
Fushi no Kami
Rebuilding Civilization Starts with a Village
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Mizuumi Amakawa
Illustrator:
Mai Okuma

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Maika's Perspective

I was always looking at his profile—surprisingly, I hardly ever looked him in the eye. After all, he was always staring straight ahead. Engrossed in a book, engaged in conversation, or just lost in thought. His gaze was straight ahead at all times, and at the end of his sight awaited his dream of a safe, healthy, and affluent life like the one of the ancient civilization.

The more time passed, the more I realized what an incredibly difficult task that was. I had come to understand why smarter and more powerful people than me didn't bother pursuing that same dream—it was too far removed from reality. Surely Ash, who was smarter than me, was painfully aware of that fact. And yet, he didn't give up. To achieve his dreams lying far into the distance behind an impenetrable veil of darkness, he didn't have the luxury to look to the side. His shining eyes were focused on the goal. On the contrary, I was always there, watching him... So, of course I would immediately notice any changes in him.

"Ash, are you injured?" I asked.

My gaze was closely fixated on the red-haired boy, who was nonchalantly going through some documents at his desk at the Promotion Office.



“No, I am fine. Why are you asking?”

“You’re definitely injured.” I knew it. His answer just now meant that he was injured but didn’t want to show it. By now, I could easily see through the smoke and mirrors. “As the chief, I order you to pause your work until you’ve recovered.”

“Maika, please wait a moment!”

Ash was getting ready to start negotiations. He turned around to face me with a smile and lowered eyebrows.

Here we go! Ash’s looking straight at me! I like his profile, but he looks even more handsome this way!

“I may have a little injury, but...”

“Just be honest. It’s your stomach, right?”

I could tell that his movements were different than usual. Normally, Ash had good posture, so it was quite obvious.

“During the fight against the treants in Ajole, I suffered a blow to my flank.”

While the injury itself may have been unavoidable—or was it?—I had every right to be overprotective considering that Arthur had asked me to make sure Ash wouldn’t do anything too reckless. It was outrageous that he tried to hide it in order to continue working.

As I glared at Ash, he started to talk faster. “I understand what you are trying to say, I really do, but please overlook it this time. Just this once. If we do not manage to relocate Ajole’s residents before winter comes, my precious new personnel may be in risk of perishing.”

He wasn’t wrong. During the treant attack on Ajole, Ash had led a troop to save the villagers and stall the enemy. In the process, they had demolished the houses and repurposed the materials to build an encampment for their counterattack. As a result, they had managed to defeat the treants, but Ajole village no longer offered any shelter from the cold. If the poor villagers spent the winter sleeping outdoors, many of them would end up catching colds and dying. To prevent such an outcome, we need to relocate them, and Ash was

trying to do that while hiding his injuries. *Ahh... It's this...* This *is precisely why Ash's so amazing.*

"I am really grateful that you and Renge already wrote up a draft plan before I returned. Thanks to you we can act right away," he continued. "The Ajole residents are now all experts in advanced farming techniques—every single one of them is valuable. I have got to do my best for them. Besides, I cannot let your and Renge's kind gesture go to waste."

This is what I love about Ash. He fiercely swoops down on any tragedy and rewrites it to have a happy ending. "All right, I got it... I'll back you up wherever possible."

So, I decided I was going to support him rather than trying to stop him.

"Thank you, Maika! You are always so wonderfully kind!"

Huh? That one caught me off guard...

I could feel my face turn red. Ash's direct compliments were always a one-hit knockout, with no room for defense or evasion. Not that it was necessary. If anything, I would gladly run straight into them.

"Well then, let us start negotiations with some of the villages that seem likely to cooperate!" After making me blush, Ash tried to just take the documents and leave at once, but... "Maika?" I grabbed his shoulder.

"Not so fast, Ash... You can't trick me so easily anymore..."

A single compliment was no longer enough to sway me and cause my attention to wander. Finally, I had caught up to Ash. I was able to stop him in situations like these, where he tried to slide through my hands.

"I'll allow you to work, but you can't go outside!"

"Wh-What?! I mean, it is not an unreasonable request, but..."

"Weren't you just trying to go negotiate all by yourself?"

"Well, yes. For the time being, I was going to visit the villages managed by our former classmates, like Saias. That should speed things up."

That's a no-go. No way an injured person should be doing work like that.

“In that case, I’ll go with Glen.”

“But...it is quite the—it is an extremely tough job.”

“All the more reason I can’t leave it to you. I told you I was going to back you up.” *No shame in relying on me, especially when injured. In fact, I insist. Please, rely on me.* “Besides, they are also my former classmates. And considering my position, I may even be better suited for the task. I’ll ask Glen to bring Suiren along.”

As our positions were more suitable for the job, this was probably going to work in our favor and smooth things out. Ash would have most likely yielded the same results with his momentum alone, but then I might as well go myself if it was going to be the same result.

“Hmm... Your plan seems fine too...” Ash admitted.

“See? You don’t have to do everything yourself. You stay here and sort out the residents’ requests. Some might want to stay with their families, but others don’t mind being split up.”

After considering my proposal for a moment, Ash reluctantly agreed. “Fine. Let us divide the workload this time.”

“You can count on me.”

Ash handed me the documents with which he tried to leave earlier. They were papers requesting a guide and guards for the journey. It looked like I had intervened just in the nick of time—a little later and he would have been gone.

“Please take care, Maika,” Ash said in a greatly concerned tone while staring right at me.

“Heh heh. Don’t worry. There’s not much crime around here, and I’ll have someone guide me, so I won’t get lost either.”

“Yes, but... You have become quite an important person here in Sacula. As the head of the Promotion Office, you should always be on your guard.”

No matter what I said, it appeared that Ash remained worried—his eyes were fixed on me. It sent a chill down my spine. Ash’s gaze, which was always oriented toward his dreams, was now focused on me. In other words, I was

important enough to his dream to be included in his field of vision. It had been a long road. Ever since that fateful evening back in Noscula, I had kept on running, pushing myself beyond my limits. But now, I finally stood here eye to eye with Ash. Was this the right moment to confess my feelings? If I jumped into his arms and told him that I like him, would he reciprocate my feelings...?

No—I had to suppress the urge. I had to play it cool and reassure him with a smile. As his childhood friend.

“I’ll be fine. Can you just contact Glen and Suiren for me? I’m going to request a guide in the meantime.”

“All right. Take care, Maika.” And with that, Ash turned around. I was once again looking at him in profile now that he was focused on contacting Glen and Suiren. His profile was handsome, but I would have loved to look straight into his eyes for a while longer—that was a much rarer sight.

But soon you’ll be mine!

The count’s family was currently discussing our engagement! Once the proposal was official and Ash my groom, I would make him look into my eyes more often. And in return, I was going to help push him toward his dream. So, for now, I was going to be patient and run this errand for Ash. But first, I looked at his profile a little longer.

“Maika, is there something stuck to my face?” Ash asked.

Yes, my lovestruck eyes.

Yuika’s Perspective I had made it a habit of not dropping by the city too often, since I used to be the count’s direct successor. While it had been some years since I had renounced that title, there were still a few of my supporters around. Once you got some fervent followers, you didn’t shake them off quite so easily. For the most part, that wasn’t a problem. Many of them had just shifted their support to the current successor, my brother Itsuki. After all, we were known to get along well.

Nevertheless, some hardcore followers were prone to causing trouble, so I decided to confine myself to my village to avoid inconveniencing Itsuki and the current administration. Therefore, it had been a while since I last visited Itsutsu city, but now I was here, following a very charming invitation.

Many of the shops had stayed the same since I last saw them. Some of my favorites had closed down, though, replaced by new ones. The roads also looked much nicer than I remembered. I was so captivated by the cityscape that, before I realized it, I had arrived at the administrative halls.

"Dear sister! It's been a while!" The acting count had come to greet me personally.

"Yes, some time has passed since our last meeting, *Your Excellency*." *Looks like he needs some lessons.*

Did he not realize why I rarely showed up here? And why I had used Quid's guards as escorts rather than knights? And why I was referring to my younger brother by his official title? It appeared he needed someone to spell it out for him.

In an instant, a maid rushed out of the building to grab Itsuki by the nape of his neck and drag him back in. After my brother had disappeared through the administrative halls' imposing doors, the maid took his place.

"I am sorry about his attitude, Lady Yuika."

"Looks like you've got your hands full, Ms. Ran."

Even without mentioning any specifics, the acting count's personal maid immediately understood what I meant. She thanked me for my concerns with a bow.

"I have told him countless times that it is okay to act familiarly as long as it is not in public. And yet, as soon as I take my eyes off him for a moment, he openly introduces himself like this," Ran lamented.

"I'll make sure to remind him later myself," I reassured her.

“Anyhow, your accommodation at the mansion has been prepared.”

“Thank you. Just leave Itsuki to me.”

Due to external pressure, there wasn’t much friction within the Sacula household. However, that didn’t mean that there was no conflict brewing at all. Despite being my younger brother, Itsuki still outranked me, so it wasn’t right for him to behave too casually toward me. Otherwise, the vassals might have started thinking that I was a better fit for the title, causing unnecessary drama.

And here I was thinking that the count’s successor had grown a bit, but looks like he’s still very much a child on the inside.

After letting out a sigh, a smile came over my face. My brother’s warm welcome was a reflection of Sacula’s charm. Even though it was a poor, dangerous, and remote region, it still flourished in harmony.

“Well then, Ms. Ran.” I directed my smile toward the acting count’s personal maid and took a bow. “I am Yuika Noscula, wife of Chief Klein, the head of Noscula village. I have come as the village chief’s representative to negotiate the acceptance of the Ajole refugees.”

“Welcome to Itsutsu, Lady Yuika. Chief Maika from the Territory Reform Promotion Office informed me of your arrival.”

My smile grew even bigger and my eyes were sparkling. “Chief Maika” had a nice ring to it. This was the first time I had heard someone refer to my daughter as chief out loud.

“The meeting will take place at the Territory Reform Promotion Office itself. I will show you the way,” Ms. Ran said.

