with that smile, the wider the rift between his and Lady Detlinde's hearts will grow."

Naturally, Wilfried would need to join me to prevent any untoward rumors or misunderstandings about my relationship with Ferdinand. Charlotte needed to keep her distance from him for the same reason.

"Lady Charlotte is very observant of her surroundings and would make for an

excellent peacekeeper," Elvira continued, "but as you have spent more time with Lord Ferdinand, you are better able to understand his expressions and emotions."

I would need to support Ferdinand as best I could, but I wasn't confident that I could manage it. In fact, I felt like I would be holding him down, if anything.

"This will also be the time for them to show Ehrenfest's nobles a formal proposal and engagement," Elvira said. "Lady Detlinde will most likely be bringing a proposal feystone. Is Lord Ferdinand preparing one to give in return?"

The blood drained from my face. During our lessons together, he had prepared rejuvenation potions and defensive charms to bring to Ahrensbach... but I hadn't seen him preparing a proposal feystone.

"I expect not..." I replied. "He has been tutoring me this entire time, and preparing the temple for his departure is his greatest priority."

Still, there was no way that Ferdinand could make an excuse when Detlinde was offering her own feystone. After all, Ahrensbach had informed us of the visit and its goals well ahead of time.

I summoned an ordonnanz and said, "Ferdinand, have you prepared a proposal feystone?" I was sure we could still remedy this in time if not, but the response he sent knocked me out of my chair.

"I already have one. It is of all elements, so it will suit her no matter which ones she possesses."

"Hold on! Aren't proposal feystones supposed to be made to match your partner's elements exactly?" I wanted to put my head in my hands; a feystone with all elements was fine for the sake of appearances, but it also communicated a complete lack of interest in learning about one's partner. "There's a limit to how brusque you can be! At the very least, consult Ahrensbach about Lady Detlinde's affinities. They might assume your proposal feystone was intended for someone else!"

"I made it for class in the Royal Academy, so I expect no such misunderstandings," came his response. Now I really had to cradle my head; he

had no motivation whatsoever.

“Brunhilde, will this cause any problems?” I asked.

“W-Well... as a feystone with all elements, it could perhaps please her, depending on its quality and the words carved within it...” Brunhilde noted.

I grasped at this solitary thread of hope and asked Ferdinand what words were carved into his feystone. It was the simplest and most generic message, which he had used so that he could give the stone to anyone: “May my heart be yours.” Naturally, even Brunhilde gave up at this point; the feystone was beyond saving.

“Let us remake the stone,” I said via ordonnanz. “Your current offering is simply too poor. No woman will appreciate receiving it.”

“It exists and shall continue to. I have no desire to waste time consulting Ahrensbach and making a new one. If you insist on me having a feystone that matches her affinities, then you can make it yourself, as my family.”

“This isn’t something I should be making! I’m not the one getting married here, you know!”

“All will go smoothly as long as I deliver the feystone with a smile and some honeyed words. Discussing this further is pointless. I am busy.”

After that, he stopped replying to my ordonnanzes. It seemed that he was set on using his all-element feystone no matter what.

Geez, can you imagine a worse groom?! Ferdinand is the least marriageable person ever!

He was so intently focused on Georgine and the former Veronica faction that he was giving barely any thought to his own fiancée. At this rate, Detlinde would absolutely despise him by the time her stay was over.

“We must ensure that Lady Detlinde receives the best treatment in Ehrenfest,” I said, “or her opinion of Lord Ferdinand will end up beyond saving. Brunhilde, Lieseleta, Rihyarda, Ottilie—the task ahead is by no means an easy one, but I must ask for your assistance during her stay.”

“Understood.”

To be honest, I wasn't well educated in the ways of romantic gestures and expressions. I would need people supporting me as well.

"Let us summon Wilfried, Charlotte, and Melchior," I said. "We must ensure that the upcoming visit is enjoyable for everyone."

Anything was better than letting Ferdinand give his fiancée the cold shoulder upon her arrival. I consulted Wilfried's and Charlotte's retainers about Detlinde's preferred sweets and topics of conversation, which they had picked up on during the tea party for cousins that Wilfried had attended, and asked for their help with the challenge ahead.

From there, our progress was steady. We ensured that the necessary rooms were prepared and discussed what to serve during tea parties and meals, while Ferdinand attended more meetings with members of the former Veronica faction.

The Welcoming Feast

A short while after the peak of summer, Georgine and Detlinde's entourage arrived in Ehrenfest. Carriages appeared one after another, and out of each stepped a variety of retainers. I could see Raimund among them, presumably as a result of our request for his attendance.

Servants carried in gifts for Ehrenfest by the boxload, while two women wearing Ahrensbach veils alighted from one of the carriages. Formal greetings would take place at the welcoming feast later tonight.

I pray that this visit ends peacefully... unlike the last one.

We couldn't let our guard down; Georgine's previous visit had seemed a success at the time, but then the former Veronica faction had caused the Ivory Tower incident and attacked Charlotte and me not long after. I slapped my cheeks to keep myself alert.

It seemed that I wasn't the only one feeling tense—my guard knights were especially on edge, since they had failed to protect me last time. Cornelius was wearing the furthest thing from a friendly smile, while Damuel checked all the locks on our doors and windows for any foul play. As for Angelica, she had relentlessly practiced the motions necessary to draw Stenluke even while wearing formal attire. Judithe and Leonore seemed nervous as well.

The welcoming feast began after sixth bell.

Hugo and Ella were our chefs for the day, and they had put their all into making a range of Ehrenfest dishes. Our cuisine could quite easily be described as some of the trendiest in Yurgenschmidt at the moment. Most of what we were serving had already been shown during the Archduke Conference, so we didn't need to be too secretive, but we had also added a few undisclosed items to the menu to advertise our duchy as an even more valuable partner. Sylvester had said that it was essential we show just how much Ferdinand was worth.

The plan was for the Ahrensbach group to enter after the archducal family,

starting with Georgine and Detlinde. All of the archduke candidates in the northern building had been told to gather together and move as one.

It was rare for us to have visitors from other duchies at the castle, and it was a first for both Charlotte and Melchior. I wasn't worried about Charlotte, since she was already expertly socializing with nobles of other duchies at the Royal Academy, but Melchior barely had any experience to rely on. Not even a year had passed since his baptism, and as it stood, he was just like Wilfried when Georgine had previously visited.

"Melchior," Wilfried said, "don't utter a word more than what you absolutely have to. Speak the greeting we discussed and nothing else."

"Yes, Brother."

Wilfried was being quite firm, not wanting his younger brother to make the same mistake he had made before. Melchior listened with a solemn expression as Wilfried explained the trouble he had caused in the past.

"Do you know whether Lord Ferdinand prepared a new feystone?" Brunhilde asked in a whisper, her voice tinged with concern. Given all the ingredients in his workshop, it wouldn't have taken him long to make something according to Ahrensbach's specifications, but I imagined that he probably hadn't.

"He will manage somehow," I said. "He did seem confident."

He had flatly declared that he could solve any issues with a smile and some honeyed words, which I took to mean an over-the-top expression and a horrifyingly clichéd one-liner. It was going to be such a strange contrast to his usual stone-faced persona that I started to worry my sides might explode from laughing too hard.

Ferdinand was already in the grand hall when we arrived, speaking with the nobles congratulating him with a perfect fake smile. He looked so kind and gentle—and so unlike his usual self—that I wanted to shout "LIAR!!!" at the top of my lungs. Wilfried and Charlotte could only stare in awe; they likewise knew how harsh Ferdinand was after our lessons together.

"Uncle's socializing face sure is something else."

"Indeed. One cannot see even a trace of the dry expression he wears while

giving out work and checking the results," Charlotte added. "He is an excellent example not just for brewing and administrative work, but for socializing as well."

I certainly didn't want her trying to become more like Ferdinand, but I couldn't bring myself to say it out loud. *Still, if you start walking around all deadpan and giving such fake smiles while you're socializing with others, I'll cry! I swear I will, Charlotte!*

"Rozemyne, Wilfried, Charlotte, Melchior. You all wait here."

"Lord Bonifatius."

"I don't usually attend formal meetings with other duchies to make it clear I'm retired, but I was asked to be here to serve as your guard," Bonifatius explained. He then puffed out his chest and said, "Stay close, so I can protect all of you at once."

After hearing this impassioned declaration, Angelica and Cornelius casually moved to protect me from Bonifatius.

"We are here today to welcome our esteemed guests from Ahrensbach," Sylvester said, officially marking the beginning of the feast. The doors of the hall were opened at once, and in came Georgine and Detlinde, with their retinue trailing behind. They were both wearing veils, although they were thin to the point of seeming transparent—perhaps because it was summer.

Georgine carried herself with all the boldness of a queen, as usual, while Detlinde walked a few paces behind, smiling sweetly at the surrounding nobles. The nobles responded with friendly expressions while murmuring among themselves.

"Now that I see her, that girl really does look like a spitting image of a young Veronica," Bonifatius said quietly from the corner where we archducal family members were waiting.

"You think so too?" Wilfried asked.

I hadn't actually met Veronica, so I couldn't offer any thoughts on the matter, but Bonifatius had known her since her baptism and considered the two of

them to look exactly alike.

Is Ferdinand going to be okay?

I turned my attention to Ferdinand, who was on the stage alongside his retainers, the archducal couple, and their retainers. Detlinde gave him an affectionate smile, which he returned in kind. To most, it must have looked like he was rejoicing over his engagement and welcoming our guests from Ahrensbach. No one would guess that he felt sick just looking at her.

At this very moment, Ferdinand was demonstrating the same advice he had always given me for living as a noble: do everything with a smile, no matter how much you hate it, and show absolutely no weaknesses or openings to those around you. I wondered whether he would find somewhere in Ahrensbach where he could at least have a little peace and quiet. The thought of him living in another duchy, always having to hide his true feelings behind that fake smile, made my heart ache.

I really hope he can get along with Detlinde. The last thing I want is for his life to be spent in nothing but misery.

After ascending the stage, Georgine and Detlinde exchanged greetings with the archducal couple. Melchior and Charlotte then followed with Bonifatius, since this was Charlotte's first time meeting Georgine, Bonifatius's first time meeting Detlinde, and Melchior's first time meeting them both.

"May I pray for a blessing in appreciation of this serendipitous meeting, ordained by the vibrant summer rays of Leidenschaft the God of Fire?"

"You may."

Melchior blessed Georgine as well, then stepped down from the stage at once. He returned to where I was, then boasted that he had done exactly as instructed.

"You did very well," I said, mussing his hair.

Once the greetings were done, Georgine began speaking about Ferdinand and Detlinde's wedding as the representative of Ahrensbach.

"By the king's grace, we are granted this opportunity for a close relationship

between our two duchies. I am overjoyed that my daughter Detlinde will take someone as exceptionally wise and skilled as Lord Ferdinand. Of all the nobles in Yurgenschmidt, he was chosen by the king as the best candidate to support Aub Ahrensbach in these trying times, when we have only female archduke candidates in our care."

From there, Georgine casually mentioned that every greater duchy agreed it was a crime to let someone as accomplished as Ferdinand rot away in the temple—an obvious criticism of Sylvester.

She's acting the same as before—politely dunking on Sylvester with a smile—but she seems far livelier this time...

"Now, the feystone," Georgine said.

Detlinde nodded and gracefully started toward Ferdinand. Walking half a step behind her was her apprentice attendant Martina, holding a small box.

Ferdinand swiftly knelt, prompting Eckhart and Justus to do the same, their heads lowered. Then, once everyone was ready, Martina carefully and gently opened the box. Detlinde took the feystone from within and presented it to her future husband.

"The supreme King and Queen of the heavens have ordained this union," she said, starting the greeting that turned into effusive praise for the gods. I could actually decipher her words, since they were partly taken from the bible. If my understanding was correct, she had just said something to the tune of "Your life is in my hands, and only I can save you; do show me the utmost gratitude."

I'm not the most confident when it comes to noble euphemisms, but given how Ferdinand just smiled even harder and Justus subtly moved to hold down Eckhart, I'm probably not too far off the mark.

"I offer this feystone to my God of Darkness," Detlinde concluded.

Ferdinand respectfully accepted the feystone being offered to him, placed it inside a box that Justus had prepared, then held out his own feystone. "O my Goddess of Light..." he began in a gentle voice and with a saccharine smile. His actions were straight out of the romantic knight stories that Elvira held so close to heart.

The women present all sharply inhaled at once. It was easy to see that there were many passionate readers of Elvira's books in the grand hall.

"From amidst the eternal darkness shone a solitary light," Ferdinand said, continuing his lengthy speech in a low, resounding voice. It seemed that his words weren't taken from the bible, so I didn't have a clue what he was saying. I might have stood more of a chance with a transcript and enough time, but I simply couldn't keep up otherwise.

I don't understand... It's kind of poetic, I guess? He said something about light dancing among the flowers when the darkness passed... so he's probably expressing happiness? Right...

Elvira didn't know what Ferdinand actually thought about the situation, but she listened with a combination of a dreamy gaze and a sharp glare. I was confident that his words today would appear verbatim in a love story before long. I would use that opportunity to actually decode them.

Although these "honeyed words" were incomprehensible to me, Elvira and the others were positively enraptured, while Detlinde was listening with flushed cheeks and tearful eyes.

"Brunhilde, is the feystone acceptable?" I asked.

She nodded carefully and explained what Ferdinand was saying. In summary: "I am truly glad to have been engaged to you. In order to show my resolve to overcome any challenge for the sake of our marriage, I have secured a feystone of all elements." From there, he had emphasized what great lengths he had gone to for each ingredient.

"It seems that he gathered the rarest materials he could despite their engagement having been decided only a short time ago," Brunhilde noted. "And when he puts it like that, his feystone is the embodiment of sincerity."

The heck?! I totally would have fallen for that if he hadn't already told me how he really feels! Never trust Ferdinand when he smiles! Never! He's so scary!

"Oh my... To think you would go so far for my sake, Lord Ferdinand..." Detlinde's green eyes were brimming with tears as she accepted the proposal feystone, looking like a young maiden who was truly smitten.

Aah! Detlinde fell for his trick! I mean, this is what we wanted... but I still feel pretty bad for her. I want to yell out that she's being deceived.

But almost nobody could recognize my pain. Ferdinand stood, having made every woman in the hall more or less swoon. The audience clapped to bless the engaged couple on the stage before shining their schtappes, and with that, it was time to socialize.

Georgine was surrounded at once by the former Veronica faction. This was the point when Ferdinand would circle the hall and greet everyone with his new fiancée, so he was surrounded by them as well. His fake smile was in full force, to the point that I started to worry he wouldn't be able to maintain it. I couldn't make any overt moves myself, though. Instead, I scanned the hall—and that was when I discovered Raimund wandering around aimlessly.

"Raimund," Hartmut called out.

Raimund quickly approached with a smile. "I was ordered to come at the last moment," he said, "but I've been a bit worried, since I'm only close with a few of the others. I was surprised enough to learn about Lord Ferdinand getting engaged to Lady Detlinde, but I thought I was going to pass out when I heard that he plans to take me as a retainer."

Serving as his retainer meant serving the archducal family directly, and such a role would secure Raimund a much better position in his own family, where he had mostly been ignored. This was an excellent opportunity to most, but for someone who wanted to focus on research and nothing else, it was actually quite troublesome.

"I am relieved to know that Ferdinand will have a familiar face with him in Ahrensbach," I said. "Please do look after him there; do not simply indulge in research and lose sight of your health."

Raimund gave a troubled smile, evidently unable to promise that. I couldn't blame him, though—I would have reacted the same way when it came to books. Still, this was all the more reason for me to record some reprimands for Ferdinand to take with him to Ahrensbach.

"Incidentally, I was speaking with Ferdinand the other day about your next task to complete."

“Please go on,” Raimund replied, his eyes sparkling. He listened intently as I explained our idea of modifying sound-recording magic tools to be smaller, then said, “I cannot say much without any blueprints or the tool itself, but this does seem interesting.” I detected a healthy dose of optimism in his voice.

“Hopefully you have the chance to speak with Ferdinand during this visit,” I said. “That may be a challenge, though, since he has so many prior engagements.”

“Rozemyne,” came a familiar voice; Ferdinand was suddenly standing beside us with Detlinde in tow. “I have invited Lady Detlinde to my estate, but it would be unacceptable for us to be alone, no? I would like you and Wilfried to accompany me, if you have the time.”

“Could we perhaps have Charlotte and Melchior join also? We cousins have so few chances to all come together,” I said. The thought of only bringing Wilfried made me feel uneasy, since I was far from being an expert at socializing, and he was usually too oblivious to pick up on subtle insults. There was also the fact that I hadn’t attended one of their tea parties for cousins at the Royal Academy. By bringing Charlotte, I could ask her to cover things for me.

“I do not mind. This is a rare opportunity indeed, and I understand that you would appreciate the extra company. What do you think, Lady Detlinde?” Ferdinand asked, wearing the kind expression of one concerned about his fiancée’s comfort.

Detlinde returned a positively overjoyed smile and said, “Everyone is welcoming me so warmly. I am just so happy. I thank you ever so much for your concern.”

Ferdinand nodded, having received the approval that he wanted, then looked at Raimund. “You come as well, Raimund. There is something I must show you, considering that you will serve as my retainer in Ahrensbach.”

“I am honored.”

Despite my initial concerns, Ferdinand managed to maintain his fake smile to perfection until the very end of the welcoming feast. All in all, things had gone very well.

Or so I thought. Ferdinand summoned me the next day to inform me that Detlinde had asked for a hairpin.

"I said that I would prepare one for her," Ferdinand explained, "but she said that she wishes to order one herself. Rozemyne, can you contact the Gilberta Company?"

"I can, but when will we call for them? You have many prior engagements already, no?" I asked. The former Veronica faction was making full use of the circumstances and swamping him with invitations, from what I remembered. Was there even time for a meeting about hairpins?

Ferdinand let out a heavy sigh. "It would be ideal to speak with them while she is visiting my estate. I do not trust myself to keep the conversation going otherwise."

For tea parties and meals, it was up to the host to oversee things and come up with topics of conversation. Those who attended as guests only had to come up with responses, which Ferdinand was very much used to, but now he had invited Detlinde to his estate and needed to decide what they would talk about. It seemed that his plan was to make do with a single topic and waste as much time as possible on selecting a hairpin.

"You may spend your time having a rousing conversation with Raimund," I said. "For your sake, Charlotte and I shall speak with Detlinde about hairpins and trends and such."

"Thank you," Ferdinand replied—albeit after a hesitant pause. His light-golden eyes watched me for a moment, then his shoulders relaxed. "In fact, while we are here, could you assist me with one other thing?"

I nodded at once and gave a very emphatic yes. It was rare for Ferdinand to ask for help.

"I wish to borrow your temple attendants on that day," he said. "I barely have any in my noble estate."

As it turned out, Ferdinand's estate was more or less right next to the castle. His father had prepared it for him, and Ferdinand had lived there briefly before his baptism, after being brought home from the Adalgisa villa. The estate had

been formally bestowed upon him when he came of age, but as he had almost immediately entered the temple, he rarely ever used it. Only the bare minimum of personnel were kept there to maintain things, and since Detlinde was only going to be there for a day, he had decided that it was a better idea to simply borrow gray priests and chefs from the temple.

"My attendants and chefs have been moved there already, but we still do not have enough people," Ferdinand explained. "I did not plan for Charlotte and Melchior to be there as well. Can you lend me Fran and Zahm?"

He could have managed with Detlinde as his only visitor, but with so many archduke candidates now joining them, he was short on manpower even with all of his temple attendants.

"Of course," I replied. "You can borrow Fran and Zahm, as well as Hugo and Ella."

"Thank you, Rozemyne," Ferdinand said, his brow growing tighter as he expressed his gratitude. Maybe it was simply due to the shadow that fell over his face as he started rubbing his temples, but he looked utterly exhausted.

"You don't look so good, Ferdinand. Don't push yourself too much."

"There is nothing to be worried about," he replied monotonously. "I already have enough rejuvenation potions prepared."

In truth, that just made me even more worried.

From there, I briefly returned to the temple to ask Fran and Zahm about helping Ferdinand at his estate in the Noble's Quarter. They both agreed without issue, having served as his attendants in the past.

"You may trust us with helping the High Priest."

"Due to your retainers visiting so often, we have grown able to serve archnobles and members of archducal families without fear. You may rest easy."

I prepared a carriage and sent them off, heartened by their words, then sent a letter to the Gilberta Company—I needed to inform Otto that an Ahrensbach

archduke candidate wanted to order a hairpin. He replied that he would send an adult hairpin maker rather than Tuuli, who was still underage, but the subtext was clear: “As you’ve already been targeted by Ahrensbach in the past, it’s best to keep your family hidden lest they be viewed as a weakness to exploit.” I naturally followed his advice, not wanting to expose Tuuli to any danger.

Ferdinand's Estate

It was the day of our trip, and we archduke candidates were traveling by carriage. "This is my first time going to Uncle's estate," Wilfried said. "Have you been here before, Rozemyne?"

I shook my head. "No, this is my first time as well. We normally conduct our business in the castle or the temple."

"This is my first time being invited outside of the castle, so I'm a bit nervous..." Melchior admitted, though he seemed openly excited as he gazed out the window.

Although traveling by carriage was slower than the alternatives I was used to, Ferdinand's estate was right next to the castle, so the journey didn't take very long at all. We arrived in the blink of an eye.

"Ferdinand certainly lives in a big estate, considering that he's not even married..." I said as I alighted from the carriage, looking up at the massive white mansion that greeted us. In terms of size, it wasn't that much different from Karstedt's estate. It being abandoned was such a waste.

Wilfried shrugged in response, having stepped out of the carriage before me. "All archduke candidates leave the northern building once they come of age. He must have been given this place under the assumption that he'd marry right after graduating. I doubt Grandfather expected that Uncle would remain unattached this late into his life."

It was then that the door to the estate opened, revealing none other than Fran. "Please do come in," he said, welcoming us inside.

"Fran? Why are you here?" Wilfried and Charlotte asked, surprised to see a temple attendant at an estate in the Noble's Quarter. They knew Fran from my two-year slumber, when he had accompanied them for Spring Prayer and the Harvest Festival.

Upon seeing the two archduke candidates frozen in place, Fran directed a

troubled smile in my direction. I took that as a signal for me to explain.

“Ferdinand has spent so much time in the temple that his estate barely has any attendants and servants,” I said. “He has so many visitors today that Fran and Zahm have agreed to help, having once served as his attendants.”

Wilfried, Charlotte, and Melchior’s retainers all seemed to accept this explanation.

“Lord Ferdinand will soon be leaving for Ahrensbach,” Charlotte noted, “so I suppose there would not be much point in him taking on more personnel now.”

“Especially when he’s going to be spending his remaining time in Ehrenfest in the temple, training his successors,” added Vanessa, her head attendant.

“Please keep it a secret from Lady Detlinde that those working here are temple attendants,” I said. “I don’t imagine she will respond positively.”

Everyone nodded their understanding.

As we made our way inside, I noticed many more similarities to Karstedt’s estate. At the same time, however, the interior was very distinctly *Ferdinand*—that is to say, one could tell at a glance that a woman had never so much as touched it before. It was simple, practical, and entirely lacking in decoration. In a way, it kind of resembled Dunkelfelger’s tea party room.

Ferdinand noticed our arrival and turned around, having been instructing the attendants in his parlor. “Ah, there you are.”

“Your estate truly is bare, Ferdinand.”

“You simply do not understand the beauty of practicality.”

We passed through the entrance hall and were taken into a sizable parlor that seemed a lot more inviting—largely owing to the many tables, chairs, benches, rugs, and important magic tools. Zahm brought in some sweets, working under the instruction of someone who appeared to be the noble attendant usually in charge of the estate.

We sipped tea while the final checks were made before Detlinde’s arrival.

“This room is the only one you may eat and drink within,” Ferdinand said. “Once the Gilberta Company arrives, I intend to take Raimund and the other

male scholars to my book room for a research meeting."

"No way..." I muttered, my interest piqued. The idea of a research meeting with Raimund was my own suggestion, but this was the first I was hearing about it being held in a book room. "I want to come too."

"You offered to host Detlinde and discuss hairpins, trends, and such with her, did you not?"

"So I'm expected to suffer, knowing that your book room is just outside my reach?" Denying me access to a treasure trove of new books that I'd most likely never have another opportunity to visit was the height of cruelty. "Oh, I wish I were a man just for today. Wilfried, can we exchange clothes?"

"That won't help you," Wilfried replied.

"I know that deep down... A girl can dream, though."

After witnessing my desperation, Brunhilde suddenly clenched a fist and said, "Lord Ferdinand, may I offer a few words of advice?"

"Go ahead."

"Having men and women socialize in separate locations is by no means uncommon, but as the goal of this socializing is for you to deepen your bond with your fiancée, it would not be wise for the two of you to remain apart."

Lieseleta nodded in agreement. "Perhaps you could leave the doors to the parlor and your book room open, such that your guests can move between them as they please. Such transparency will only work to your advantage, as being able to see her fiancé will put Lady Detlinde at greater ease."

Charlotte fell into thought for a moment, then looked at me and smiled. "Still, Lady Detlinde may be hesitant to enter a room without any other women present. We could avoid causing her any unnecessary discomfort by having Rozemyne stay in the book room and read for the duration of our visit."

Oh, Charlotte! You're an angel!

"Are you not being too soft on Rozemyne?" Ferdinand asked.

"Not by any conscious effort," Charlotte replied with a concerned smile. "I simply do not think we should trust Rozemyne with socializing while she is so

fixated on your book room. Were you hosting Aurelia, who is more open to discussions about books, then this caution wouldn't be necessary, but Lady Detlinde does not share this interest."

Brunhilde and Lieseleta nodded in agreement, then they both puffed out their chests. "We are used to hosting others while Lady Rozemyne is absent, so you may entrust this to us, Lord Ferdinand."

"In other words, Rozemyne's shifted motivation makes her dead weight, which is why we should put her in the book room to begin with," Ferdinand said. "I see the logic."

"Indeed. It is impossible to say what Rozemyne might do when books are involved, so the most peaceful solution is to distance her from the start."

I shot my head up at once; everyone was labeling me as useless. *I can't let this stand. Melchior is here; I need to show him that I'm a competent big sister!*

"Wait just a moment," I said. "I'll focus on socializing. After all, I've already resolved to do everything I can to help Ferdinand."

"No, you would do well to stay within the book room," Ferdinand replied. "Perhaps because of your tendency to cause problems at the Royal Academy, those around you all seem a lot more dependable. I feel safest putting this matter in their hands."

I don't know whether I should celebrate that Ferdinand is willing to trust other people or weep at the reality that I'm proving entirely useless here.

As I fell into thought, Ferdinand made his way to a nearby door and unlocked it with the turn of a key. An attendant then stepped forward without missing a beat and opened the door fully to reveal the room beyond.

"Rozemyne, this is my book room."

"On my way!"

All thoughts of my promise to help went out the window as I rushed over to the open door. Through it, I could see rows and rows of shelves, all neatly lined with books. There was far more reading material here than in Karstedt's estate; in fact, there was more than I would expect any one person to own.

“My, what a magnificent book room. You never let me down, Ferdinand. Praise be to the gods!” I exclaimed, showering the area with the light of a blessing. Before I could charge inside, however, Ferdinand grabbed me by the collar.

“Fool. You will enter only after the Gilberta Company has arrived and we have discussed the hairpin.”

“Then why are you showing me it now?! Are you *trying* to hurt me?!”

“I had a feeling that, in your excitement, you would unleash a blessing the very moment you laid eyes on my book room. My prediction was entirely correct.”

I put my head in my hands, regretting my spur-of-the-moment prayer, while Wilfried started nodding to himself. “I see,” he said. “Rozemyne is very likely to give a blessing when seeing a new book room.”