“Thank you.” I followed the familiar maid down the corridor. “Ms. Ran, I have a question regarding the Territory Reform Promotion Office.”

“Yes?”

This was a good opportunity to learn more about my daughter’s achievements.

“Is it true that they have accomplished quite a bit despite being such a new department?”

“Oh, very much so,” my guide replied cheerily. She kept walking ahead of me while continuing her explanation. “The Territory Reform Promotion Office was established as a department exempt from certain restrictions to better carry out its mission. As such, it is under the direct control of His Excellency the count —or rather the acting count at this moment. A certain amount of success was guaranteed when Lady Maika, a direct relative of the count, was appointed as head of the department—”

“But it exceeded expectations?” I finished the sentence for her.

Ms. Ran nodded in agreement. “No one expected it to become such an important department over the past two years.”

It’s a pity people underestimated them. I do remember predicting something like this would happen when Itsuki asked me for advice and I urged him to support them... “They will exceed your expectations” were my words, I believe.

“Crime has remarkably declined in Itsutsu. Most likely because we started delivering food to the slum quarters of the city.”

“You are distributing food to the slums? Is this also the doing of the Territory Reform Promotion Office?”

“Without a doubt. The Promotion Office hired residents from the slum quarters to carry out public works, aiming to cultivate more fields for agricultural experiments outside the city. It seems that prisoners acted as an intermediary between the Promotion Office and the leaders of the slum quarters.”

Indeed, they had exceeded all expectations. No one would have thought of recruiting residents from the slums and collaborating with prisoners.

“In addition, they also started expanding the laboratory, planned to improve trading routes, and invited people to test their experimentally cultivated produce for free. Everything in order to distribute more food to the people in need.”

As a result, fewer people were starving in the slums, which in turn had led to less crime.

“So poverty does indeed seem to be the main cause for crime.”

“That is what the numbers suggest,” Ms. Ran confirmed.

That was great news. On a personal level, I was happy for the reduction in sadness and suffering. Moreover, as a politician, I was also happy about the increased level of safety.

“Furthermore, the Promotion Office has also been introducing new building materials, which helped revitalize carpenters, stonemasons, and all kinds of craftsmen that work with kilns and furnaces,” Ms. Ran added.

“In other words, they increased the demand in labor through the manufacturing of new products, which in turn will eventually boost the economy,” I said.

“It has already been positively affected. For example, the Quid company, which is working closely with the Promotion Office, has quickly grown in size these past few years.”

Until a few years ago, Quid had been working as hard as he could, driving a single horse-drawn cart by himself, but now his company was sending out dozens of horse carriages to various places. Fortunately, it appeared that Quid hadn’t forgotten the source of his success—he was providing Noscula with great deals.

“However, as a result of the Promotion Office’s projects, the administrative work here has also increased. Ms. Rihn is still somehow managing it, but she is reaching her limits.”

“That’s not good...”

That one hitch risked slowing down an otherwise smooth process.

“Yes, but fortunately, the past two years we’ve had excellent students enroll in the military academy, so help is on the way.”

“Oh my!”

Now that she mentioned it, it had come to my ears that the two students from our village were hard at work. They were listed as the dorm supervisor’s assistants in several letters.

“It seems that a bright future lies ahead for Sacula,” I remarked.

“Surprisingly, yes,” Ran agreed and briefly paused. “That bright path was paved by the Territory Reform Promotion Office. They’ve suggested and executed countless plans. Chief Maika’s skill is astonishing.”

Even the acting count’s head maid couldn’t hold back her praise for their achievements, understandably so. No matter how effective a plan may have been, it would cost money, and the territory’s administration usually didn’t have much leeway. The budget was a significant hurdle, looming like a tall wall, which any new challenger would have to climb while dragging down anyone ahead of them to come in first. That was a difficult task. As a result, even the best, most carefully crafted new plans tended to devolve into half-hearted, haphazard projects. It was each department chief’s responsibility to win that battle royale and secure funding. And it looked like my daughter had come out on top. *Well done, Maika.*

“However, Lady Yuika, while Chief Maika has showcased tremendous skill, there is someone else who is just as...tremendous? Yes, tremendous... Although you could also say a little baffling, or maybe mysterious...”

I immediately realized who Ms. Ran was referring to. There was really only one person this difficult to describe in Itsutsu right now...

“In Lady Maika’s shadow—is ‘shadow’ the right word here?—well, putting the terminology aside, I should probably also mention the source of all those projects, the Promotion Office’s head of planning...”

Of course, it’s him. I chuckled while covering my mouth with my hand. It appeared that the red-haired boy, who had just popped into my mind, was doing quite well for himself here too.

Ms. Ran turned around to reveal a frown on her face. I remembered her as someone who didn’t show much emotion, but it appeared that the head planner’s rampage baffled her.

“Oh dear, is the head of planning causing trouble? Unlike the chief? As they say, talented people can often be quite peculiar,” I feigned ignorance.

In return, Ms. Ran replied with a face indicating sixty percent approval and forty percent disapproval. “No, there probably aren’t any problems, I think... The head of planning is...fundamentally a good kid who’s even given me small

gifts on occasions. He has good manners and always points out Lord Itsuki's flawed behavior, which I'm grateful for..."

She was right. Ash was fundamentally a good kid who helped others.

"However, it's also true that he can be a bit too forthcoming and overwhelming," she continued. "But normally, he is a good kid with good intentions, so I can't really scold or reject him either..."

She was also right about that. Ash was a naughty kid whose unstoppable momentum could be overwhelming.

As I giggled to myself, Ms. Ran's facade finally started crumbling. "Lady Yuika, I really don't think Ash is a bad kid... I especially like how he lets Lord Itsuki have it, and his sweets are always delicious..."

Even though he was quite a peculiar boy, he somehow managed to put everyone in the palm of his hand, including Ban and Father Folke. His peculiarity was undoubtedly part of his charm, and it seemed to work here in the city too.

"He truly must have a remarkable talent for you to say that. I'm guessing the project I'm here for also sprung from the head planner's mind."

"It did. After extensively testing the newest farming techniques in the fields and yielding great results, the head of planning proposed the project at hand." Ran started talking really fast as she finally praised him in a non-roundabout way.

"And the refugees have all learned those new farming techniques? Sounds promising."

"Yes. Hopefully, this will solidify the Promotion Office's influence within the territory. Besides, leaders and their associates from other territories have started inquiring about the office."

"I see. They're proving themselves both within and outside the territory," I said. Then I let out a murmur before I realized it. "That's Ash as we know him. My little monster. You keep charging straight ahead toward your dream, just as you said back then."

The bird that had flown away from the village had now started building a

majestic nest here in the city. It was exciting to see. As his supporter, it made my heart leap to hear that my favorite monster's rampage was shocking so many people. Moreover, my daughter was standing right by his side! How exhilarating!

"Now then, Lady Yuika."

Ran stopped in her tracks. We stood in front of a room that I remembered to be a storage space for all sorts of random documents. Now, there was a sign stuck to the door that read, "Territory Reform Promotion Office."

"This is it. The head of planning is waiting for you inside."

"Thank you, Ms. Ran."

My dear little monster. It had been a while since I last talked to him as Noscula's representative—I was looking forward to it. He had scooped the finest honey from the bottom of the barrel called Noscula, so I wondered what he was going to pull out of the barrel called Sacula.

When I entered the Territory Reform Promotion Office for the first time, I was greeted by bookshelves filled to the brim with documents. An incredible sight considering the department had only been established two years ago. There were three somewhat larger desks. I instinctively smiled upon seeing the department chief's nameplate placed on the one at the far back. Unfortunately, currently no one was sitting at that desk. Instead, the boy who had sat behind one of the other large desks stood up.

"Welcome to the Territory Reform Promotion Office. We have been eagerly awaiting your arrival, Mrs. Yuika."

Even though it was a formal, business-like greeting, his gentle smile radiated genuine hospitality, especially in tandem with his good looks—although my husband was still more handsome.

The boy approached me with a neat, straight posture and led me to my assigned seat at the round table. "Thank you for accepting our invitation. My name is Ash George Fenix, and I am the head of planning. I will be acting as a substitute for Chief Maika, who is temporarily unavailable." Ash's hand gestured toward the girl who was already sitting at the table. "And this is Suiren

Ajole. She performs a stellar job as the chief of Ajole village."

"I am S-Suiren! I don't know how to thank you for your kind gesture!"

Suiren's nervous tension was written all over her face as she abruptly rose up and energetically bowed her head. Thanks to Ash's swift thinking, he was able to pull away her chair before she knocked it over. *Nice save.* He must have been aware that Suiren was in danger of committing a blunder.

"My name is Yuika Noscula. I am Noscula's village chief's wife. You don't have to be so formal, Ms. Suiren," I politely suggested. After all, Suiren outranked me.

However, Suiren vigorously shook her head. "No, I absolutely insist! Maika and Ash told me that you immediately agreed to provide shelter to our refugees! Your generosity has brought me so much relief, since I knew that they had somewhere to go. Therefore, thank you from the bottom of my heart!" Suiren repeatedly bowed her head.

That was a great answer. Her stiff attitude was not just because I was a relative of the count, but also because I helped her villagers. As I glanced at the red-haired boy, he acknowledged me with a nod and a smile. I had heard that Ajole village had run into various problems, but with a chief like her, I was hopeful for their future.

"You don't have to feel like you are burdening us at all, Ms. Suiren. Your villagers all know how to use the newest farming techniques developed by the Territory Reform Promotion Office. I don't consider it an act of charity at all, but rather an investment."

"Yes! The residents of Ajole trained for the past two years! We will definitely be of use!"

She sounded very confident, and considering who trained them, I was convinced. My little monster smiled, pretending to be completely harmless.

"Now then, since we are done with our introductions, let us get straight to the point. Regarding the farming techniques learned by the Ajole villagers, please take a look at this," Ash said.