“Yes. You would do well to note that while dissolving her mana clumps reduced the rate at which she collapses, it simultaneously increased the rate at which she expends blessings.”

Stop! Nobody write that down!

“Lord Ferdinand, carriages have just arrived,” an attendant said. “It seems that Lady Detlinde is here.”

Ferdinand made for the entrance hall, and we followed to welcome Detlinde. My first observation was that her retainers were all women—presumably because she was here to pick a hairpin. Raimund was also with them, as per Ferdinand’s request. He was trailing behind, looking very small and uncomfortable.

After exchanging greetings at the entrance hall, we moved to the parlor to have tea. Thanks to some very careful probing by Justus, we had managed to prepare and were now serving Detlinde’s preferred sweets. We had not only honey pound cake, but also ice cream, which was perfect for the summer months and superbly chilled from the ice room magic tool we had used to store it.

“This cold sweet is quite delicious,” Detlinde said, sounding very content.

“Ice cream is a summer sweet, so it doesn’t get served at the Royal Academy,” I explained with a smile. “I am glad you like it, Lady Detlinde.”

“Indeed,” she replied, smiling in turn. “I quite like it. Could we perhaps bring the chef responsible to Ahrensbach with us?”

“Unfortunately, Ahrensbach ingredients are nothing like those found in Ehrenfest,” Ferdinand said. “There is no point in me bringing my chefs, as they are unlikely to be able to make the same recipes in another duchy. Plus, would it not be strange for me to bring my chefs to Ahrensbach when Aurelia brought none to Ehrenfest?”

Detlinde blinked her green eyes several times, then turned and stared up at her attendant. “Martina, is it true that Aurelia brought no chefs to Ehrenfest?”

“It is,” Martina replied, speaking as Aurelia’s little sister. “I never expected that she wouldn’t be allowed one.”

I clapped my hands together in realization; Aurelia’s magic tool of Ahrensbach ingredients made a lot more sense if she had been expected to have chefs accompanying her.

“Aah. So that’s why her magic tool only contained ingredients,” I said. “Aurelia was very surprised when she found out. She even felt quite down, thinking it was an act of malice, but I am relieved to know that was not the case.”

Martina linked her fingers in front of her chest and shook her head so dramatically that it was almost comical. “We would never do anything so mean,” she said. “Does this mean my sister hasn’t been able to eat any of our duchy’s food since arriving in Ehrenfest? I would very much like to share some with her, if possible...”

“Don’t worry—we have chefs capable of making Ahrensbach food, so we prepared the fish Aurelia brought and cooked it as intended. She was quite pleased with the results.” I was trying to convey that we were treating Aurelia well, but Martina’s expression instead clouded over.

“Um, Lady Rozemyne... I would like to use this opportunity to visit my sister, but her husband is not permitting us to meet.”

“Her partner serves Lord Wilfried, does he not?” Detlinde asked, resting a hand against her cheek. “Lady Rozemyne, could your brother and Lord Ferdinand perhaps speak to him? I just feel so terrible for Martina.”

I glanced at Wilfried, who slowly shook his head and replied, “I’m afraid I can’t do that.”

“Oh my... Whyever not? Martina is so concerned for her sister.”

“I’m told that Aurelia personally refused the idea. Not to mention, she lives in the knight commander’s estate, and her husband is my retainer; we can’t permit the meeting due to the risk of our duchy’s secrets being leaked,” Wilfried explained, flatly refusing to budge.

Detlinde slumped over, looking dejected, then turned to Ferdinand with tearful eyes. “Lord Ferdinand, please hear my desire.”

“Unfortunately, this is a decision for Wilfried to make as Lamprecht’s lord. I dearly aspire to grant any wish you may have, but this is outside of my control,” Ferdinand replied, his kind smile betraying traces of regret as though he actually felt bad.

“It seems my fiancé is like Ewigeliebe in the spring...” Detlinde said with a sigh. “I am truly sorry for Martina.”

Excuse me? You’re going to call Ferdinand useless because he refuses to force a meeting that Aurelia herself doesn’t want? There are some things archducal family members from other duchies just shouldn’t encroach upon!

Ferdinand and I met this response with equally broad smiles, and once again, I saw Justus holding Eckhart back. He was right to do so, but a small part of me wanted to give Eckhart the go-ahead.

Martina hurriedly put a hand on Detlinde’s shoulder, having noticed the mounting tension in the room. This unease was only momentary, however; Zahm soon appeared and said, “Lord Ferdinand, the Gilberta Company is here. Shall we let them in?” His announcement cleared the air at once. Truly, our saviors had arrived.

Otto, Corinna, and a woman I didn’t recognize entered the room before long. The unfamiliar figure was presumably one of the increasingly talented hairpin

craftswomen. Her hair was bundled, but judging by how young she looked, I presumed she was only a few years past her coming-of-age ceremony.

“May this serendipitous meeting, ordained by the vibrant summer rays of Leidenschaft the God of Fire, be blessed by the gods.”

After exchanging the usual greetings, we jumped straight into talks about the hairpin. Brunhilde seamlessly weaved in and out of the conversation, such that the commoner craftswoman only had to speak when absolutely necessary.

“First, we shall ask for your preferences, Lady Detlinde,” Brunhilde said. “Have you ordered clothes for your graduation ceremony? If so, what color might they be? Do you have any preferred flowers?” She was utilizing all of the talents she had developed while ordering so many hairpins and even overseeing the ones for Eglantine and Adolphine.

Charlotte noted that she wanted to order a hairpin as well, while Melchior watched the discussion about this new thing with sparkling eyes.

After confirming that the atmosphere in the parlor was likely to stay calm, Ferdinand smoothly rose to his feet and said, “Lady Detlinde, please take your time and choose whatever your heart desires. Women tend to take quite some time when shopping, so I will wait in the book room next door. Come, Raimund.”

“Yes, Lord Ferdinand,” Raimund replied. He was the only Ahrensbach visitor to move to the book room.

“I shall go as well, then,” I said. “Judithe, Angelica—wait here, if you would.” I made my way into the book room at once, with Cornelius, Damuel, Leonore, and my scholars in tow, then sighed with bliss. “Hartmut, Philine, Roderick! Start preparing a registry of all the books here!”

“One already exists,” Ferdinand replied. “If you are looking for material you have not read before, I would recommend starting with this shelf. This one contains books transcribed from the royal library, and that one holds books I have already lent you.”

“You’re as on top of things as ever, Ferdinand!” I was rejoicing to no end, while Ferdinand shot me a clear grimace.

“Rozemyne, your reading time may begin only once my conversation with Raimund about magic tools is over.”

“You would prolong my suffering...?”

“This is something that you yourself requested, so yes.”

Raimund reached into his bag and pulled out two medium-sized pieces of cloth, looking tense all the while. They were experimental versions of the feystone-assisted low-energy magic circles, and Ferdinand wasted no time in looking them over.

“The ingredients I was able to prepare weren’t of a particularly high quality, so...”

“Indeed,” Ferdinand said. “We could have further reduced the mana cost had we used the ingredients I have on hand. Still, the magic circles themselves are well made.”

This praise made Raimund smile, then his expression turned more quizzical. “Lord Ferdinand, can I ask what you intend to do with these magic circles? They’re quite limited in the size of what they can send, so I’m not sure what use they can serve.”

“Rozemyne wanted them for transporting books,” Ferdinand replied.

Raimund eyed the nearby books, no doubt concerned about their thickness. Of course, Ehrenfest books were thin and used Japanese binding methods, so I didn’t expect them to be a problem.

“Let us try a volume,” I said, spreading out both teleportation circles and setting a piece of paper atop one. I touched and channeled mana into that circle, and a moment later, the paper appeared on the other. The process had barely taken any mana.

“Ferdinand, that required so little mana that it might as well not have taken any,” I observed. “Can we try a book next?”

He paused for a moment and then said, “Have Philine or Damuel send it. We need to know whether a laynoble can use these circles as well, but we cannot determine this with you as our test subject.”

I did as instructed and asked my two laynoble retainers to try sending books and paper, testing the limit of what they could send and the amount of mana it required. Interestingly enough, they were able to send one of Ferdinand's thick books but not another.



“The mana cost varies depending on the size and weight of what’s being sent,” Philine and Damuel summarized after extensively experimenting for me. “An average laynoble should be able to use it ten or so times before being on the verge of running out of mana. Extended periods of work won’t be feasible without rejuvenation potions.”

In short, this system was well suited for delivering books as per my book deposit system, and it wouldn’t take much mana either. I was sure it could serve as work for people like Konrad and Dirk in the future.

“Raimund, I wish to purchase this magic circle,” I said. “May I?”

His face blossomed with overjoyed surprise, but then his eyes settled on Ferdinand and worry tinged his expression. “I-It would be an honor for you to buy a magic tool of my creation, but... is that acceptable? I, erm, needed guidance from Lord Ferdinand to finish it, so it should naturally be his to—”

“Do not concern yourself with that,” Ferdinand said, interrupting him. “You are the one who actually realized the idea; and as it stands, I have no need for fame or fortune. You may treat it as your own.”

It wasn’t at all rare for teachers to take credit for their disciples’ creations. I wondered aloud whether Hirschur was doing this herself, but she didn’t seem to have a particular desire for fame either; all she desired to do was seek new knowledge and make new things.

“Hirschur has even been known to ask her disciples for funding and ingredients when she deems it necessary for her research,” Ferdinand noted, “all so that they become strong-willed enough to refuse others. That said, Raimund, there is no need for you to worry. She would doubtless come to leech off of me rather than someone as poor as yourself.”

I chuckled; it was easy to imagine Hirschur doing that.

“Your next task is to modify sound-recording magic tools to be smaller,” Ferdinand said. “Here is a blueprint.”

“I would like them to be finished before Ferdinand leaves for Ahrensbach. Is that feasible?” I asked, then started explaining all that I wanted the magic tool to be capable of. It would ideally be openable by a switch and fully capable of

delivering my chastising remarks.

Raimund—and even Hartmut—peered at the blueprint with interest. “If you intend to record long messages, then I will need feystones and magic tools to match,” Raimund said. “If you only want a single sentence, though, that shouldn’t be too hard.”

“Remember that it must be capable of replaying the recording an infinite number of times,” Ferdinand warned. “One that only lasts so many uses is not good enough.”

Raimund—and again, Hartmut—frowned at this news. “For something to replay the same recording an infinite number of times, a magic circle would need to be added just for preservation. In turn, this limits how small we can make the tool.”

“You may learn from the protective circles on Schwartz and Weiss,” Ferdinand said offhandedly while looking at the blueprint.

Raimund and Hartmut stared at him. “So, to summarize: you want us to isolate the preservation magic circle used for the two shumils and attach one to a phrase, all while using only a single feystone to keep the size and mana cost to a minimum?” they both asked. I could tell from the looks on their faces that they understood exactly what he wanted, though I couldn’t even begin to imagine how they had worked that out from what was essentially a hint.

Okay, I’m not sure I’ll manage to come first-in-class for the scholar course after all...

I was starting to get nervous... but then Ferdinand set down a book in front of me and said, “That will do. You may read now.” All of my concerns vanished in an instant, and after asking Roderick to open the heavy cover for me, I started to read. Once immersed in the text, the sounds around me began to fade into the distance.

“Rozemyne. It is time.”

I was brought back to reality by Ferdinand’s deep voice, and the book in front of me was promptly shut. The hairpin order had long since concluded, and both

Detlinde and the Gilberta Company had already left.

“If you do not return soon, you will miss dinner and receive a scolding from Rihyarda,” Ferdinand warned.

My attendants made all the necessary preparations for my return to the castle, then we hurried into our carriages. Once we were inside, Ferdinand looked at us all and said, “Wilfried, Charlotte, Rozemyne—you and your retainers hosted Lady Detlinde today with the utmost skill. You have shown much growth, and seeing this has brought me some relief. Continue to strive for greater heights.”

Wilfried and Charlotte smiled in response, and they waved at Ferdinand as our carriages began moving toward the castle.

To our surprise, our hairpin meeting ended up being our only personal encounter with Detlinde. She had intended to stay in Ehrenfest for longer, but an urgent message had arrived from Ahrensbach, forcing her and Georgine to hurry back.

“I pray that you live well with the divine protection of the gods until Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time weaves the threads of our fates together once again.”

“Indeed. I pray that her weaving is smooth and swift.”

Those of us from Ehrenfest had given the traditional and innocuous farewell meaning “We hope that we one day meet again.” Georgine’s crimson lips had curled into a grin at this, and she had chosen a response that meant “We shall meet again soon enough.”

Epilogue

Several joined carriages drove away from Ehrenfest's lower city and along a road through trees and fields, heading toward Ahrensbach in the south. Magic tools were being used to reduce the shaking, but there was no stopping it once they had moved beyond the smooth stone paving of the city.

The carriages were adorned with Ahrensbach's crest; they belonged to Georgine, Detlinde, and their group, who were returning home after receiving urgent news of the archduke's collapse.

After confirming that the scenery was bland and repetitive, Detlinde returned her attention to the inside of her carriage. Sitting alongside her were Martina, her apprentice attendant; Georgine, her mother; and Seltier, her mother's attendant.

"How unfortunate," Detlinde said. "To think we have to return so soon..."

Upon her return to Ahrensbach, Detlinde would need to endure having lots of work forced on her and countless retainers who were irritatingly insistent on her studying. She was under watch at all times, meaning she couldn't relax. Only when she was at the Royal Academy did things go her way, since there was nobody above her there.

"Is that not a very cold remark, milady?" Seltier asked. "Aub Ahrensbach—your own father—has collapsed with illness."

Detlinde fell silent at this criticism; the news had certainly come as a surprise to her, but she barely had any memories of seeing her father, let alone being doted on by him. On the few occasions they had met, he had done nothing but chastise her with a look of resentment before ordering her to leave. If she was being cold, then it clearly ran in the family.

I was having ever so much fun in Ehrenfest. Could he not have collapsed at some other time? Detlinde groused. Everyone in Ehrenfest did as she said, and it felt good to command so much respect. *Mother was enjoying herself as well;*

perhaps she feels the same as I do.

Georgine was staring out the window, making no attempt to stop Seltier's lecture.

"Father collapsed due to the Sovereign Knight's Order, no?" Detlinde asked. "They have been coming nonstop since spring. I would rather they put an end to antagonizing Ahrensbach with false charges." Knights from the Sovereignty had appeared again and again to investigate Ahrensbach's potential involvement in the ternisbefallen terrorist attack, since Ahrensbach managed old Werkestock.

"You mustn't say such things, Lady Detlinde. The Sovereign Knight's Order is simply doing its job."

"My, oh, my. But was dealing with them not exceptionally inconvenient while the ships from Lanzenave were here for summer trade? Mother and Father were so busy that I was sent to deal with the knights despite being underage."

Detlinde made it clear that she believed the Sovereign Knight's Order were to blame for her father's sudden collapse. He had supported the king during the civil war and continued to serve faithfully even after losing his second wife and successors, yet he was now being accused of aiding a rebel attack. His pride as an archduke had consequently been wounded, which must have placed a heavy burden on his heart.

"How dare the king doubt Ahrensbach," Detlinde continued. "It's so irritating that I find myself disgusted. Don't you agree, Mother?"

Georgine slightly narrowed her dark-green eyes in response, her crimson lips painting an arch. "Given that feybeasts from old Werkestock were involved in the attack, the king has no choice but to investigate us. It certainly has put a strain on us, but now we are closer with the Sovereignty, and the knight commander has said that their suspicions were cleared, no? It was well worth providing our assistance. Personally, I consider all this to signify the filling of Forsente's basket."

To Georgine, their incident with the Sovereign Knight's Order was beneficial enough to be considered a blessing from the Goddess of Harvest. Detlinde vehemently disagreed; she had only suffered from it.

After all, I'm going to be the next Aub Ahrensbach.

Ahrensbach had two archduke candidates, Detlinde and Letizia, but the latter was so young that she hadn't even entered the Royal Academy. One had to be of age to become an aub, so the current archduke's illness would most likely result in Detlinde taking the archducal seat.

And under my circumstances, an archknight from the Sovereignty certainly wouldn't make a suitable partner for me.

Archduchesses absolutely needed to marry someone who had graduated from the Royal Academy as an archduke candidate, as such men were expected to take on the duties of an aub while the archduchess was pregnant. In other words, no matter how wonderful the men who fell for her were, she could not respond to their feelings. She recalled the young Sovereign knight who had so passionately approached her, and sighed.

It had been springtime, after the Royal Academy term had come to an end, but before the Archduke Conference. Ahrensbach had received a visit from the Sovereign Knight's Order, whereupon Detlinde had formed a romantic relationship with one of the knights. They had met practically every day, and she had enjoyed the feeling as they slowly grew closer and closer. But that love had met its end in the blink of an eye. Detlinde's engagement had abruptly been decided during the Archduke Conference, meaning she had needed to break up with the knight.

And then there's the person they engaged me to.

The man selected to be Detlinde's partner was much older than she and from a duchy ranked below Ahrensbach. He also continued to visit the temple despite having returned to noble society, and although he was a member of the Ehrenfest archducal family, he had no mother.

His lineage and circumstances are rife with problems, but... oh well.

He was rather attractive, his smile was as kind as his demeanor was soft, and everyone described him as being exceedingly competent. Such an intelligent man surely understood the situation he was in. He would no doubt admire Detlinde for saving him from the temple, offer her his heartfelt affection, and strive to support her as she rose to become the next archduchess. After her

experiences with her father, who had always barked orders with the sourest expression, Detlinde was glad to have a man who would act according to her will.

Not to mention, the Ehrenfest nobles had said that Ferdinand was pulling Rozemyne's strings from the shadows and using her to spread various trends—trends that would rightly belong to Ahrensbach once he married into the duchy. Detlinde felt a very satisfied smile creep onto her lips as she thought about all the praise Ehrenfest was receiving at the Royal Academy being redirected to her.

Plus, I shall soon have a hairpin of my very own.

This made her even more pleased—the Ehrenfest hairpin she had wanted would soon be hers. She wished to stand in front of Adolphine, who had shamed her in the Royal Academy last year, and show her the ultimate hairpin she had designed herself. It was a shame that the young woman had since graduated.

Still, perhaps she will do as Lady Eglantine did and come to the Interduchy Tournament as Prince Sigiswald's betrothed.

That possibility was displeasing in its own way, though. Adolphine was engaged to the first prince, while Detlinde was engaged to an archducal family member from Ehrenfest, neither a greater duchy nor a top-ranking one. She felt as though she had somehow lost as a woman.

"Putting all that aside, what manner of hairpin has been ordered?" Georgine asked, looking not at Detlinde but at her apprentice Martina. "We were operating separately that day."

"Right," Martina said, eyeing her lady carefully. "Lord Ferdinand's estate is close to the castle, and only the minimum number of attendants are kept there. It was bare of decoration, and it seems that he does not have any regular female visitors, if any at all. It felt as though Lady Rozemyne and the others had received invitations only to host Lady Detlinde."

She went on to describe how Ferdinand had joined them for tea only briefly, electing to bring Raimund, Rozemyne, and the scholars to the book room when the hairpin craftspeople arrived.

“Now, now, Martina. Did Mother not ask specifically about my hairpin?” Detlinde said, pointing out that her apprentice’s answer hadn’t at all matched the question. She then spoke at length about the hairpin she had ordered, explaining that she had deliberately ensured it would be much fancier and more beautiful than the one Adolphine had worn.

Georgine paused for a moment, then said, “You ordered it according to your own specifications, Detlinde?”

“Indeed, I did. I know far more about what suits me than Lord Ferdinand does,” Detlinde replied, puffing out her chest. In her eyes, it was only natural that she couldn’t trust her fiancé’s tastes and sensibilities so soon after their engagement.

“Lady Detlinde did order it according to her own specifications,” Martina added, her focus devoted entirely to Georgine, “but as Lady Rozemyne’s retainers and Lady Charlotte were there to give advice, there is nothing to worry about.”

“Pray tell, what reason might she have to worry in the first place?” Detlinde asked.

Georgine merely waved a hand in response, seeming to have lost all interest in the matter. “That is enough,” she said, returning her attention to the bland scenery outside the window.

The carriage rumbled along until it arrived outside an inn located in the plaza of a nearby city, where Georgine and Detlinde intended to stay the night. Half a day had passed since their hurried departure from Ehrenfest.

Detlinde was aware that the inn they were patronizing accommodated nobles as well as regular citizens, but the food served there was nothing like the fashionable meals they usually ate at the castle. It was a disappointing truth, and one that brought with it a stark realization—no matter how much Ehrenfest dressed itself up at the Royal Academy, it was still a backwater duchy through and through. She couldn’t help but give a derisive sniff.

“Given the urgency of the situation, we will travel by highbeast from tomorrow onward,” Georgine said. “The carriages with our belongings may

travel more leisurely, and we shall teleport the belongings we will need on the road."

"That sounds reasonable enough," Seltier replied. "I expect there to be word from the border gate if something happens."

They hadn't mounted their highbeasts from the very beginning of their return journey because of the barrier that surrounded cities with an archduke's castle; traveling by carriage was the only option for nobles from a foreign duchy such as Detlinde and the others. Furthermore, as they had worn formal clothing when saying their farewells, departing by highbeast would have required them to change into riding attire.

"Do we not have too few guard knights for that?"

"It would greatly inconvenience the giebe we are staying with if we bring too many guests to his mansion. This is all very sudden, you know."

Georgine and the others were discussing their plans for tomorrow, but Detlinde ignored them, focusing instead on her cup of tea. She knew that her mother would make all the decisions and that there was no point in attempting to contribute; not once had anything Detlinde suggested ever been respected or attempted. It seemed foolish to pay any mind to the conversation when she knew that her input would immediately be disregarded.

"Lady Detlinde, if you would..."

Seltier refreshed Detlinde's tea. This normally would have been a task for Martina, but she was busy preparing bathwater; their being on a trip meant they had fewer attendants than usual.

Can't they stop talking already?

Detlinde was exhausted from the incessant rattling of the carriage. She wanted nothing more than to retire to her room and rest.

The next morning, Detlinde awoke feeling no less weary than before she had gone to sleep. This didn't surprise her; as an archducal family member raised in a regal environment, it was only natural that she wouldn't take well to the hard beds of this backwater duchy's inns.

After breakfast, Detlinde recalled their plans for the day while sipping the tea Seltier had prepared for her. She lamented that they could have reached the border gate within the day if they had only taken their highbeasts, which would have allowed them to stay at a noble mansion in Ahrensbach. Still, she decided that her complaints could wait until after Ehrenfest was behind them, and it was with this mindset that she put on her riding clothes and prepared to leave without so much as a single negative word to her attendant.

The two parties departed from the inn separately, flying their highbeasts for about a bell before stopping to rest. They were traveling much faster than usual, so everyone but the knights already well accustomed to highbeast travel were made to drink rejuvenation potions often.

Detlinde appreciated the brief respite; she had thought that she could endure until they reached the border gate, but she was feeling sicker by the moment. Her breathing was quite labored, perhaps due to their hastened travel, and it felt as hot as the height of summer.

“Lady Detlinde, you seem quite poorly, I must say!” Martina exclaimed, having come to see why Detlinde wasn’t drinking her rejuvenation potions. “Perhaps we should rest.”

All eyes immediately fell on Detlinde, but she couldn’t accede to the idea; her suffering would only be prolonged if she spent another night in a cheap, backwater inn.

“I am rather delicate, so I imagine the hard beds of the country inn did me no good,” she said, fixing Martina with a glare. “A noble estate is just what I need, so let us cross the border gate as soon as we can.”

“How can you make such a suggestion when you look so sickly?!” Seltier cried, stopping Detlinde in her tracks. “You wish for noble accommodations, do you? The mansion of a giebe from my family is nearby. Let us go there.”

As it turned out, Seltier was from Ehrenfest. She had served Georgine before the latter was married into Ahrensbach, which was probably why Georgine valued her so much. It was with those thoughts in mind that Detlinde agreed to visit the noble mansion.

“That is, if you are fine with this, Mother.”

“My, my. Is there a reason I would not be? Your health is far more important than any schedule. Seltier, send an ordonnanz to Grausam at once.”

“As you wish, Lady Georgine.”

Detlinde was moved; Georgine never usually showed any concern for her health, and it was unprecedented for her to change her plans so suddenly. Detlinde could count on one hand the number of times Georgine had shown any consideration for her well-being and not forced her to continue working through illness. As she considered whether it was in her best interests to fall sick more often from now on, a reply arrived.

“This is Grausam,” came an apologetic male voice from the ivory bird. “As much as I desire to accommodate any wish you may have, Lady Georgine, I happen to have visitors today. I can prepare rooms for you and Lady Detlinde, but not all of your entourage. My sincerest apologies, but could you limit your retainers to one attendant and one guard knight each? I will prepare any other staff you might need for the duration of your stay and recommend an inn for the others in your party.”

Georgine agreed to this proposal without so much as batting an eye. “I suppose we both have our own circumstances,” she said. “Detlinde and I shall oblige you, but I suggest that we send the others to rest in Ahrensbach, as planned. We could not demand so much from a giebe of another duchy. It would also be rude to the giebe in Ahrensbach who is so graciously planning to house us tonight.”

“But only one attendant and one guard knight is much too dangerous,” came protests from those gathered. It was unthinkable for members of an archducal family to surrender so much protection in another duchy, but Georgine fixed all those who spoke up with a firm glare.

“We are staying with Seltier’s family, with whom I am already acquainted. We can trust their attendants and guard knights, and I will not hear anything to the contrary. Detlinde’s health comes first.”

After looking over the group, Georgine ordered everyone to move at once. Detlinde’s body was starting to feel exceedingly heavy, to the point that she struggled to even move her highbeast. Georgine instructed her to ride with a

female guard knight, and off they went.