I started skimming through the papers he had just handed me. Some of the

techniques seemed familiar—the use of companion plants, the best ways to efficiently manage fields and document their condition... Those were all methods widely employed in Noscula. However, there were also many unfamiliar techniques. I had heard about some, but I had no idea what they actually entailed.

Interesting. So this was the new and improved Ash—the result of my daughter's support.

"That is a remarkable amount of new technology," I remarked.

"I appreciate your kind words. It is all thanks to the outstanding personnel here at the Promotion Office selected by Lord Itsuki himself." Ash's words sounded too genuine to be mere flattery.

"This investment seems even better than expected. However, while we are able to accommodate refugees, we won't have enough food for everyone until next year's harvest."

I jumped right into the negotiations for a better reward. Reframing the issue of Ajole's refugees as the migration of farming experts was a genius move, but they were still displaced villagers in the end. My negotiation aimed at using that fact to my advantage to claim compensation.

"There is no need to worry in that regard. Until your next harvest, the Sacula administration will provide the food for the migrants."

Great response. Or should I say as expected? He had come prepared. By limiting the food supply to the migrants, he managed to keep expenses to a minimum. Very reasonable. But was that really all there was to it? It was hard to argue against it. Unfortunately, humans aren't always reasonable creatures—they might try to squeeze out a little more.

"With those conditions, we may not be able to accommodate too many migrants in Noscula..."

For example, they could threaten to accept fewer migrants. Since the Ajole villagers most likely also wanted to stay with their families and relatives, this could have thrown a wrench into the works of the Promotion Office and forced them to reorganize their plans. It could have also seriously impacted the ability

of the refugees to efficiently teach the new techniques if there were fewer experts in Noscula.

"Mrs. Yuika." The red-haired boy was smiling. Not Ash, but *Mr.* Ash. Maintaining his professional composure and without taking advantage of our relationship, he went on to answer my test question. "Please take another look at the list of farming techniques."

"What do you mean?"

"Some of the improved machinery and equipment require a bull or a horse to pull them. Do you have any farm animals in Noscula?"

"No, unfortunately not." *Shouldn't you know that already?* I thought to myself with a strained smile.

"In that case, we will run into some problems trying to teach you those new techniques. But since we want to give you full training, we will lend you some horses for that time period. The Quid company is currently working on a scheme to rent out its horses."

I see. So that's how it is. He really is good at negotiating.

They weren't just going to provide food and funds on a single occasion, but rather enough aid to smoothly diffuse the new agricultural technology according to their plan. Moreover, since it was a loan rather than a donation, the Promotion Office wouldn't run many expenses either. Furthermore, horses made it possible to cultivate more fields than usual, and a larger harvest meant higher taxes that would in turn cover their expenses.

The Quid company was surely more than happy for the administration to pay the maintenance costs of their horses too. It might have even encouraged other companies to keep more horses, which would eventually lead to higher circulation of goods. And that, once again, would increase the tax revenue going toward the administration offices.

I wondered what the Financial Affairs Department lead's face had looked like when the Promotion Office had submitted their plans. They must have been freaking out at the prospect of losing money while praying that it would come back with profits.

“However, there will be a limit to the number of horses we can provide. Since there will be a sequential order, they might arrive a bit later to some locations, so please bear that in mind.”

“A sequential order?”

“Yes, a rotation. There should not be too many issues since working times vary even within the territory, but just to be safe, we need to sequence the distribution,” the head of planning explained with a smile.

It was human nature to use any sort of ranking to your own advantage. If it were me, I would prioritize sending the best horses—and maybe even in bigger numbers—to the places that agreed to accept the most migrants. Moreover, the horses were being distributed in sequential order, meaning the villages that accepted the most migrants would get the horses earlier, when they weren’t exhausted at all.

Ah, my cute little monster had become quite a bad boy. How promising. How extraordinarily promising! After all, I was on his side.

“Noscula may not be wealthy, but we’ll take as many refugees as possible.”

As an ally, I decided to raise my hands in the air to signal surrender.

The purpose of this visit was to help the Territory Reform Promotion Office hone their negotiating skills ahead of their first large-scale talks. They wanted me to become their examiner and practice partner for a negotiation without any favoritism. But in the end, I actually wished he would have gone easier on me.

“Did I pass, Yuika?”

“Yes, perfect score.”

After I had broken character and praised Ash’s performance, he started blushing slightly, like most kids his age would have after receiving praise from their seniors.

“I am glad to hear that. If you say I pass, then I definitely will not have any problems with the other negotiations.”

“Don’t let your guard down! Although... I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

As I was a relative of the count, I enjoyed a special standing. In hierarchical terms, I was probably above the Promotion Office, which was under the count's direct control, yet Ash managed to strike an advantageous deal without any favoritism from my part. Therefore, there shouldn't have been any problems regarding the other village chiefs, who would be of lower rank than the Promotion Office.

"You see, Suiren? There is no need to worry. Your village's residents will be treasured wherever they go."

The frightening head planner was politely convincing Suiren that the migrants were so valuable that most places would love to welcome as many of them as possible.

"Y-Yes, I... I believe what you're saying."

Thank you for taking my monster's side. As an ally, I'll give you a little bonus.

"Earlier, I said that Noscula wasn't that wealthy, but we actually have some leeway at the moment."

"That is delightful news!" Ash happily exclaimed.

You do realize that that is because of you? I thought. "Consequently, we are willing to take in families with a lot of children and households without any men. In fact, you can prioritize those groups for Noscula."

"A-Are you sure?" Suiren gasped.

When working in the fields, the most important thing was strength. Women and children, who tended to be physically weaker, were thus often considered unsuited to become farmworkers. Suiren must have been aware of that fact too, thus her surprise.

"Yes, leave them to us. In Noscula, we've also got some work that doesn't require much strength, so don't hold back!"

For instance, manufacturing beeswax and aloe ointment, or helping people working from their homes. There had also been talks of starting leather processing following the recent increase in hunting exploits. While we didn't know how exactly it worked, the younger villagers had suggested we just look it

up in a book.

Noscula, a village that had almost exclusively survived on farm work, now had a budding processing industry. It had transitioned from a village self-producing the bare minimum of food to the birthplace of several luxury items of high value, making the local economy flourish. While it was still a far cry from the abundance of the ancient civilization that Ash sought to recreate, life in Noscula had become much more comfortable.

Suiren had immediately understood my message. At the same time, Ash smiled with a hint of satisfaction—just a hint. *That's so like him.*

After hearing my proposal, Suiren ran toward the desk, overjoyed to re-examine the list of migrants.

"Thank you, Yuika. In fact, there are a lot of households where the husband and eldest son have died, leaving only the women and small children."

Ash also expressed his gratitude. It appeared that it would have been difficult to assign those women and children to the city, since a lot of jobs had already been assigned to the residents of the slum quarters.

"Don't worry about it. I mean, we're already familiar with some of those techniques in Noscula, and in the worst-case scenario, we're not too far away from here," I said, implying that Ash could always come help us.

Upon hearing my presumption, Ash replied while pouring another cup of tea. "I believe that kindness repays kindness. And you have always been kind to me."

"Thanks, but that's my line."

As I accepted the tea, I closely watched Ash—not in my capacity as the village chief's representative, but as Maika's mother.

"You've grown up so much. I can't believe you're already turning fifteen this winter."

Both his body and face were starting to lose their childlike features and becoming more mature. His formal work clothes were a perfect fit that made him look even more like a grown-up.

“All thanks to you. If you had not given me your approval to study at Itsutsu’s military academy, I wouldn’t have flourished this much.”

Ash crossed his hands with long fingernails behind his back. His calm demeanor was sure to appeal to all the girls his age. He had become a truly handsome young boy.

“By the way, I wanted to ask you about Maika,” I continued.

And with that, the conversation had now entirely turned into a private chat about my cute daughter.

“What about her?”

“What do you think of her now that she’s become the Promotion Office’s chief?”

“She is wonderful,” Ash replied without any hesitation to my sudden question. “Even considering her lineage, it is astounding how much she has achieved with this new department. I may not be the best person to say this, but she readily understands and supports my barrage of proposals.”

It probably would have been closer to the truth to say that she supported *Ash* rather than the *proposals*.

“So you are saying that the Territory Reform Promotion Office would not be where it is now without Maika?”

“Most certainly not.”

The Promotion Office’s accomplishments equaled Ash’s accomplishments. Any outsider could tell, no matter how humbly he portrayed himself. He had turned the Promotion Office into his wings, allowing him to fly closer to his dreams. In other words, by advancing his projects, my daughter was pushing Ash forward to his goals.

“She has been proactively covering for my weak points, like negotiations or dealing with grievances. I am extremely thankful for that. It allows me to focus on drafting new plans and doing my administrative work,” he added.

It looked like Maika was giving her best. She had become an essential part of Ash’s life and dreams. Although that must have been no easy feat, she still

strongly wished to stand beside him. Her adoration had not withered with age. On the contrary, she had nurtured it to a point where it was blossoming stronger and more vividly than ever before. *Maika, if you love him this much, let me lend you a hand one last time.* In the stories, the young maiden who had troubles in love was often helped by the magic of a witch.

"In that case, it would be awful if Maika ever left, right?"

I just provided him with a little food for thought. What if his childhood friend, who had been on his side since seemingly forever, suddenly disappeared? *Now, consider it carefully.* Was she important to his dreams? Did he want to hold on to her? If he felt even the tiniest bit of fear at the thought of losing her, then he had already started to come under my magic spell.

Maika's Perspective

After receiving several positive replies to our petition to take in refugees, I made a triumphant return to the city in the evening. My visits to the refuge villages had been a huge success! Ash would surely praise me! "As expected, Maika! You are so reliable! Let's get married!" Something along those lines. Well, maybe not the last part, but I was confident he was going to say the rest.

I would have loved to barge right into Ash's room at the dormitory, but tonight I was supposed to stay at the count's mansion. On the second floor, there were rooms reserved for our family. My room was the one where my mom used to sleep in when she lived in the capital. However, since I was spending most of my time at the dormitory, I barely ever used it.