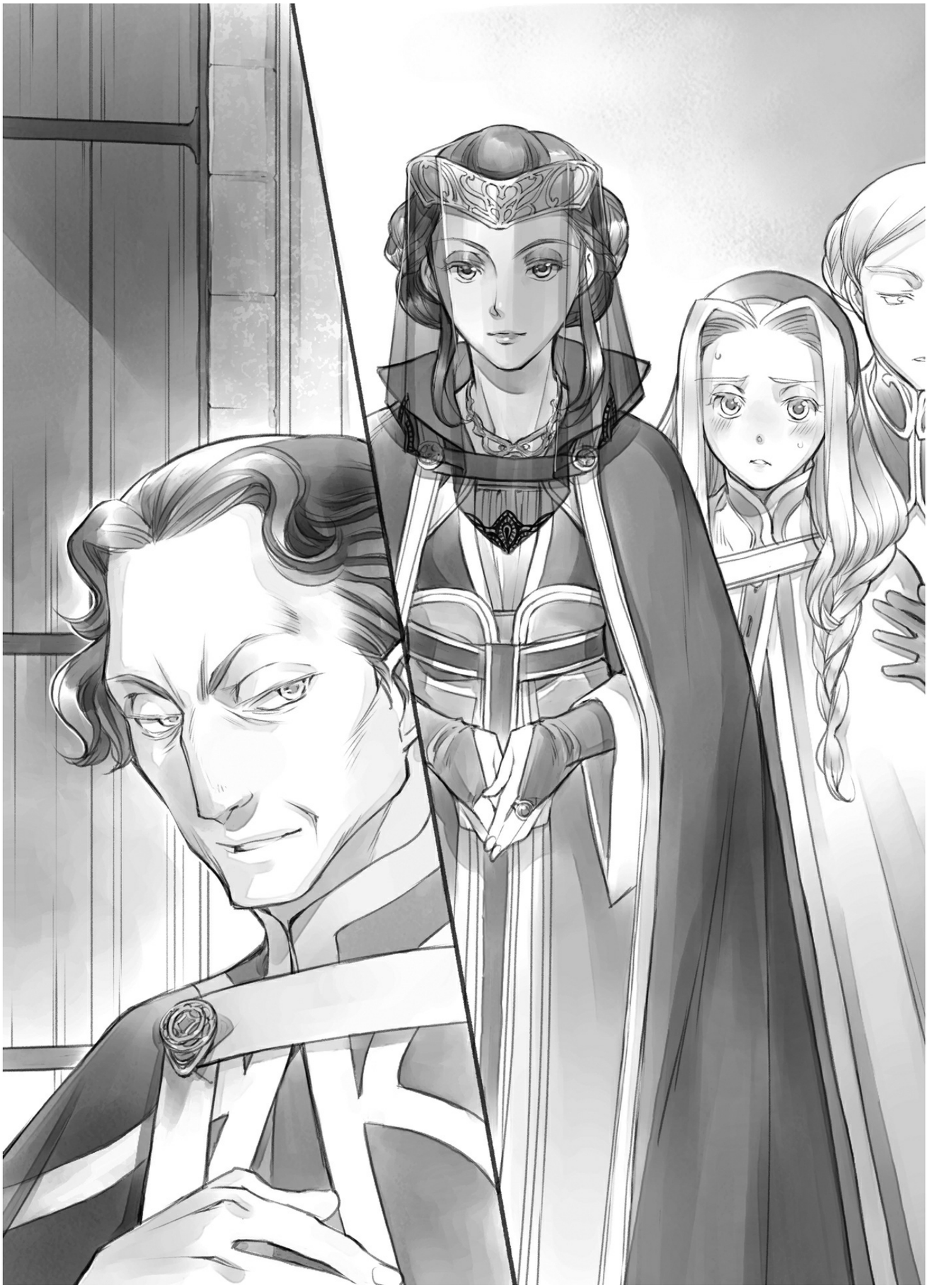
“Welcome, Lady Georgine. We have long awaited your visit. I shall take you to your rooms at once. Yours is this way. Everyone is ready.”

Oh...?

Detlinde looked at Grausam. Despite the fuzziness that was beginning to blanket her mind and cloud her thoughts, she realized that she had seen this man quite recently—he had been among those who had stuck closely to Georgine in Ehrenfest. Why was he here when he had just been in the Noble’s Quarter? Something about the whole situation felt strangely artificial... but perhaps her uneasiness was simply due to her poor health. She struggled to say for sure, disoriented as she was.

“We shall stay until Detlinde has recovered,” Georgine said. “I am glad to have this opportunity to strengthen old bonds with you all.”

“The other side worked unexpectedly hard at the Noble’s Quarter. It is a pleasant surprise that we may meet like this without any interference, Lady Georgine,” Grausam replied, welcoming her politely. Detlinde couldn’t help but think that he was looking at Georgine as one might look at one’s master.



Clearing Regrets from Ten Years Ago

“Heisshitze, what’s all this fuss about?”

“We were discussing our first ditter game with Lord Ferdinand in almost ten years,” I replied. This earned me a glare from the knight commander, but he was the one who had interrupted our impassioned exchange of praise for my opponent.

“Change of guard.”

It was the middle of the Archduke Conference, and a discussion between Dunkelfelger and Ahrensbach was being held in Dunkelfelger’s tea party room. We guard knights not yet on duty were all packed into a waiting room.

“Has the discussion about old Werkestock concluded?” I asked, sitting up straight.

The biggest concern of this year’s Archduke Conference was the rebel attack that had occurred during the Interduchy Tournament, with Werkestock being at the center of it all. Dunkelfelger was managing the old duchy alongside Ahrensbach, so the Sovereign Knight’s Order had opened an inquiry into what we knew about the ternisbefallens before investigating the provinces where the rebels had once lived.

The Order’s findings had already been reported at the conference, so discussions were now focused on adjusting their countermeasures based on the thoughts and reactions of other duchies. Even so, the atmosphere in the waiting room was calmer now than it had been when these talks first started. I had gotten a bit carried away myself, but I hadn’t forgotten my role here.

“Old Werkestock has been covered, but there are many other things to discuss,” the knight commander said with a hard stare. “After all, Prince Hildebrand’s engagement to Lady Letizia was announced so soon after his debut. Stay alert.”

After heeding this warning from the commander, we exited the meeting

room. Outside, we met up with the cart-pushing attendants who were similarly changing places with their coworkers.

Prince Hildebrand's formal debut had taken place during this year's Archduke Conference. He was closer to Dunkelfelger than his siblings, owing to the fact that his mother was our own Lady Magdalena, the king's third wife. Henceforth, our duchy would serve as a crucial pillar of support for Prince Hildebrand, and negotiate with Ahrensbach while keeping in line with the Sovereignty.

"This is going to take a while," a knight muttered, looking like he'd rather be doing anything else.

I gave a small nod of agreement; it was exhausting beyond words having to remain completely on guard and aware of one's surroundings for extended periods of time. About a decade had passed since the civil war, and each year, more knights blind to the world of surprise attacks and abrupt betrayals joined the Order. Many expressed their wishes to be like the other knights and stand around without a care in the world, but we had no need for statues—especially those who were so eager to embarrass themselves.

"Excuse me. Please allow us to refresh the tea."

I entered the tea party room with the attendants and gazed around, asking myself question after question. How many from Ahrensbach were here? How many people had mana capacities close to my own? Had any dangerous magic tools been brought in during our switch? We measured up the Ahrensbach guard knights, and they did the same with us; it was something of a standard procedure for both sides.

After scanning the room for enemies, I turned my attention to Ahrensbach's archducal couple. There was a significant age gap between Aub Ahrensbach and his first wife, Lady Georgine. This had blown me away when they first attended the Archduke Conference together, but I was very much used to it now.

"Now, as we know, the engagement between Prince Hildebrand and Lady Letizia was announced..." began Lady Sieglinde, the first wife of Dunkelfelger.

As the knight commander had expected, the topic of the engagement was broached as soon as everyone had settled down with their tea. This was a matter of great importance for both of our duchies, so I made sure to listen as

well while performing my duties as a guard knight.

Lady Letizia was the granddaughter of the archduke's previous first wife, and she had apparently moved from Drewanchel to become the next aub. Prince Hildebrand moving to Ahrensbach as her groom was recompense for the series of punishments following the civil war forcing the duchy to reduce its successors to archnobles.

I was already aware from the circumstances surrounding Lady Magdalena's marriage, among other things, that Prince Hildebrand was being raised as a vassal... but I didn't expect the engagement to be settled this soon.

The agreement was that Lady Letizia, who had both Ahrensbach and Drewanchel blood, would marry a prince with Dunkelfelger blood. This made it clear to all that Lady Letizia would become the next aub. The royal family must have benefited greatly from unifying Ahrensbach and Dunkelfelger, the two duchies that managed old Werkestock.

"This shall bring peace and stability to the next generation," Aub Ahrensbach said, stroking his beard with visible relief. "I feel as though a great burden has been lifted from my shoulders."

Ten years had passed since he lost his successors in the civil war. I could only imagine the panic he had endured as the archduke. All had seemed well on the outside—our archducal family was populous, and our duchy had suffered few casualties in the war—but he had wrestled with problems that nobody in Dunkelfelger could even imagine.

"However, this makes it that much harder to select a husband for my daughter Detlinde," Georgine said, her brow deeply furrowed. "He would need to be someone who can serve as a temporary aub in a dire situation."

She had a daughter approaching her sixth year in the Royal Academy who could not secure a groom, while Lady Letizia's position was not yet solidified. It seemed that Ahrensbach had so few archducal family members that they wanted her to marry as well, broadening the family and providing support for Lady Letizia.

To think that, during this uncertain time, Lady Georgine must worry about the future of both her daughter and her duchy...

I respected her attitude as the first wife of a greater duchy, but few would want to marry into the family of a female archduke candidate who stood absolutely no chance of becoming the next archduchess. It was possible that she might find someone within Ahrensbach, but she would be hard put to find an archducal family member from another duchy who could actually carry out the duties of an archduchess's husband. Most older students in the Royal Academy had already decided on a partner, and while women could simply enter other duchies as a second or third wife, married men were completely removed from the equation.

For a male archduke candidate to marry into the family of a woman not due to be the next archduchess, he would need to be either completely in love with her or mired by some circumstances that prevent him from having a normal marriage.

Although I appreciated their struggles, I wasn't too concerned about them. This matter was none of my business—that is, not until Aub Ahrensbach named a potential candidate.

"Personally, I would welcome Lord Ferdinand of Ehrenfest as her groom. Do you know of him?"

Lord Ferdinand?!

I stared at Aub Ahrensbach in a daze, feeling the blood rush to my head. Never had a more genius idea been put forward. I had shared classes with Lord Ferdinand in the Royal Academy, and there was no denying his talent—he had come first-in-class every single year he attended, he was an exceptional scholar and unrivaled at ditter, his harspiel playing was literal music to the ears, and he was by no means unsightly. That the archduke had considered him for this position was truly commendable.

That said, Lord Ferdinand was also a man of great misfortune. He had no mother and thus no support among the nobility, which the first wife of the previous Aub Ehrenfest had used to ostracize him. It was safe to say that his father had been his only blood relative, and after his death, those who envied Lord Ferdinand for his overflowing talents had forced him into the temple.

Our encounter at the most recent Interduchy Tournament had marked my

first time seeing him in public in a decade. And given that the engagements of archducal family members were announced at the Archduke Conference, it was clear to see that he was still without a wife.

Is this not a tremendous opportunity to save him?! We could free him from his mistreatment by getting him to Ahrensbach!

Just as I was clenching my fists in excitement, however, Aub Ahrensbach slumped his shoulders. “He has everything we need, and my hope was to save him from his unfortunate abuse in the temple and have him see the light of day once more. The problem is, they were not particularly... *open* to the suggestion.”

Aub Ahrensbach had sought to free Lord Ferdinand from the temple and grant him an opportunity to fully use his talents, but Aub Ehrenfest had declined on his behalf.

“But of course,” Lady Georgine replied. “I sincerely doubt he could speak his mind before the aub. We suggested that Aub Ehrenfest leave his seat so that Lord Ferdinand could offer his true thoughts on the matter, but even that was refused. Lord Ferdinand ended up leaving after saying only a few words himself.”

It seemed that Ehrenfest intended to keep Lord Ferdinand chained up—to prolong his suffering. The very idea infuriated me.

“I have been attempting to contact Lord Ferdinand ever since he came to my attention at the wedding between my niece and an Ehrenfest noble,” Aub Ahrensbach explained. “We learned that he was visiting for the Interduchy Tournament and strove to speak with him personally, but...” He trailed off and shot Aub Dunkelfelger a look, the meaning of which I understood at once. Before those from Ahrensbach had managed to discuss things with Lord Ferdinand, we of Dunkelfelger had whisked him away to play ditter.

This can’t be... I’m responsible for Lord Ferdinand missing out on such a bright future.

It had never been my intention, but it seemed that my actions had put Lord Ferdinand in a very unfortunate position. I wanted to shirk my guard duty and bemoan my foolishness, but then Lady Georgine’s voice reached my ears.

“Dunkelfelger still communes with him, no? Could you perhaps introduce him to us, if you have any personal connections? I feel so terribly bad for the man...”

“Indeed,” Aub Ahrensbach said. “I intend to ask the king to get involved in return for us embracing the Sovereignty’s investigation. If possible, I would appreciate Dunkelfelger’s input as well.”

I was moved that Lady Georgine would try so hard to save Lord Ferdinand from his troubles, and I was grateful beyond words for Aub Ahrensbach’s willingness to petition the king himself. This was a chance to bring some much-needed good fortune to Lord Ferdinand that I wasn’t going to miss. I could hardly contain my excitement.

“Lady Sieglinde, I must ask that you assist Ahrensbach!” I declared. “This is our second chance to save Lord Ferdinand. It will also make amends for Lady Magdalena dishonoring him all those years ago!”

Lady Sieglinde glared at me with her red eyes. “*You* are the one who dishonored him back then,” she barked. “You acted on your emotions without thinking ahead, first troubling Lord Ferdinand and then many others. Have you already forgotten how furious Lady Magdalena was?”

I didn’t know what to say. Back in our Royal Academy days, I had planned to rescue Lord Ferdinand from Ehrenfest by having him marry Lady Magdalena, an archduke candidate from our duchy. The two had been both friends and foes when it came to forming ditter strategies, but they had not at all been in love; Lord Ferdinand had simply wished to leave Ehrenfest.

Still, Lord Ferdinand’s living conditions had simply been too cruel to bear, and many of us Dunkelfelger knights had fervently wished to have such a strong ditter player in our duchy. In the end, we had asked the previous archduke to have him marry Lady Magdalena. We pushed, and pushed, and pushed... and eventually, the aub accepted, praising the idea as an opportunity to both rescue someone from misfortune and show the duchy’s respect for good ditter players.

And that’s when things got bad.

We had convinced the aub but not Lady Magdalena, who had erupted with anger when the previous aub spoke to her about the marriage. She had then exploited the situation to her advantage, initiating a secret plot she had come

up with to marry the man she loved: the fifth prince at the time, now the ruling king.

"Why should I throw my whole life away to save an archduke candidate from a backwater duchy?" she had asked. "There is someone else I wish to save. If, as you say, Lord Ferdinand is unhappy with his situation, then he need only use that intelligent head on his shoulders to eliminate the first wife of Ehrenfest. That he has not done so is his own choice. Do not wrap me up in the drama of a bottom-ranking duchy."

Lady Magdalena's bonding to royalty had marked the end of the civil war, and ultimately, Dunkelfelger had benefited far more from this than it would have from her marrying a single archduke candidate from Ehrenfest. Lord Ferdinand had not been formally engaged despite all the probing into the matter, so the ordeal was concluded with a simple letter to Aub Ehrenfest. It was the natural decision to make as far as the duchy was concerned, but personally, I had always regretted not being able to save Lord Ferdinand.

"This is why I wish to use this second chance to save Lord Ferdinand from Ehrenfest," I explained. "Lady Magdalena's marriage to King Trauerqual prevented Lord Ferdinand from leaving his duchy and is the reason he has spent the past ten years in its temple."

"It will ease your guilt, but that is all," Lady Sieglinde said. "Tell me, what do *we* gain from helping him?"

I racked my brain for an answer, then desperately grasped at the first straw I could find. "Lord Redmond. His daughter Clarissa intends to marry an Ehrenfest archnoble, so he wishes for Ehrenfest to establish more connections with the duchies surrounding it. If we can accomplish this by having Lord Ferdinand wed into a greater duchy—"

"Again, Dunkelfelger has no interest in aiding individuals. The needs of the duchy outweigh such personal concerns," Lady Sieglinde stressed, shaking her head at my appeal. No matter how much I wanted to save Lord Ferdinand, I needed to retreat for now and seek out a justification she would agree with.

I saluted, then promptly turned around.

“And that’s how it is,” I concluded, having brought all the other knights together in our duchy’s dining hall to discuss my situation with Lady Sieglinde. It was beyond me to do this alone, but with everyone putting their heads together, a good idea would surely come.

“Despite it all, the benefit of the duchy still matters less to me than using this second chance to save Lord Ferdinand,” I continued, then held up a cup of vize and declared, “This time for sure, we *will* free Lord Ferdinand! Our mission is to support Ahrensbach and ask that the king free him from Ehrenfest!”

“Aye ayeee!”

The knights raised their cups in a resounding cheer, then we all downed our drinks together. The burning sensation of the alcohol on our throats roused our spirits at once.

“Hm... Seeing as Prince Hildebrand will be marrying into Ahrensbach, we could argue that we’ll want Lady Detlinde to marry someone we have influence over,” one of my knight buddies said, also thinking about how to convince Lady Sieglinde. The recent ditter game against Lord Ferdinand had no doubt revitalized them.

“Right. Lord Ferdinand is not one to concern himself with power and status. He wouldn’t so much as consider opposing Lady Letizia or Prince Hildebrand after marrying into Ahrensbach.”

“He is educating Lady Rozemyne as her guardian, so he should be able to serve as Lady Letizia’s educator as well. Could we not get Drewanchel on our side if we focus on that?”

It would be more reassuring to have not just Dunkelfelger, but other duchies on this quest as well. I decided to follow up on his idea; we needed to spur Drewanchel to action too.

“Given that the borders can’t be redrawn, we share a fate with Ahrensbach and must strengthen the bond between our duchies,” my friend noted. “Lady Sieglinde surely understands this. Ahrensbach says it cannot devote the necessary resources to hunting feybeasts, but perhaps having Lord Ferdinand on hand would change this.”

“In other words... we could slay feybeasts together? We could even play ditter!”

“Calm down, Heisshitze. That would benefit you, not the duchy, remember?”

My argument needed to be grounded entirely in how this marriage would assist Ahrensbach and facilitate a closer relationship between our duchies. I nodded along with this explanation, all the while imagining myself slaying feybeasts alongside Lord Ferdinand. Excitement stirred within me; it would be like being transported back to our golden years at the Royal Academy.

“If we can have Ahrensbach in our debt, then we will secure the upper hand in negotiations for priority trade access to Lanzenave commodities.”

“And with Lord Ferdinand in Ahrensbach, we can get Ehrenfest’s trendy goods without having to rely on their underdeveloped trade routes. He was behind Lady Rozemyne’s various inventions, you know.”

“Really? That’s our Lord Ferdinand for you!”

It was the peak of stupidity to constrain a man of such genius to the temple, which was why we had all resolved to fight for his freedom. Our collaboration had given life to ideas that I would never have come up with on my own, and our next course of action was now clear. If we could get support from Drewanchel, then even Lady Sieglinde would agree to our proposition.

“Let’s go, everyone. This time, we *will* rescue Lord Ferdinand from the temple. He’ll suffer in Ehrenfest no longer!”

“Aye aye, sir!”

Together we swore a solemn oath... and soon after, our efforts were rewarded. At the end of the Archduke Conference, a united effort from several powerful duchies secured a royal order for Lord Ferdinand to be wed into Ahrensbach.

Ten Years of Change

“Eckhart, Justus, I have been abruptly summoned to a meeting with Ahrensbach,” Lord Ferdinand announced. “My apologies, but you must prepare to accompany me at once.” It was a strange development, considering that he had deliberately not attended the Archduke Conference.

“Understood.”

We soon joined him on the teleportation circle—I as his guard knight and Justus while dressed as an attendant—and together we moved to the Ehrenfest Dormitory in the Royal Academy. There we found Karstedt and a number of the archduke’s retainers waiting for us.

“I have arrived at the order of Aub Ehrenfest,” Ferdinand said. “Karstedt, what in the world is going on?”

“Ahrensbach wishes for you to marry into their duchy, and they won’t budge no matter how many times we turn them down. Apparently, they want an answer straight from the horse’s mouth.”

It seemed that Ahrensbach’s desire to assimilate Lord Ferdinand into their duchy had first blossomed when they saw him at Lamprecht’s wedding. They had indirectly criticized Ehrenfest to no end, saying that it was beyond cruel for us to have sent someone who had shown such tremendous promise at the Royal Academy to the temple right after his graduation.

“Utterly ridiculous,” Lord Ferdinand muttered, frustrated to no end. “Have they forgotten that they attacked Rozemyne? I would rather not wed into a duchy that would do something so despicable to another archducal family. Do they not see the tragic irony in their cries of supposed cruelty?”

He briskly headed to the tea party room, offered the usual greetings, refused the marriage, and then left as swiftly as he had arrived. It seemed that he had never intended to discuss the matter with Ahrensbach.

“To think you would turn down such a generous marriage proposal...”

“Would tightening our bonds with Ahrensbach not be massively advantageous? Lady Veronica is no longer here, so why not accept?”

Nobles of the former Veronica faction who knew about the proposal offered their highly absurd thoughts and opinions.

Marry into Ahrensbach? Now, of all times? Fools.

We would have welcomed the idea ten years ago, sure. Back then, it would have served as an escape from Veronica while simultaneously serving to slight her. She had always been so openly proud of the rich Ahrensbach blood coursing through her veins, so it would have wounded her greatly to see Lord Ferdinand move there instead of enduring the humiliation of the temple.

Now, however, the idea held much less appeal. Veronica was already detained in the Ivory Tower, having been stuck there since her plot to destroy Lord Ferdinand and Rozemyne completely backfired. Rozemyne had also taken over as the High Bishop, and the temple had since become a far more comfortable place.

The nobles who had persistently attempted to eliminate Lord Ferdinand were no longer in their high government posts, and my lord was treasured as a valuable pillar of support for the archduke. His relations with others were becoming more tranquil, and the duchy was more or less at ease.

And they wish for him to throw away this peace he’s finally obtained for a miserable duchy like Ahrensbach? He has nothing to gain from this marriage; who would dare push for it to begin with? My lord is satisfied with things as they are—and above all else, we have no reason to appease the former Veronica faction, no matter how much they want cooperation with Ahrensbach. You lot killed Heidemarie; now it’s your turn to die.

I spat internally, then returned to Ehrenfest with Lord Ferdinand.

I was sure that Lord Ferdinand refusing Ahrensbach himself would settle the matter, but that was not the case; he was soon summoned to the Royal Academy again to speak with the royal family. On paper, they intended to question him further about the rebel attack. Not even his guard knights were permitted to accompany him—much like when Rozemyne had been

interrogated after killing a ternisbefallen in the Royal Academy—so we retainers had to wait outside.

The actual contents of their discussion remained unknown to us, but it ended with the king decreeing that Lord Ferdinand would marry into Ahrensbach—all without so much as a word of permission from our archduke, Sylvester. It made absolutely no sense. I didn't know what deal they had struck with Ahrensbach, but several duchies had apparently come together and pressured the king about using this engagement to free Lord Ferdinand from the temple.

You fools! What have you done?!

Seeing how extremely displeased Lord Ferdinand was infuriated me to no end.

He personally refused Ahrensbach's archducal couple, and your response is to take the matter even higher?! Ridiculous! That stupid duchy can clean up its own mess. They're the ones who lost all their successors in the civil war; why should we be mixed up in their garbage?!

However, no matter how foolish those responsible were, the king's word was absolute; Lord Ferdinand could only obey. It seemed that he did not wish to bring misfortune to Ehrenfest.

"Lord Ferdinand, could we perhaps... kill the king, and sweep all of this under the rug?"

"Do not state something so dangerous, Eckhart. You are as shortsighted as always."

I personally thought it was a good idea, but Lord Ferdinand turned it down. It was the same as when I had suggested that we assassinate Veronica—or, as I remembered saying to him at the time, that we "send that waste of space after your father and avoid this banishment to the temple."

My only consideration was for my lord; as far as I was concerned, all those who opposed him were better off eliminated. The response I received was always that the ripple effect would catch too many other people in its wake, which was understandable enough—although I didn't much care about those consequences myself.

“Eckhart, Justus, there is something of great importance we must discuss,” Lord Ferdinand said, summoning us the night we returned. “Come to my mansion.”

Upon our arrival at his estate, we were welcomed inside by Lasfam, the laynoble tasked with managing it. His dark-green, almost-black hair was tied behind his head, and his green eyes were crinkled in a kind smile as he started pouring our tea. His presence meant that Justus rarely needed to do attendant work here.

“I am told that you were summoned to the Royal Academy,” Lasfam said, addressing Lord Ferdinand. “You do not come bearing good news, I gather.”

“I intend to explain as I drink.”

“Understood. Please sit as well, Eckhart, Justus,” he continued, regarding us each with a troubled smile.

Lasfam was a retainer whom Veronica had assigned to Lord Ferdinand specifically to trouble him. Laynobles had such paltry mana that they sometimes struggled even to use the magic tools necessary for attendant work. It was even harder during one’s younger years, particularly when one first started at the Royal Academy.

Laynobles already had to put up with their competency as retainers being called into question due to their smaller mana capacities, but on top of that, Lasfam’s very existence had served as fuel for those who would mock Lord Ferdinand. They would say, “His retainers are incompetent failures, but that only means he is an incompetent member of the archducal family for failing to train them properly.”

Lasfam was in a cruel position himself, which was why Lord Ferdinand had come to him with a request: “For your own protection, engage in the abuse that Lady Veronica seeks. Prove to the world that you are by no means associated with me.”

To Lord Ferdinand, having another troublesome person around would not change much; Lasfam was far from the only retainer assigned to him for the

purpose of abuse, and the others among them acted cruelly toward my lord to earn the cursed woman's favor. Lasfam declined his suggestion, however, saying that this would only confirm the notion that he was a failure of a retainer.

But those words only made Lord Ferdinand suspicious. He considered Lasfam a spy sent by the cursed woman, and said that he wouldn't trust him unless he gave his name.

And so, Lasfam had agreed to do just that, establishing that he was to be trusted. He had overseen the estate when Lord Ferdinand entered the temple, and it had served as his workplace ever since Lord Ferdinand came of age and moved out of the northern building. As opposed to someone like Justus, who had mastered scholar work, there was nothing Lasfam could do in the castle.

"Eckhart, Justus, Lasfam," Lord Ferdinand said upon finishing his tea. He took out three objects, each in what looked to be a white cocoon, and clinked them down on the table one by one. He had lined up our name-swearing stones just like this on the day he had resolved to enter the temple.

A shiver ran down my spine as his light-golden eyes focused on each of us in order. I was racked with fear that my future was about to become so very tragically bleak.

Is he trying to return them again?!

Despite my heated exclamation on the inside, I said nothing. My lip was quivering and my teeth chattering so violently that I couldn't even speak. I couldn't help feeling as though my life were being carelessly tossed aside... but then the veil of Lord Ferdinand's mana that surrounded me suddenly intensified. The mana that bound me, which I usually didn't notice at all, was growing stronger.

"Eckhart, Justus, I order you thus: come with me."

It was an absolute order from the lord we had given our names too. If we agreed, the mana binding us would continue to be easily ignorable, but if we refused... we would die on the spot.

"Despite my direct refusal of the engagement," Lord Ferdinand continued, "it

will go ahead because of the king's decree. This outcome is the result of the combined force of many duchies; the circumstances seem anything but normal. All of our lives will doubtless be in danger, but even so, I ask that you serve as my arms and ears."

I took a knee at once; his order was exactly what I had been waiting for. "Understood. I shall accompany you wherever you go. Always."

Justus similarly accepted the order.

Lasfam, however, had not been addressed. "Lord Ferdinand, I... Please bring me as well," he said, staring at his stone with a ghostly white expression.

"I cannot bring someone without the strength to protect themselves to Ahrensbach."

Upon hearing this, Lasfam took in a sharp breath and started to tremble. This was the opposite of what had happened when Lord Ferdinand had gone to the temple. Back then, he had told only Lasfam to remain as his attendant, since he could not live in the castle but could manage his estate. He had then said that Justus and I should seek out other paths in life, as we were archnobles.

"Lasfam, my order to you is as follows: manage this estate and my remaining luggage until my engagement period ends and I no longer have need to stay in an Ahrensbach guest room."

"I thought I would be the only one to have my name returned..." Lasfam whispered, his voice oozing relief. I understood how he felt painfully well. "I suppose I will need to organize your luggage into what needs to be brought and what will remain for now, then."

"I intend to leave the bulk of my brewing ingredients with Rozemyne," Lord Ferdinand said. "There are many ingredients that her retainers would struggle to prepare themselves. I will need to teach them to make rejuvenation potions, and have her dissolve the rest of her mana clumps in a jureve." He immediately started putting these plans to paper. It seemed that, for some reason, he was preparing Rozemyne's matters rather than his own.

"There is no need to be soft on Cornelius," I said. "What kind of guard knight cannot even prepare the ingredients their lord or lady needs?"

“He would struggle if we were to cast him aside now after providing him with ingredients for so long, no? Perhaps you could teach Cornelius and the others to gather the ingredients themselves.”