As I approached the room, I heard some lively voices coming from inside. Once I opened the door, I was met by the previous occupant, who had made herself comfortable there.

"Oh my, it's Maika! You can't just open the door without knocking!"

"I'm sorry, mom!"

Even though she was scolding me, I was happy to hear her voice again. It had been such a long time.

My mom laughed it off with a wry smile. "Welcome back, Maika."

“I’m home, mom!”

Reminiscing about home, I suddenly felt the urge to hug her, and since there were only family members in the room, I jumped right into her arms.

“Ahem, you’ve grown up a lot. Naturally, considering you’re already fifteen now.” Apparently, I had choked her a little bit with my hug. Maybe I had used a bit too much strength in my excitement. After taking a deep breath, mom hugged me back like she always used to. “Everyone’s praising you for working hard.”

“Of course! I’m working with Ash, so I have to do my best.”

“Ash was also praising you. *A lot*,” mom emphasized.

My heart almost started melting upon hearing her words. Even if I hadn’t heard it directly from him, it was still praise from Ash—so addicting.

“What did he say about me?”

“That you are wonderful. And that he can focus on the things he wants to do thanks to you.”

“Really?! Yay!” I exclaimed while raising my hands up in the air.

My mom evaded my fist with a frantic expression on her face. *Sorry I almost hit you there.* She had taken a few steps back to get to safety. Her tender touch had let go of me again.

“Won’t you behave a little more gracefully? Your enthusiasm is cute, but you should also know when to keep it within limits.”

“Yes, ma’am! I will make sure to pay better attention henceforth!” I sharply straightened myself and took a bow. *How about that?* Even I was capable of more refined behavior.

“Now you sound like a soldier, Maika. It would be more elegant if you loosened up a little bit. Keep that in mind.”

“Oh... Yes...”

And here I thought I had mastered proper etiquette, but I was still far behind my mom. She was formidable. Once I dropped my shoulders, her fingers started

stroking my hair.

“As long as Ash likes you the way you are.”

“That’s the problem... I don’t know what he thinks, since he behaves the same way toward everyone...” It was as if he had likes and dislikes but nothing he really loved. As his childhood friend and superior, I did get to see more sides of him than others, but still, I couldn’t tell whether he felt the same way as I did. “But that’s also part of Ash’s charm.”

“Yeah, that’s a praiseworthy attitude...but you need to make him yours sooner rather than later. I’ll help you.”

“Thanks, mom!”

Her help equaled that of a hundred people. After all, she was Ash’s first crush, and I definitely didn’t want her as a rival...

“Now then, shall we start the Sacula family council? Itsuki, you can sit down on the chair.”

On command, my uncle stood up. He was trembling. For some reason, he had been made to sit on the floor before I entered the room.

As if she understood my confusion, my mom explained with a smile, “I had a talk with him as his older sister. Don’t worry about it.”

“Did you mess up again, my dear uncle?”

Ran often scolded him, but to think that even my mom had to give him a lecture after being apart for such a long time! He had a bit too many weak points.

“Itsuki, do you mess up so often that Maika’s already grown used to it?” my mom asked.

“N-N-No, no! J-Just once in a while! Right, Maika?!”

“Hm, he always works diligently, but privately he is slacking quite a bit...”

Like being hungover after drinking with George or spending a fortune on a lavish feast at the tavern. Of course, someone needed to scold him for those things. And since my uncle didn’t have a wife and his father was at the royal

capital, his personal maid Ran was burdened with that task.

“Come on, Maika, that’s just socializing among men. Or I should say, it’s a possibility to directly engage with the citizens, so it’s not just private fun at all —”

“Itsuki, I’ll have another word with you later.”

Upon hearing my mother’s cold tone of voice, my dear uncle stopped with his rapid-fire excuses and dejectedly hung down his head.

“Putting aside my little brother’s escapades for later, let us get to the main topic then—the reason why I came to the city,” my mom changed the subject and clapped her fist into the palm of her hand.

That was right. My mom, who had avoided Itsutsu for years, had come to discuss a very important topic. And it wasn’t the relocation of Ajole’s refugees as farming experts—that was just a cover.

“Itsuki, you are the next in line, so let me ask you. Do you think Maika is capable of eventually becoming your successor?”

Today we had come together to discuss the future of the Sacula family. First, whether or not I was capable of succeeding the count—a question that didn’t just concern me, but also the lives of many others.

I had never seen such a sharp look in my mom’s eyes. She must have fully turned back into Yuika Sacula Amanobe. She was no longer the wife of the village chief, nor my mother, but the politician looking out for the territory’s citizens.

In response to her question, my dear uncle squinted his eyes as if he had just been blinded by my mom’s dazzling look. Then he said, “Maika really lives up to her potential as a child raised by you and my dear brother-in-law. Her administrative work is impeccable and she speaks eloquently at meetings, as proven by the Territory Reform Promotion Office’s achievements. If I had to name a weakness, it would be her lack of social connections.”

“Yeah, that’s somewhat inevitable for a girl growing up in a village,” my mom remarked.

They were right. There were still a lot of people within the territory whom I didn't know, and even more outside.

"However, that isn't a big shortcoming," my uncle continued. "Maika is cheerful and sociable. During her time at the academy, she was surrounded by lots of people and highly valued by the administrative staff too. Even Chef Yacoo, who tends to be quite moody, approves of her."

"In other words, she'll catch up as time passes?"

"I think so. In addition, I am still young. If nothing goes wrong, it will be at least another five or ten years until she takes over."

My mom nodded with a sharp look. "If that's the only problem, then there's more than enough time. In the worst-case scenario, I could always support her... Is there anyone else who could claim the right to succession?"

"Yae, who'd be the next in line, would almost certainly endorse Maika. Moreover, my faction, spearheaded by Ran and Rihn, would also follow Maika. We're all on good terms. Oh, and the Quid company would also be on her side. That's a big plus. Recently, they actually acquired another company."

"At this stage, that is more than enough. That sounds like more support than most previous counts ever had, so we should be fine."

My mom looked at me as the stateswoman she was. I almost perceived a glimmer of joy and surprise in her eyes. I had worked as hard as possible. Just like she had taught me, I had actively formed relationships to have Ash's back. As a result, I had gained trust from my surroundings.

"Well then, it looks like Maika is more than capable of succeeding the count in the future...which brings us to a more serious problem," my mom said with a serious tone.

"Maika's groom."

My heart skipped a beat upon hearing the words uttered by my uncle. However, I was unsure whether it was due to joy or fear. Either way, I decided to make my opinion clear.

"I don't want anyone other than Ash."

I was even prepared to run away from home if they suggested someone else. Fortunately, it appeared that both my mom and my uncle were well aware of my preference, which I had repeatedly stated in the past.

“You heard her, Itsuki. Then we need to convince everyone else that Ash is the right man for her.”

“That was my intention from the beginning. This matter is more urgent than Maika’s succession. A marriage between a farmer boy and the granddaughter of the count normally only happens in fiction. *Normally*.”

My mom smiled upon hearing my uncle emphasize that last word. “Yeah, I wholeheartedly agree with you.”

But luckily, Ash isn’t normal. Everyone seemed to express that with their smiles.

“I heard that he will be getting his second silver medal soon.”

“That’s old news, my dear sister. He is currently holding four Sacula silver medals, and he will be awarded three more from other territories. Seven in total.”

The fact that my mom didn’t gasp in surprise went to show for how long she had known Ash. Even so, her complexion had changed a bit. Ash was just *too* amazing.

“Which territories?” My mom’s voice sounded a little hoarse.

“From Viscount Sukuna and Baron Nepton. They were overjoyed when Ash disclosed the recipe for manufacturing soap. They awarded him with the steam silver medal and the tsunami silver medal respectively, both medals unique to their territories.”

“So, the highest honor. Anyone would be in awe upon seeing someone with medals from different territories.”

“They were well aware that the disclosure of the recipe helped break up the monopoly of the wealthy merchants from the capital. At this point, anyone pointing out Ash’s birthplace and family origin would just seem jealous of his accomplishments.”

Now that Ash had been acknowledged by other territories' lords, he could no longer be reduced to his origins as a farmer. He had been awarded more than enough medals to prove himself superior to most people. Ash probably would have preferred reading another book rather than showing off his medals, but the point still stood.

"Well, then it is decided." My mom nodded enthusiastically as she spoke. She appeared cheerful at the prospect of having dealt with all problems. "No issues with Maika becoming the count's successor. Moreover, Ash is known for his great achievements, and it's a habitual practice to welcome outstanding talent into the family through marriage."

"Does that mean you approve?!" I leaned forward over the desk.

"Yes. I will put in a word with my father, the count of Sacula, that I consider Ash appropriate as your husband," my mom said.

"Of course, as the acting count, I will also talk to him. Actually, you're the only one who can control Ash, so it would be a net positive for you to be together both in public and private," my uncle added.

"Oh my, do you also think they look cute together, Itsuki?"

"So much so that I can't even imagine another candidate... I'm a little hesitant about handing over my cute niece, but I do feel reassured with Ash."

Is that how we're perceived by our surroundings? It was a little embarrassing, but it made me smile. I wondered what Ash would have thought.

"Lovely. Like me and Klein."

"Yeah, I imagine anyone from back then would agree."

"So, make sure not to lose to your parents, Maika. Go and get him!" My mom challenged me with a wink.

How sly. Even I had to admit that she was a great flirt. *I'll have to try winking at Ash next time I see him.*



• • •

The cold winter air resembled the stretched string of a bow. It created a calm and clear yet solemn atmosphere, where everything within the range of its bleakness was compelled to silence. As a result, the forest was extremely quiet in winter.

Amidst that silence, I closely watched my surroundings. As I knelt down, the cold air rising up from the damp ground relentlessly chipped away at my concentration. *Not my day today. I want to sneak under my covers or go to a hot spring.*

After suppressing my desires, my knowledge and experience led me to conclude that our surroundings were clear. I stood up with a sigh.

“No ominous signs here. Let us go on a bit further.”