“It will be done, without fail.”

It was my duty to eliminate anything that concerned my lord, and to that end, I needed to train Cornelius and the others such that they could gather their ingredients on their own. I saw Ferdinand off as he went to his room to work, then began planning a schedule to train the guard knights myself.

“Eckhart, we need to get our things ready too,” Justus said. “Lord Ferdinand leaving Lasfam here means he expects Ahrensbach to be seriously dangerous. Might not want to bring anything you care too much about. I’ve yet to leave home, so I intend to keep my things with Mother, but you have your own estate. You’ll need to clean that place up too.”

He was right that I still owned the estate I had moved into when marrying Heidemarie, and if we were moving to Ahrensbach, I would need to start clearing it out. Returning it would require some paperwork too. But the estate was filled with memories of Heidemarie, and the thought of losing them made me deeply uncomfortable.

“What if you give the estate to Cornelius, who’s marrying in two years or so, and get him to leave a room for you to use as storage?”

The weight on my shoulders lifted on the spot. Leonore was still underage, so their marriage wouldn’t be for another couple of years at the very earliest. By then, I would no doubt have a home in Ahrensbach that I could move my things to. I appreciated that I could break this down into stages and clean things up slowly over time; I still wasn’t ready to face it all at once.

“One or two years to settle into your new lives... That sounds like a long time. I wonder when I’ll be able to rejoin Lord Ferdinand’s side...” Lasfam said, wearing a dry smile.

Justus crossed his arms with a sigh and stared out the window. “There’s no helping it. So many wills and objections are mixed together when it comes to this engagement that it’s impossible to tell who’s after what. The more cautious we are, the better.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Do they want Lord Ferdinand in Ahrensbach specifically, or do they simply want him out of Ehrenfest? The situation changes drastically depending on the answer, but we don’t even have the intelligence necessary to figure it out,” Justus said, clearly frustrated. He was wearing the same expression he had always worn back when Veronica was still around.

I vowed to steel my resolve; no doubt we were being swallowed up in a massive current too large for any one person to sway.

“Eckhart, your affairs are going to take longer to get in order than mine, right?” Justus asked, changing the subject entirely. “Better hurry up.”

“I’m giving my estate to Cornelius, so I’m not in a rush.”

“No, that’s not what I mean. I’m divorced, so I’m free in that regard, but you’re engaged. If you’ll be bringing Angelica as your wife, then you’ll need to get married this summer. And if you’re canceling the engagement, then you’ll need to speak with her about what happens next.”

Right. That’s a pain. I really should get that sorted...

I thought for a moment about bringing Angelica. Based on how she acted and trained at the temple, she wouldn’t do anything except what she was ordered, and she would instinctively follow orders without questioning them whatsoever. She would be useful to Lord Ferdinand if we brought her.

“Angelica could prove fairly useful, depending on how she’s used,” I noted.

“Oho? It’s rare for you to consider other people useful, Eckhart. We want as many people we can trust there as possible—especially those who are good fighters. How about you marry her and bring her with us?”

“I will have to ask her whether she has the resolve to go into enemy territory...” I replied, nodding. No matter how skilled Angelica was, she needed to have enough determination. I decided to probe her about going to Ahrensbach at the next opportunity.

Lord Ferdinand and Rozemyne were busy talking in the hidden room, and

Angelica had glued herself to the door. I called out to her; it was the perfect chance for me to pose my question.

“Angelica, as a loyal guard knight, I must accompany Lord Ferdinand to Ahrensbach without question. What will you do?”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“You need to decide whether you’ll marry me and come with me, or end our engagement and stay here. Your strength would be a valuable asset to us, but I intend to respect your choice. No matter how strong someone is, they won’t be of any help if they don’t want to be there.”

Angelica blinked at me several times in silence, as if chewing over my words. Her expression didn’t change at all, but Cornelius and Leonore both paled in contrast.

“Eckhart, Angelica needs to get married as soon as possible,” Leonore said. “Given her age, canceling your engagement would be socially disastrous for her.”

“Leonore is right. You shouldn’t even be talking about—”

“Shut up, Cornelius,” I said, waving him off. “No matter what Angelica decides here, Grandfather will make sure it doesn’t impact her negatively in the slightest. He was the one who pushed for this engagement in the first place. It’s not for us to worry about.”

“But...”

Rather than drop the matter there, Cornelius tried to press further. He really was a bothersome little brother, and it was obvious that he didn’t care about Angelica’s reputation. His real concern was that Grandfather might order him to take her as a second wife.

“This isn’t going to impact you at all,” I assured him. “Here, let me give you an excuse: you’re already engaged to Leonore, so you’re not in a good position to take an older woman like Angelica as your second wife.”

“Ngh...”

As expected. That shut him up.

I turned back to Angelica. “Made your decision?”

“Yes,” she replied. “I am Lady Rozemyne’s guard knight, so I will cancel our engagement and stay here in Ehrenfest.” Her flat-out rejection took me by surprise for some reason, but I could tell that it was final: there wasn’t even a trace of indecision in her deep-blue eyes. “I serve Lady Rozemyne, not Lord Ferdinand.”

“I see. That makes sense. You’re completely right. You’re Rozemyne’s guard knight.”

More important than marriage or reputation was the person you served and your loyalty to them. We may not have followed the same person, but we were exactly the same in what we treasured. I found Angelica’s purity of spirit to be highly appealing.

“Rozemyne has good retainers, I see.”

“I will do everything in my power to protect Lady Rozemyne while she fights for Lord Ferdinand,” Angelica said, looking toward the hidden room. Rozemyne was no doubt compassionately ripping into Lord Ferdinand as we spoke. I only ever followed orders, but my little sister always spoke up when there was something she didn’t agree with. She had even fought to reduce Lord Ferdinand’s workload out of concern for his health, taking on even the archduke himself, so I was confident that she would continue to help him even after he departed for Ahrensbach.

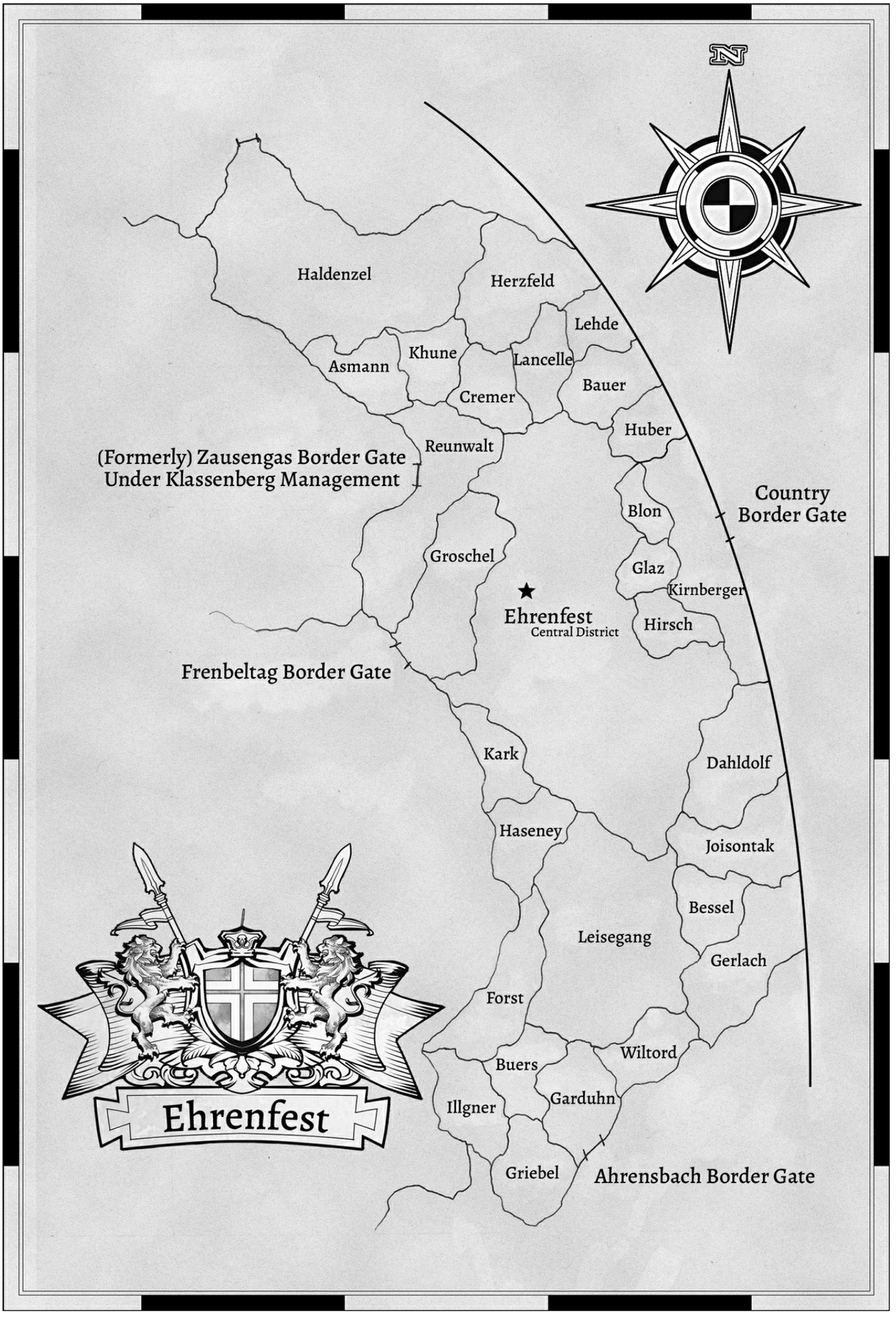
Oh, I see...

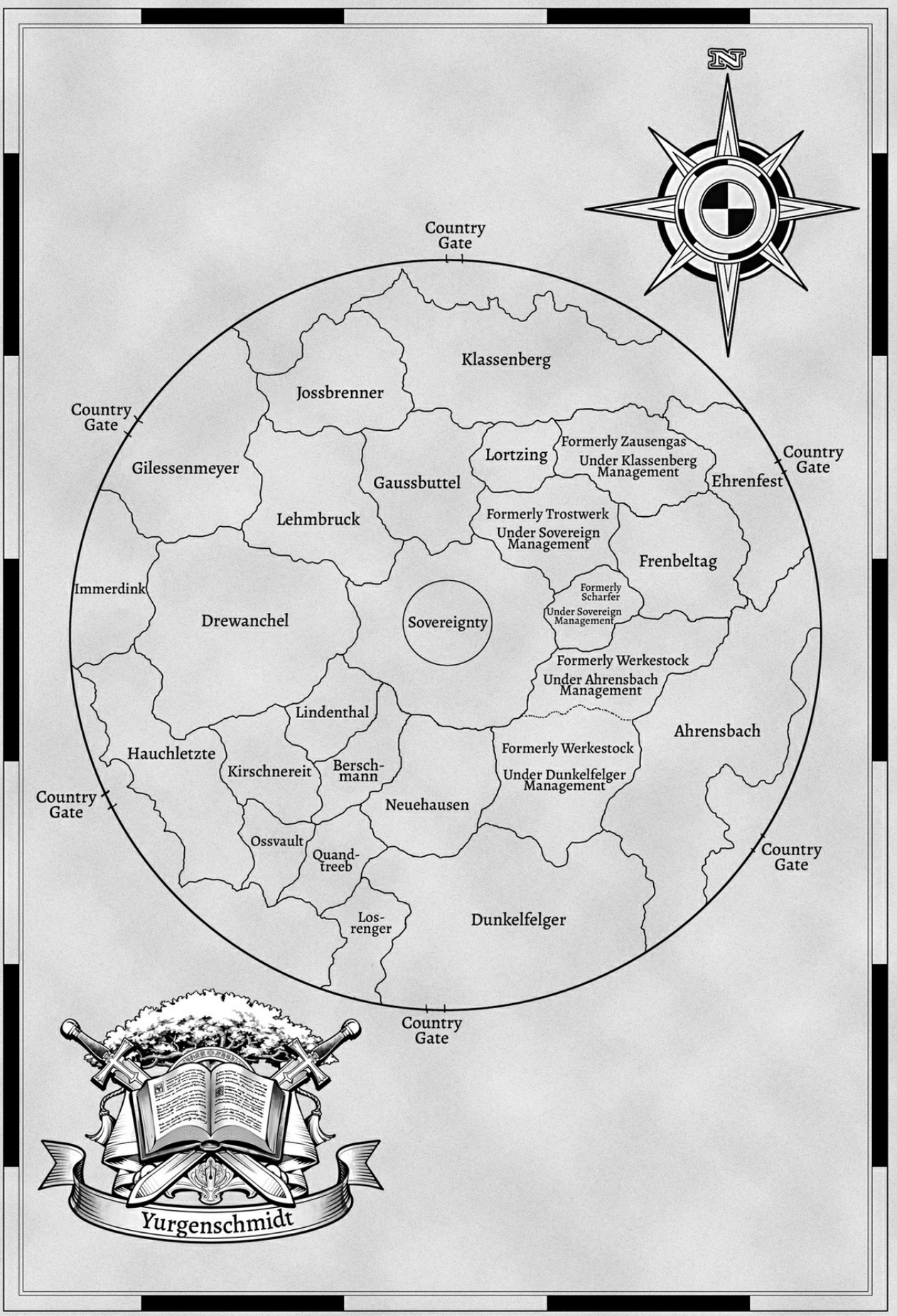
Angelica’s declaration had made me realize something: this wasn’t the same as when Lord Ferdinand had entered the temple after all. We weren’t the only ones worried about his engagement and frustrated with the situation; unlike before, there were many people here trying to support him. It wasn’t dangerous for him to show emotion, nor was it forbidden.

Ehrenfest has changed. It actually managed to change.

I truly believed that from the bottom of my heart. It was unfortunate that we couldn’t stay here, but at the same time, I was hopeful. We would change this new land as well, ensuring that Lord Ferdinand could live there in peace—and I

would eliminate all obstacles that tried to get in our way.