My subordinates acknowledged my order with relieved yet troubled expressions. They were relieved that no dangerous wild animals or demons—especially no treants—were around. And bothered by the fact that they had to push through the forest in this cold weather. I sympathized with them, especially in this weather. I would have loved to go back home just as much.

Nevertheless, this forest warranted our presence. It was the same forest from which eight treants had emerged and flattened Ajole village a little over a month ago. We needed to check if there were any more while also looking out for wild animals. The battle of Ajole was not over just yet.

In the end, the only inhabitable settlement left in the vicinity of this forest was the extremely productive Adele village. Currently, they were offering shelter to the Ajole residents that had lost their homes. Both from an economic and emotional perspective, we couldn’t leave our business unfinished and risk sacrificing Adele as well.

After suppressing a sigh, I observed the troops. They were much more professional than me. Even without any explanation, they had fully grasped the situation. Upon seeing me nod, they steeled their faces and nodded in return. They had every reason to feel tired and discontent—they were only human after all. However, their inherent toughness and trained professionalism

allowed them to push through and keep on moving forward. It was inspiring to see their relentless devotion to their jobs as the defenders of the territory. They may have looked like boring old men and mischievous young lads, but on the inside, they were passionate soldiers.

There was still a lot I could learn from them, even as their superior. At the very least, I wanted to be an officer whom they could follow with pride. As a leader, it was important to garner enthusiastic support rather than reluctant submission.

While I was absorbed in my self-conscious musings, we quietly and patiently continued to explore the forest. Following the treants' tracks, which were still visible a month later, we came across a strange odor.

"This smell..."

It reeked of rotten eggs. Normally, it would have been extremely unnatural for such an irritating odor to linger in the forest...unless it was home to treants.

"This is it, everyone. It smells like treants. Please be careful."

The soldiers all agreed while sniffing the air with a puzzled look on their faces. Apart from me, no one seemed to smell the odor.

Now, let me tell you something a bit scary. Since fighting the treants, my five senses had become even sharper. In addition, it appeared that my wounds were healing faster. While it may have just been my imagination, I had in fact already completely recovered from the treant battle, including my apparent cracked rib.

In order to work on the Ajole villagers' migration plan, I had been downplaying my injury, but after just a week it had actually stopped hurting, and another week later I had been able to perform physically exhausting tasks again. At the time, I had just considered myself lucky and ascribed my quick recovery to Goddess Yuika's divine protection. However, now that I had had the time to think about it more calmly, it appeared like an overly optimistic assessment.

Although it was an intangible feeling—an experience difficult to compare with that of other people—I felt like I was slowly evolving into a different type of non-human being. *Like the protagonist in a fantasy novel, except this time the*

humans aren't at a disadvantage. Or rather, I am at an advantage. Maybe there is in fact a level-up system in this world? Of course, that was impossible. Probably.

During my research on demons, I had found methods and examples of subjugation. In other words, there had obviously been other people besides me who had defeated demons in the past. However, there were no accounts of anyone gaining special strength from it—not even in folklore and legends. *Maybe I'm just the chosen one?*

Moreover, there was the mysterious message I had received during the treant battle. On top of that, I possessed memories from my past life. They no longer bothered me at all, but it was still a strange phenomenon. Now that I had become a bit older, I wondered... Was there really no one who could explain all those mysteries to me? *God, if you're listening, isn't that your area of expertise?*

Anyhow, the scent had led us to colorful scenery that was uncharacteristic of the forest. In the faint reflection of the sunlight, crystal-like shades of red, yellow, and silver intermingled with the dark green world of the forest. The source was a bark whose surface appeared like glass. A multicolored substance was leaking through from inside—a bit like candy in a glass bottle. However, it was not a very appetizing color. The red looked dull and subdued, as did the silver. While the yellow was still vivid, it was also the source of the foul sulfuric smell. Even if someone had found this appetizing, they probably should have refrained from eating it. Even if in moderation it might have surprisingly been good for you, assuming it was poisonous was the safer bet.

"Sir, is that what I think it is?" one of the soldiers asked absentmindedly while staring in wonder at the giant glass-bottle tree. I could not blame them. It was such a fantastical sight that you could have easily turned it into a paid attraction.

"I assume you all have heard about it before, but this is a treant dwelling. That being said, this is also my first time seeing one."

"Whoa..."

The soldiers, whose prime mission was defending the territory against demons, were all extremely knowledgeable regarding their enemies. They

gazed at the wondrous treant dwelling with a mixture of admiration and satisfaction.

As a frontier region, Sacula was prone to demon attacks. Its proximity to the Roaring Dragon mountain range and the adjacent large forest meant that demons were never far away. Werewolves, in particular, had a large area of activity, which meant that they often came in close contact with humans. In fact, there were many people who had run into werewolves before.

Nevertheless, despite the frequent encounters with werewolves, not many soldiers had seen a werewolf cemetery. That term referred to a location where werewolves gathered at the end of their lives, and where their remains were preserved as lumps of metal. In this world, it was a precious vein of ore. Less than ten of those cemeteries had been discovered in the Sacula region, and most of them were of such a small scale that you could not collect ample amounts of metal. It appeared that there existed giant cemeteries where metal resources were so abundant that they could stock an entire kingdom. *I wish I'd stumble across one.*

Apparently, Marquis Datara's current influence was supported by the wealth he had accumulated back in the day as a frontier-region count. Back then, he had been at the forefront of the fight against the demons during the rise of the kingdom.

On the other hand, the treants' area of activity was somewhat limited due to their sluggish movements, meaning that the encounter rate was incredibly low. The incident at Ajole village had been a stroke of extremely bad luck. As a result, there were even fewer reports of treant dwellings than werewolf cemeteries.

As the word "dwelling" suggested, it appeared that the undead gorilla in the wooden armor usually rested motionlessly inside this curious glass-bottle tree. Never having seen it myself, it sounded unbelievable to me, but it was written in the literature I had consulted. And now that I was standing right in front of a dwelling, I had to admit that the hole was a bit too large for it to be a natural cavity. Therefore, it was not too far-fetched to think that a treant could have snugly fit inside. However, I still could not believe it until I had seen one entering with my own eyes.

Anyway, the treant dwelling's profoundly mysterious glass-like bark was in fact made out of glass. *Seriously? Can you even call that a bark anymore?* Furthermore, it appeared that the regions famous for their glassware were harvesting and recycling the glass bark of treant dwellings. As a result, they were able to manufacture glass on a larger scale than anywhere else. *So, it seems to be legit.*

Sometimes the fantasy elements of this world were beneficial to humans, after all. I had already come to that conclusion after learning that it was possible to harvest metal from werewolf corpses.

But the benefits did not stop there. The candy-like, discolored substances inside the glass-bottle tree were precious resources. Lord Arthur had told me that, according to scientists in the royal capital, the yellow substance could be sulfur. *Like, seriously?* I mean, it did indeed give off a sulfuric smell. *This is probably good for us too.*

Moreover, judging from the scientists' analysis, it appeared that the red substance was a type of phosphorus, and the silver one was magnesium. I was going to check the validity of those assumptions by thoroughly examining the real thing. If it were indeed true, that would be a huge help. Especially the sulfur. *A lifesaver.*

It was unclear how widely sulfur was used by the ancient civilization, but nowadays it was nowhere to be found. Apparently, it was possible to collect a minuscule amount at hot springs, but sulfur was so important that even just a small amount was notable. Or to be precise, the sulfuric acid gained from it was so important. But since there was no way to directly obtain sulfuric acid in this world, the focus lay with sulfur itself. And that sulfur was now right in front of my eyes.

Thinking of all the things that I might have been able to finally do, my brain was releasing a flood of endorphins, causing a euphoric high. Feeling such joy, the mystery of why the treants built such dwellings had become a trivial matter. Only the tangible facts mattered—both the werewolves and the treants provided useful resources that were running dry in this world.

Ah! If only there had been demons like this in my previous life. So many

people could have been saved. The world had always been short on resources. Such peculiar beings would have probably been deified. After all, the gods of polytheistic religions also tended to bring some disasters along. *Just pray and hope for the best! Thank you, fantasy creatures! Thank you, god of fantasy, whoever you may be!*

Since I didn't know the god of fantasy's true nature, I just prayed to my beloved Goddess Yuika. *Now then, let's secure the area and collect some resources!*

The treant dwelling was so big that it was hard to believe there had only been eight of them. Fortunately, that also meant we would not be running out of resources for a while. And hopefully, we would find another dwelling in the meantime. If not, we would have to import the raw materials from other territories. Even if most territories were not willing to give up glass so readily, sulfur should not have been a problem since, to my knowledge, no individuals or associations were currently making use of it. Maybe it would be a bit pricey, but possible to strike a deal. Funny taking into account that sulfur was definitely more valuable in my eyes.

For the time being, I concentrated on turning the sulfur that we brought back into sulfuric acid. Once I had given the all clear to Hermes, the laboratory's head of experiments, he and his team, the convicts, started experimenting while adhering to methods and procedures researched in advance.

First, we needed to break open the bark glass to retrieve its contents, which already felt pretty surreal. The bark was indeed made out of glass and functioned as a receptacle, like a glass bottle. While it was convenient that the resources were protected by glass, warding off chemical changes, it also felt very artificial.

What's up with demons? They attack humans but also supply them with resources? As my questions just kept piling up, preparations to extract the sulfuric acid were in full gear.

"Mr. Hermes, we finished setting up the glass vessel."

"Thank you! I'll go have a look right away!" Hermes replied to the staff's report and promptly examined the equipment.

The main device was a glass installation. Simply put, it consisted of two chambers—one chamber combusting sulfur and niter and another one collecting the resulting sulfuric acid, which was our main goal. By making the apparatus more intricate, you could have also controlled the sulfuric acid's concentration.

"All right! No problems with the equipment!" Hermes loudly exclaimed after checking the device. He nodded at Lady Reina, who had been supervising the whole inspection. "Ms. Reina, may we begin the experiment?"

"Yes, go ahead."

It was an unusually concise, business-like exchange for a laboratory with a friendly atmosphere like ours. Normally, the staff did not address each other so formally, but in this instance, they were adhering to the rules for handling hazardous material, agreed upon by everyone. Usually, it did not matter what language our staff used, but it was essential to stick to fixed procedures when conducting dangerous experiments that required utmost care. That included formally addressing people, vocalizing each step, and waiting for approval from the superior.

The rules had first been proposed, as you may have guessed, by Lady Reina. She continued to polish her skills as an older sister who was strict when the situation called for it. She was so charismatic that even Belgo and the other convicts followed her orders without questioning. Since applying her rules, there had been a significant decrease in small and big accidents at the laboratory—so much so that Lady Maika had written up a report praising her efforts. After all, boasting about one's skilled subordinates was also part of the job as the boss.

"Then, let's start the sulfuric acid extraction experiment!"

On Hermes' signal, the device was ignited. Lady Reina attentively observed the whole process. All I had to do was enjoy the spectacle with a grin on my face. I was truly blessed to be surrounded by such brilliant lab members and research staff. Of course, that also included all my friends and coworkers.

Incidentally, the niter was mostly sourced from our manure production shed and the adjacent farm. On top of disassembling the nitrogen necessary for

compost production, the hardworking farmer microbes also supplied us with niter. We had been collecting the material for quite a while now, and today we had finally found its use.

If we managed to generate sulfuric acid, we could also make nitric acid and hydrochloric acid. Four years after obtaining alkaline materials from the slaked lime, I would finally be able to get my hands on industrial acid. The sulfuric acid could be used for anesthesia, fertilizer, and the manufacturing of batteries. Meanwhile, the nitric acid would pave the way for photography! Still, there were many more uses for those substances. *I won't run out of research ideas any time soon now.*

I felt the future taking shape in front of my eyes. Thanks to the strenuous efforts of our reliable research team, the first sulfuric acid test experiment had been a success. We managed to obtain sulfuric acid.

"Excuse me, I'm looking for Ash. I heard he's here."

At the same time that I was looking at the extracted sulfuric acid inside a glass bottle with great satisfaction, a young girl entered our experimentation shed. It was Lady Suiren, who looked rather innocent in her priestly attire. She did not seem used to wearing those kinds of clothes.

"Yes, I am here. How may I help you?"

"Oh, there you are. I heard that you're back from the treant hunt, so I wanted to stop by and thank you." Following all the rules of etiquette she had learned, the current chief of Ajole village bowed her head as politely as possible. "I truly appreciate all the kindness you have shown since the treant attack in winter up until now."

"Hearing you say that makes all our efforts worthwhile. I will make sure to let the troops know as well."

The treant search party and assault troops would surely rejoice at the young village chief's words of gratitude. And since we had finished our treant scouting, I should probably throw a celebration party to reward them for all their hard work.

"Oh, but you will tell Glen yourself, right?"

“Huh? Uhm, I-I don’t—”

“Please tell him yourself,” I decided for her with a smile.

Reading between the lines, the other lab members also smiled at the now bright-red Lady Suiren. Among the crowd of scarred, tough-looking middle-aged men, Lady Reina’s adorable chuckle stuck out like a sore thumb.

“I mean, it’s very obvious that you two... Still, you shouldn’t tease Suiren like that, Ash!” Lady Reina scolded me.

“I am doing nothing of the sort—I am merely showing support.”

“Hm, is that so?”

I awkwardly smiled as Lady Reina gave me a gentle look, as if to say, “Go easy on her.” She was becoming more and more like an older sister to everyone.

As such, she also took the initiative to explain the current situation to Lady Suiren. “In any case, you’ve come at the right time, Suiren. We just finished our experiment. I’m sure Mother Yae wants to know how it went, so you can tell her that it was a success when you get back.”

“Y-Yes, I will! What experiment?”

“Ash is the only one who knows the details...but we tried manufacturing sulfuric acid.”

“Sul...fu...ric a...cid? Sulfuric acid?” Lady Suiren repeated the words a few times to herself before clapping her hands and smiling. “I know that one! It’s the thing you use to make fertilizer! I heard that you found the material necessary to produce it during the treant search expedition. You already made it?”

“You are right. This is sulfuric acid. You really have a good memory.”

“Thanks! I’ve still got a lot to learn, but I’m trying to prioritize farming-related stuff,” Lady Suiren explained while staring at the glass bottle in my hand. She looked happy and surprised at the same time. “Wow, it looks like normal water. I expected something else. So, if you pour this on animal bones, it will produce a more effective fertilizer?”

“Yes, according to the literature. But I have yet to try it myself, so I cannot

confirm or deny it.”

“Oh, right! Hopefully it will work! I’ll do my best!”

Her last sentence was referring to the fact that she was in charge of testing the sulfuric acid fertilizer in the fields. Contrary to our first encounter, Lady Suiren had become very proactive. Currently, she was a priest trainee and collaborator of the Territory Reform Promotion Office. This training was the result of her desire to improve her agricultural knowledge following Ajole village’s unfortunate temporary dismantlement.

In addition to her, about a dozen other villagers had moved to the city, where they were helping to manage the laboratory’s test fields. I had asked Lady Suiren to be their leader. At some point, I was going to put her in charge of recording the results and planning new experiments. Looking at the way she was fervently asking Lady Reina about the details of the experiment, I could tell that it would not take too long until we had a new manager for the test fields.

However, while Lady Suiren was ambitious, she was still lacking some fundamental skills. Since she had not gone to the military academy, she was currently studying as an apprentice at the church, where she was learning reading, writing, and mathematics.

“Suiren, how are your studies with Mother Yae coming along?”

“Oh, her explanations are really easy to follow. The Folke teaching method is amazing! Much easier than when I tried to teach myself how to read back at the village.”

I was very well aware of that method. Still, when had Mother Yae started using it?

“Well, no matter the method, I am glad your studies are going well.”

“Coming to the city like I’ve always wanted and studying... It really feels like a dream. And it’s all thanks to you. I really don’t know how to pay you back.”

“Not at all! I am also grateful to have someone help us out with the test fields. We needed the manpower.”

Besides, I only relayed Lady Suiren’s wishes to my superiors, Lady Maika and

Lord Itsuki, so it did not cost me much effort. My superiors had once again shown their brilliance by not passing on such a competent worker.

“You say that, but working in the fields is yet another opportunity for me to expand my farming knowledge. Another thing to thank you for.”

“Yes, it is a relationship that benefits both parties.”

No doubt it would continue for a long while with no one getting the short end of the stick.

However, Lady Suiren showed a bittersweet smile upon hearing my assessment. “I’m really thankful, but all this kindness is overwhelming,” she murmured.

“I know what you mean,” Lady Reina said.

“At first, everyone feels that way,” Hermes affirmed.

Apart from me, everyone seemed to empathize. Bewildered, I tilted my head.

“There is nothing wrong with accepting favors. Especially if you express your gratitude.”

“That’s exactly what she’s talking about,” Lady Reina promptly replied. “I wish I had your problems.”

“I am not sure I fully understand...but it seems like you have some worries.”

Even if I did not fully grasp the situation, I knew very well what it felt like to suffer from worries. When it came to my dreams, I was constantly worried about the road ahead. As such, I tried offering some comfort.

“Come to think of it, we will soon visit the Sukuna region, which is famous for its hot springs. That would be a great opportunity to relax and turn over a new leaf.” I smiled full of excitement. My first time going to a hot spring in this world.

Lady Suiren, however, seemed even more distressed. “Are you sure I can go with you after causing so much trouble already? I feel like that would be too much...” she said with a wry smile.

“You do not have to worry. Lord Itsuki approved of it himself, and taking

advantage of your boss's kindness is the duty of any good employee."

When I had first laid out my proposal to go to the hot springs, Glen—who had contributed a great deal to our treant operation—had openly expressed that he wanted to take Lady Suiren along. Lord Itsuki, Lady Maika, and I had naturally sympathized with his feelings. He was a young boy head over heels in love—of course he wanted to bring his crush along to a nice holiday.

As for Lady Suiren, she had somehow managed to keep Ajole village afloat for the past two years. In the end, she had shown great leadership as the village chief in the face of Ajole's complete destruction. Therefore, it was not at all strange for the administration to reward her efforts. Plus, it would not make a difference if there were one more person accompanying us on our hot springs trip. All in all, it just made sense to invite Lady Suiren as well. Thus, it had been decided that she would accompany us. There was no need for her to worry about causing any trouble. If she wanted to repay me in any way, she should have just enjoyed herself. And maybe washed Glen's back.

"Besides, it was an invitation from Viscount Sukuna. The main objective of the hot springs trip will be a conference with him and His Excellency, Count Sacula."

Viscount Sukuna was one of the politicians with whom we had shared our soap recipe. While we had acted in our own interest, the viscount had been extremely happy to obtain the soap recipe as the administrator of a region famous for its hot springs. Consequently, he had extended this invitation as a token of gratitude.

Moreover, Count Sacula had scheduled a meeting, since it presented an opportunity to attend to some of the administrative business that had piled up recently. Therefore, Lord Itsuki was also going to join us to engage in diplomatic talks with the viscount and participate in a family meeting. It was no overstatement to say that it was an official business of utmost priority.

That's right, it's a business trip. It just so happens to also be a relaxing hot spring trip that'll help us forget about our worries.

Apparently, it was also very likely that I would get a chance to meet with the hot springs' owner, Viscount Sukuna, and our liege, His Excellency Count Sacula. If I played my cards correctly, I could establish a network of connections

benefiting my future endeavors. What an exciting business trip!

As I was absorbed in my plans and counting my chickens before they were hatched, the others started discussing among themselves.

“I’m in awe just thinking about the invitation from such an important person,” Lady Suiren remarked.

“That’s only natural if you’re not used to it. I mean, I’m still nervous myself,” Lady Reina reassured her.

“Don’t worry about it. Ash is about the only person who can remain calm and even look forward to a situation like this,” Hermes added.