N
Haldenzel
Herzfeld
Lehde
Khune
Lancelle
Asmann
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
Drewanchel
Sovereignty
Formerly Scharfer
Under Sovereign Management
Formerly Werkestock
Under Ahrensbach Management
Lindenthal
Ahrensbach
Hauchletzte
Kirschnereit
Bersch-mann
Formerly Werkestock
Under Dunkelfelger Management
Country Gate
Neuehausen
Ossvault
Quand-treeb
Country Gate
Los-renger
Dunkelfelger
Country Gate
Yurgenschmidt

Afterword

Hello again, it's Miya Kazuki. Thank you very much for reading *Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 4 Volume 8*.

Rozemyne's second year at the Royal Academy has concluded, and we're back in Ehrenfest.

In this volume, Rozemyne's new younger brother Melchior finally took the stage. He was only two when Veronica was detained and Rozemyne was adopted, so he doesn't have any memories of being insulted by Veronica like Charlotte does, and he isn't being compared to Wilfried in a way that would push them apart, so he gets along well with all of his siblings. He grew up without anyone demanding that he aim to become the next archduke, and he had plenty of toys from Rozemyne, which helped him develop an interest in picture-book bibles and biblical stories. He's quite good at being sweet.

Rozemyne had fun looking for younger retainers, dismantling fish, and listening to tales from her grandfather's youth... but these good times came to an abrupt end when Ferdinand received a royal decree to marry. Why has Aub Ahrensbach sought this marriage with Ehrenfest when the two duchies are hardly on good terms? What are Georgine and the others in Ahrensbach thinking as they support him? And what does Ferdinand decide to do...?

In any case, this volume's prologue was written from Melchior's perspective. Just what did he hear about Rozemyne from Wilfried and Charlotte before formally meeting her? I hope it was enjoyable to see the relationship between the son of an archduke and his parents.

The epilogue is told from Detlinde's perspective. Like Ferdinand, she was forced into an engagement by the king's sudden order, but what does she think about the situation and the man she's to marry? She ended up having to return to Ahrensbach after an abrupt summons, and it seems her mother Georgine was planning something on the road back... This certainly isn't something that you'd see from Rozemyne's or her associates' perspectives.

The short stories are written from Heisshitze's and Eckhart's perspectives. Both strive to improve Ferdinand's situation and standing as much as they can, but they're each mired with immense bias—one from not having met his dear friend in over a decade, and the other from having served him tirelessly as a guard knight for ten years straight.

In Heisshitze's chapter, I aimed to show how people from other duchies view Ferdinand's situation. They really were desperate to help him in any way they could. It's just unfortunate how that ended up turning out for him...

Similarly, in Eckhart's chapter, I wrote about how those close to Ferdinand view this engagement. Ferdinand wasn't the only one who had to prepare to move to Ahrensbach; what did his name-sworn attendants think of what was going on, and what does it mean for Eckhart's engagement to Angelica?

Several characters received designs for this volume: Melchior, Bertilde, Theodore, and Giebe Gerlach (also known as Grausam). Talk about a lot of cute kids. Don't you think their designs really show their resemblances to their older siblings? Of course, there's an evil face lurking among the cute ones, and it matches Grausam perfectly.

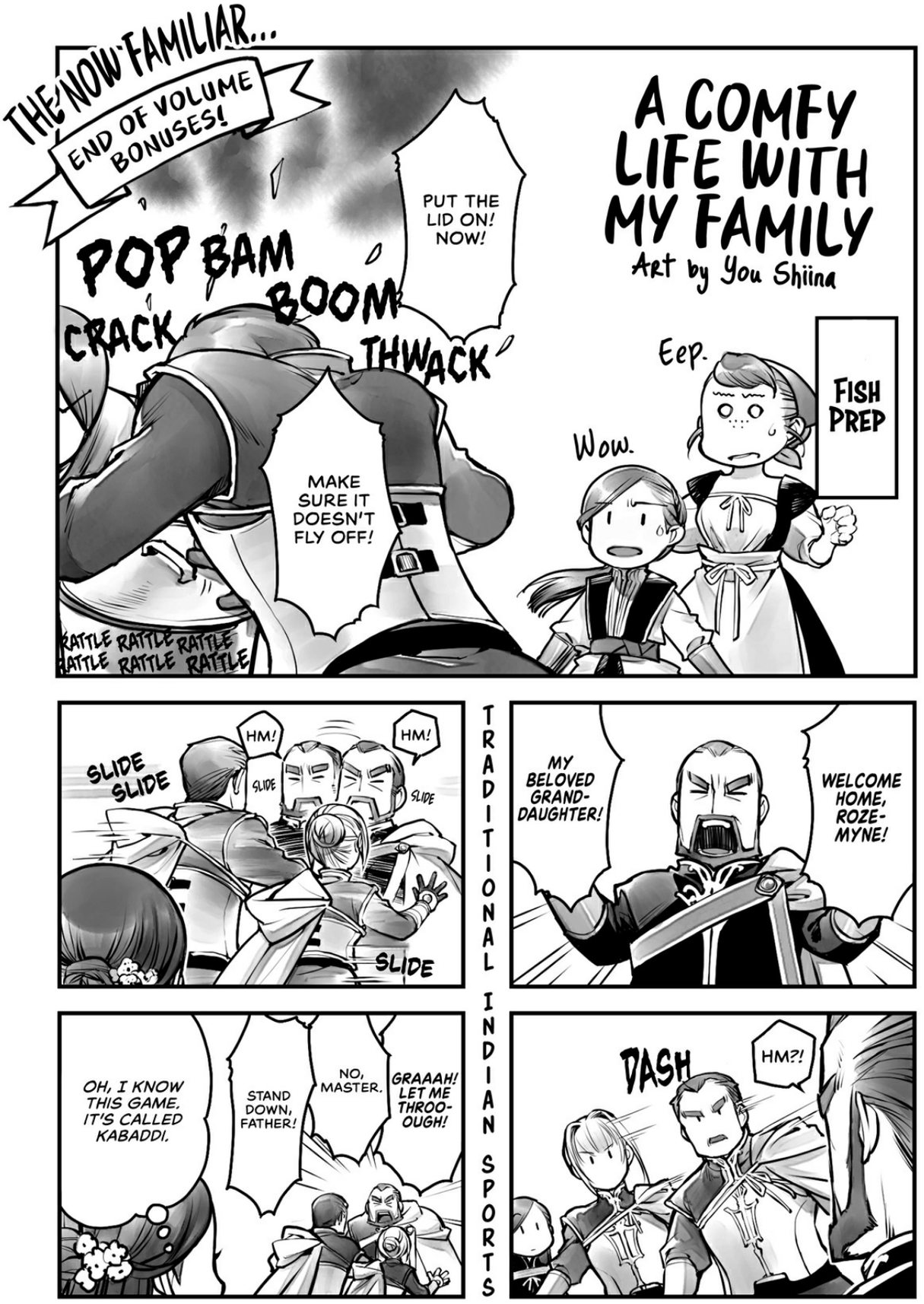
This volume's cover art is focused on Ferdinand and Rozemyne's meeting in the hidden room. Ferdinand is deep in thought about the engagement, while Rozemyne watches on with worry. Doesn't your heart ache when you realize this might be their last time together in their High Priest and High Bishop outfits? Mine sure does. (And I like it.)

As for the color illustration, I asked for the hug scene from the "Decisions" chapter. I really, really, *really* wanted this one. Rozemyne's expression is to die for.

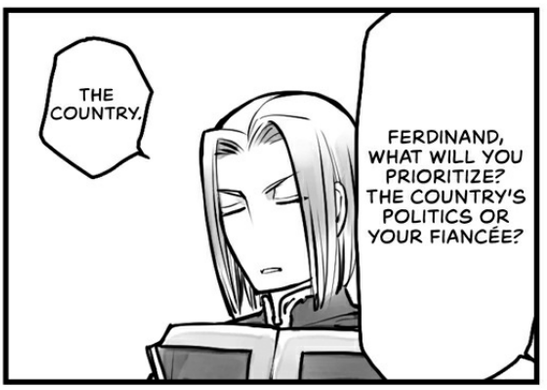
Shiina-sama, thank you.

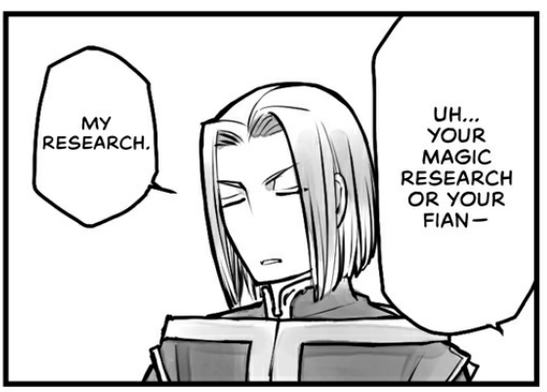
And finally, I offer up my highest thanks to everyone who read this book. May we meet again in Part 4 Volume 9.

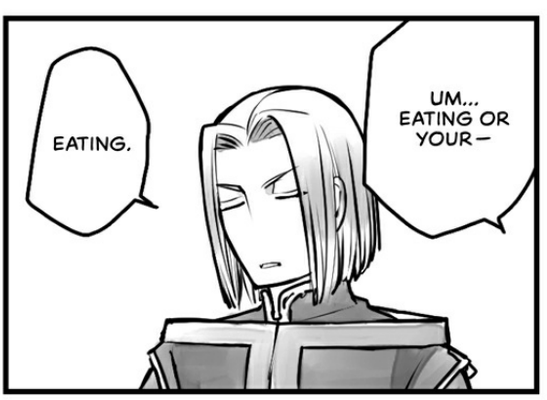
July 2019, Miya Kazuki

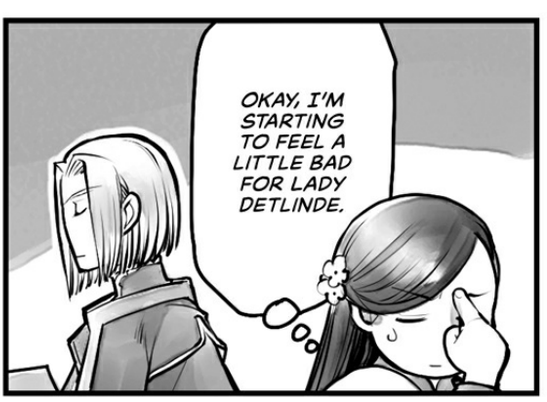

THE NOW FAMILIAR...
END OF VOLUME BONUSES!
A COMFY LIFE WITH MY FAMILY
Art by You Shiina
POP
BAM
BOOM
CRACK
THWACK
PUT THE LID ON! NOW!
MAKE SURE IT DOESN'T FLY OFF!
RATTLE RATTLE RATTLE RATTLE RATTLE RATTLE
Eep.
Wow.
FISH PREP
SLIDE SLIDE
HM!
HM!
SLIDE
SLIDE
SLIDE
MY BELOVED GRAND-DAUGHTER!
WELCOME HOME, ROZE-MYNE!
TRADITIONAL INDIAN SPORTS
OH, I KNOW THIS GAME, IT'S CALLED KABADDI.
STAND DOWN, FATHER!
NO, MASTER.
GRAAAH! LET ME THROO-OUGH!
DASH
HM?!

BOTTOM PRIORITY



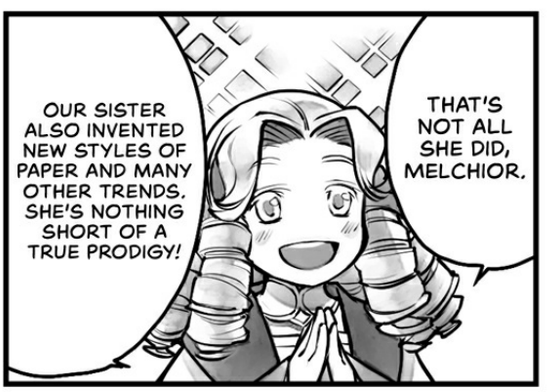


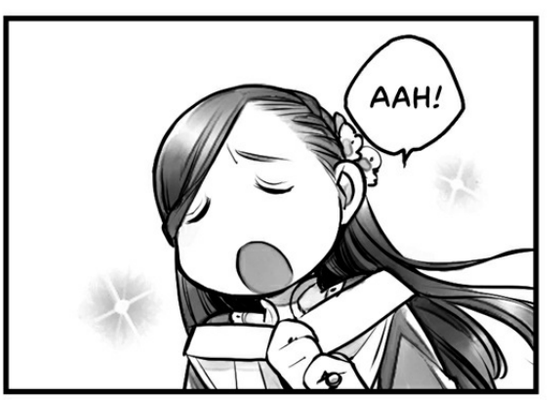


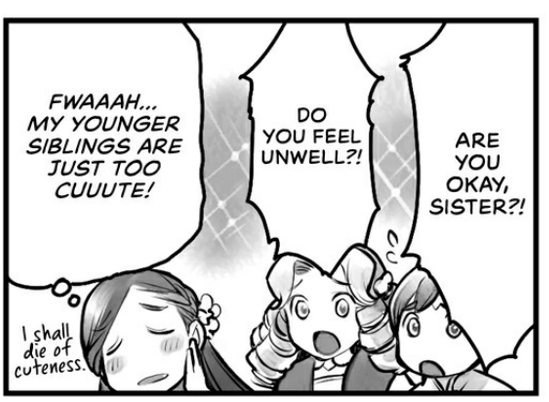


KILLING WITH KINDNESS



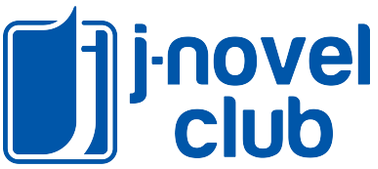












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Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 4 Founder of the Royal Academy's So-Called Library Committee Volume 8

by Miya Kazuki

Translated by quof Edited by Kieran Redgewell

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Original Japanese edition published in 2019 by TO Books, Tokyo.

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Ebook edition 1.0.1: August 2022

Premium E-Book