“As expected from Ash.”

“It’s Ash after all.”

“Yeah, typical Ash.”

I don’t mind you drawing your own conclusion, but why do you need to sigh? It’s almost as if I’m a problem child. Regardless, I had understood their worries.

“It seems like you are nervous about meeting the count, but I can assure you that His Excellency is a very amicable person,” I said.

After all, he had invited the whole Promotion Office despite it being a summit of the regional leaders. He was a flexible and reasonable lord. In fact, the biggest reason for the invitation was the fact that two of Sacula’s most prominent figures had gotten married. It was a smartly arranged honeymoon for the newlyweds. Since the Promotion Office had voiced their desire for a hot springs trip at the same time, we had managed to obtain their approval. Timing is everything.

Who were the prominent newlyweds you ask? A knight who had stayed single despite his advanced age and a younger, beautiful priestess who had finally managed to chase him down. *I wish them all the best for the future.*

Viscount Sukuna had provided accommodations at the most luxurious hot spring inn in the region. While such treatment was natural for the guests of honor, the Sacula family, I did not expect it would extend to me, the son of a peasant, as well.

The wooden bungalow, which had been built with the humidity of the area in mind, did not appear very big. However, it was also partially hiding the hot spring area. Behind the building lay a carefully arranged grove, referred to as the inn's garden. The garden contained several detached houses and hot springs, where the guests could take baths to their heart's content away from all tumult. It was perfect for leisurely holidays and private meetings. Lord Itsuki had informed us of those secret gatherings, in a way maybe inevitable for a high-class resort.

Hidden from sight, there were also guards who inconspicuously patrolled the premises to deal with any spies or assassins. Unlike the Sacula troops that specialized in demon battles, the viscount's troops were experts in stopping human threats. Their presence was barely detectable, like ninjas. Even now, as I was soaking in an open-air bath, observing the charming landscape of rivers and trees in front of my eyes, I could see the guards moving around in their uniforms as little black dots. *Thank you for your hard work*, I expressed my gratitude toward the scurrying silhouettes in my thoughts. At the same time, I felt like I had ascended to heaven as I submerged myself up to my shoulders inside the bath.

"Ah, this is great."

It was as if I had been relieved of all the fatigue of the past fifteen years the moment the hot water touched my skin. Nothing beats a good bath, especially a hot spring. With a relaxed mind and body, I could plan ahead from a different point of view.

All this time, I had only been active within the Sacula region, but now that I had shared my soap recipe, that was no longer the case. After all, the royal family had monopolized the soap business until now. Judging from Viscount Sukuna's invitation, it was safe to assume that Sacula's technological advancements had been gathering attention. I had to keep an eye on both our public and secret technology with the prospect of eventually engaging in negotiations with outsiders.

"Just relax, Ash. No need to think so hard at a hot spring."

"Oh, hello, Sir George—I mean, Baleas."

Baleas had joined me at the secluded private bath. Since it was his honeymoon, I had decided to drop the formal address. He rinsed off his body, which was much more muscular than mine, before joining me inside the water.

In this world, most hot springs had mixed baths, but since people were wearing bath clothes, it was an altogether wholesome practice. Men were usually wearing knee-long pants.

Sir George let out a sigh of delight at the hot water. He went on to smile at me. “Are you still thinking about work? Try letting your mind wander a bit. You work too much.”

“If *you* are saying that I work too much, I might actually be in dangerous territory.”

In the past, he had had experiences with lethal workloads, like the winter general inspection of all military equipment at the warehouse.

Upon hearing my serious reply, Sir George broke out in cheerful laughter. “See? I’m right. Ha ha! Lord Itsuki also said that it would be convincing coming from me. Don’t make him worry too much!”

Sir George poked my shoulder with his elbow. It appeared that his advice was in consideration of his close friend Lord Itsuki.

I’m fine. I take great care of my health. “What about you, Baleas? Should you not spend your precious time off with your newly married wife instead of me?”

It was their honeymoon after all. They had even been allotted a secluded guest room with a private, open-air bath.

“Spending two days in a row just by ourselves, we kind of ran out of things to do, so we decided to spend some time apart today.”

“How are you saying that already? As a newlywed? Come on, put in some more effort!”

“Easier said than done... Don’t tease me too much.”

Sir George’s sober, virile face took on a miserable expression as he sighed. There is an expression saying that “love makes you captive,” but that did not seem to apply at all to Mother Yae. Or you could say that maybe Sir George was

just too clumsy, despite the fact that he was extremely meticulous at his job.

“What is Mother Yae doing right now?”

“She was invited by the other women to take a tour of the hot springs. They said something about wanting her advice as their senior.”

“Oh? Relationship advice, I guess?”

The Promotion Office’s girls must have been interested in the techniques of a woman like Mother Yae, who had been able to win over someone as seemingly impregnable as Sir George. They were all at the age where they showed interest in love and relationships. It could be especially helpful for Lady Suiren—her crush was a similarly serious knight, after all.

In this world, fifteen was a normal age for marriage. Quite natural considering that even within the upper echelons of society, where people lived in a comparatively good environment, the average life span was around forty years. When it came to peasants—whose life expectancy was even lower—it wasn’t strange for a fifteen-year-old to have children either. Compared to my past life, everyone here lived their lives at full speed.

“That makes sense. I was wondering what it could’ve been.” After showing himself impressed at my deduction, he uncharacteristically started teasing me with a playful expression. “Maybe I should copy my wife and give you some advice too?”

“Oh? You want to investigate my love life again?”

It had been a while since he had last done that. When I had just arrived in the city, during our first private conversation, he had asked me something similar. Back then, we had laughed it off as both of us being workaholics, but directly afterward, I had set him up on a date with Mother Yae. Great job on my part, if I may say so.

“You’ve matured quite a bit. And gained social standing,” Sir George stated before addressing me with my full name and title, “Sir Ash George Fenix.”

Yes, sir! Starting this spring, I had become a knight. Following the treant battle at Ajole village, I had been knighted by His Excellency Count Sacula. My last name obviously came from the phoenix—the immortal firebird was now my

official banner.

“Starting a family and having your name passed down is also part of your duties.”

“I sort of understand, but it lacks persuasiveness coming from you, my dear foster father.”

“Ah, right...”

My foster father Baleas, who had been single for a long time, scratched his head and tried to evade the issue. Yes, my *foster father*. My middle name was “George” because he had adopted me as his son—at least for a little under two years.

After I had graduated from the military academy, Lord Itsuki had suggested the adoption. Being the son of a farmer would have put me at a disadvantage when leading the troops and dealing with other subordinates. It had most likely also been a consequence of me voicing my doubts regarding my continued stay in the city after the academy. Lady Maika’s influence was written all over it. When I had consulted Mrs. Yuika, she had enthusiastically encouraged me to take up the offer. My parents had also readily agreed to the adoption, since it only affected our relationship superficially.

The people around me had probably been happier about me becoming “Ash George” than I myself. Lord Itsuki had been extremely relieved, and Lady Maika had rejoiced as if it had concerned her personally. Considering all the celebrations, two years really felt too short. Especially remembering Lord Itsuki’s face when I told him that I had defeated eight treants—a face like that of Sisyphus rolling the stone up the hill.

Even though Baleas had only fostered me for a short while—although officially he was still my foster father—he continued giving me some fatherly advice regarding marriage. “I may not be the best example, but I feel like that is persuasive in another way. You see, everyone kept telling me to get married. That was pretty annoying...”

“I heard that Lord Itsuki was pestering you quite a bit.”

“Yeah, he was the worst of them. Whenever a new maid arrived, he would try

to arrange a marriage meeting. It was pretty awkward."

The image of him burying his head in his hands had indeed a strangely comical persuasiveness.

"And finally, you were cornered by your adopted son arranging your marriage for you, right?"

"Precisely! It is your fault I got married."

Calling it my *fault* made it sound like a bad thing.

"Are you not happy with Mother Yae?"

"No, no, that's not it! That was just a figure of speech..."

Mother Yae definitely seemed to be the dominant partner in their marriage...

"Come to think of it, you never told me the reason why you stayed single for so long." If I remembered correctly, it had something to do with a former love interest. I would have loved to hear it. *Please tell me.* "Does Mother Yae know the reason?"

"N-No, probably not... What are you trying to get at, Ash?"

"Since I am your adopted son, would you mind telling me? If you tell me right now, this whole thing will be kept a secret among us."

"*If* I tell you right now...?"

"Yes, if you tell me right now, no one will know."

If he missed this opportunity, there was a chance that someone else might get wind of it. Mother Yae, for example. Although judging from our conversation, it was likely that she already knew, even if Sir George thought she had not found out yet. *Now then, how confident are you that you can handle Mother Yae's questioning?*

Upon hearing my kind warning, Baleas started sweating buckets. He had realized the danger of the situation, so hopefully he had an answer ready.

"Uhm..."

At that moment, his eyes sparkled, as if he had found a way to counterattack. I considered my options while waiting for his move. I was ready to crush any

sloppy excuses he could bring up.

“F-Fine. I have settled down after all. It might be a good opportunity to put it in the past.”

“Oh, really?”

It appeared he had resolved himself. Still, Sir George’s expression revealed that, while he had been cornered, he had not given up yet. He was like a knight ready to sacrifice himself to stop the enemy.

“However, I don’t want to be the only one talking. Ash, how about you talk about yourself first?”

“What about me?”

If it meant hearing Sir George’s secret love story, I was prepared to share some information.

As if he were about to play his trump card, Sir George proclaimed his next question with a poker face. “What do you think about Lady Maika?”

“I love her.”

“You must have noticed by now, right? Even I can tell that Lady Maika is attracted to you.” He ignored me and enthusiastically continued making his case. Strange. Had he not heard my reply? “Of course, Lord Itsuki’s also noticed. In fact, he’s consulted with me about Lady Maika multiple times. He really loves his niece. He’s been racking his brain to help fulfill her wish from behind the scenes.”

“I had my suspicions already...”

Or rather, I had been fully aware of it. Lord Itsuki had pretty much openly advocated for Lady Maika when he had persuaded me to stay in the city and when he had suggested I should be adopted by Sir George. When it came to his beloved niece, he forwent all subtlety and the mannerisms that were usually required from a noble person. In that regard, Lady Maika far outclassed him. As expected from Goddess Yuika’s daughter.

“I know that you are hesitant because of your different social backgrounds, but as a man, how do you feel about her? As your foster father, I would love to

hear your honest thoughts."

It seemed that Sir George's monologue had come to an end. After making sure that he was really finished, I repeated my concise reply. "I love her."

"What?" Sir George tilted his head. Didn't he hear me?

"As I said before, I love her."

"Who?"

"Maika."

"You love her?"

"Yes."

"Romantically?"

"Romantically." There was no way to make it any clearer. "That answers your question, right?" *Which means it's your turn now.*

"Wait, wait, wait! You're saying that so lightly?!"

"You asked me. I just answered your question. Also, could you talk a bit quieter? We might get in trouble if you keep yelling."

Sir George readily covered his mouth. "B-But you never showed any signs of responding to her feelings! Did you keep it a secret?"

"I am not sure if I would call it a secret. Until recently, I was not aware that it was love myself."

I had always liked her, but it was only this past year that I had started seeing her as a romantic interest, most likely because my body had physically matured. Even my moral objections related to my past-life memories had not been able to withstand my puberty's zeal.

Lady Maika had grown into an extremely charming young woman. She was cute, pretty, talented, and naturally adapting to my way of doing things. She was my ideal love interest. And I loved how she was willing to resort to any means to achieve her goals. Before I knew it, I had fallen for her. For the past year, I had felt the urge to embrace Lady Maika whenever I got close to her. However, since I had trained to become a gentleman, I showed restraint. For

the longest time, I had anticipated it happening once she had physically matured a bit more, and I had been right. I had somehow managed to avoid turning into a *lolicon*.

“Do you realize how much Lord Itsuki and Lady Yuika worried about this?”

“I do not know what to tell you...”

I was aboard a maximum priority express train toward my distant dream. Of course, I was not going to stop at a non-scheduled station. I was even prepared to blast through the scheduled stops on my route if I risked losing time. If you really wanted to stop me, you had to jump off the platform and stand in the middle of the tracks, but even then, I could not guarantee that I would stop. *So, beware of getting caught up in a fatal accident.*

I was truly a hazard. Until now, that had never bothered me. On the contrary, I had kept increasing my speed and the potential risks that entailed. However, once you had a special someone in your life, you started considering those dangers.

“It may sound weird coming from me, but I am quite the oddball.”

“You don’t have to tell me. *Everyone* knows that.”

“Hearing you reply so quickly does hurt a little bit... But that means you are aware that I can be trouble.” I felt a strange bitter taste in my mouth and gave a wry smile before continuing. “Should an oddball like me even consider marriage?”

This was different than involving coworkers or people who followed the same dreams. I was talking about the person I loved. Someone I felt drawn to. Someone I wanted to be happy from the bottom of my heart. I would end up snatching away their opportunity at a normal social life.

“I do not think someone like me should be allowed to get married.”

Sir George was taken aback by the unusual expression on my face. After examining it for a while, he seemed to grasp my opinion and determination. Eventually, my foster father frowned with a stern face before replying, “That’s your opinion, but—”

“However valuable your advice may be, please keep it to yourself,” I interrupted him. I decisively refused to hear him out, admittedly feeling a bit guilty. “It is not your place to convince me.” *I won’t be stealing your life. Nor will you be snatching my life away. So, I won’t let you speak.* “She is the only one I will allow to convince me.”

Hearing me close the subject with that statement, Sir George pursed his lips and fell silent. Just like when our spears clashed in battle, he closely watched for any opening to charge in. I stared back straight into his eyes to let him know that I was not going to let him land a hit.

Finally, Sir George burst out in quiet laughter. “Ha ha, but you are allowed to meddle in other people’s affairs and marry them off?”

“Compared to my adoption, that was quite a humble push from behind. I really did not do much.”

At most, I told Mother Yae when Sir George was off work and what kind of food he liked. That was a far cry from the political maneuvering necessary to get me adopted and placed into my current job.

“I still think you’re much more coercive.”

“That is not true at all.”

“Be honest, it was you and not Lord Itsuki who delivered the final blow, right?”

Depends on how you look at it.

Sir George raised his hands and gave up upon seeing me feign ignorance. “Either way, I understand where you’re coming from. Even if I were to suggest something, you would pay it no heed.”

“Yes, because I am always charging full speed ahead toward my goals.”

At my speed, I would lose anyone before they could sneak up on me. It was a nonstop rampage.

“Anyone who wants to know your true feelings needs to have the courage to stand in your way and face you head on.” My foster father understood me. As I nodded in affirmation, Sir George let out an exaggerated sigh. “Lady Maika

really fell for a troublesome guy.”

“It may be an irresponsible thing to say, but I wholeheartedly agree.”

Sir George gave a bittersweet smile at my selfish remarks before looking off into the distance, toward the grove and river. He had signaled the end of the conversation...but I wasn’t going to let him off so easily.

“Well, Baleas. Now it is your turn.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

Don’t pretend you don’t know. “Since I talked about myself, now I want to hear your secret. Is that not obvious?”

That was our promise. I was not going to let him evade my question by pretending like our chat had finished. I had been looking forward to hearing this story for years.

“Are you saying you will not keep your promise, Sir George?”

“U-Uhm...”

Just spill it out already! You’re a grown-up knight! Or maybe you’d prefer if I consulted Mother Yae? About her husband breaking his promise to tell his secret love story.

Seire’s Perspective

The convoy from the Sacula region had arrived. It wasn’t just another group of regular guests, but statesmen on a business trip. We had to personally give a warm welcome to the lords.

“Seire, you will look after Sir Fenix,” Viscount Sukuna, my grandfather, ordered me. His smile acted like a sheath hiding the dagger of his true intentions.

I was sixteen years old and without a fiancée; Sir Fenix was fifteen years old and unmarried. In other words, he was telling me to keep that at the back of my mind while interacting with Sir Fenix.

“Understood. However, it appears that Lady Maika also has her eyes on him.”

It was extremely likely that Lady Maika had identified Sir Fenix as a

prospective groom. At any rate, she was like a different person when engaging with him—her gaze was more passionate and constantly directed toward Sir Fenix, even when it wasn't the two of them alone.

"So, you noticed it too. Don't worry, there is no need for you to forcefully approach him. I will broach the topic myself and won't press it too much either."

"Thank you, grandfather. Please excuse my unnecessary remark."

As expected from my grandfather. He had already grasped the situation. He didn't plan on snatching him away and stirring up trouble with Count Sacula's family. I was going to follow his lead and only approach Sir Fenix in a friendly way. If by any chance that developed into something else, that would be a lucky break.

"I'm sorry," my grandfather murmured with a melancholic expression.

Seeing him like this you would not have thought that he was the viscount feared as a demon or fox-man by the public. He was just a sympathetic old man.

"About what?" I asked.

"While it may not be something unusual, I feel bad about using my granddaughter as a pawn in political games. I'm just a senile old man, so maybe I leaned out too far."

"Please don't worry about it, grandfather. As a member of the viscount's family, I have received formal education and other great luxuries, so this is part of my duty."

Besides, none of my sisters or cousins could have done it for me. They were either engaged already or in a social position where they couldn't have settled for Sir Fenix.

Despite the fact that I was the viscount's granddaughter, it was next to impossible for me to inherit the title. An engagement between me and the knight Sir Fenix would not upset the balance in our family. Even if it weren't possible for Sir Fenix to join the viscount's family as my groom, I could always accompany him as his wife to the Sacula region.

My education had prepared me for this exact scenario. I had to gather and consolidate information, which in turn allowed me to get the bigger picture. It was quiet, delicate, and intellectual work. The women of the house of Sukuna had survived in this aristocratic society by relying on secret intelligence. I quite liked that.

“Besides, Sir Fenix is an accomplished hero proficient in both military and literary arts.”

Recently, his name had become the center of attention here at the house of Sukuna. Everyone agreed that, no matter the context, his name wasn’t one to overlook.

The name of Sir Fenix—although at the time he was still just Sir George’s adjutant—had first made its landing here together with the reports of an airplane, a technology that had only been a myth until then. In Sacula, they had resurrected a machine capable of flying through the skies! It had sounded too outlandish even for a lie. No one here had believed it. It had felt akin to an attempt at deceiving the monkey god. Therefore, no one had tried to corroborate the tall tale either. However, a little while later we had learned the truth.

After staying at Count Sacula’s mansion in the royal capital, my grandfather had come back telling us about the flying machine that he had been shown, which caused a huge uproar. Even an experienced nobleman like my grandfather couldn’t hide the mixture of confusion, amazement, and excitement showing on his face. Once the flying machine had started circulating as a local product from the Sacula region, we all came to share his sentiment.

I had also managed to get my hands on one. It had looked much smaller than expected from the outlandish stories. The machine capable of flying through the skies had been small enough to fit in the palm of my hand, but its impact was much bigger.

Needless to say, the airplane had caused a mad rush at the house of Sukuna. Technology seemingly—no, in fact, straight out of legends had suddenly appeared in front of our eyes. For the house of Sukuna, which maintained its influence behind the scenes through the gathering of information, such a bolt

out of the blue was unthinkable. Everyone—from the leaders to the small fries like me—had turned pale at the revelation.

It had quickly become our priority to find out “what” had caused this. No one had even thought of questioning “who” was behind it. Outside of fictional stories, no individual could have created such a legendary item. After all, we were only dealing with facts from the real world. Or so we had thought.

When our intelligence network had reached out to the house of Sacula, they had found out that it had all been the work of a single individual: Sir George’s adjutant. Sir George himself was a well-renowned military leader who supported Lord Itsuki, Count Sacula’s successor. Naturally, his adjutant would have been someone capable. However, that should have been limited to military feats. How had a military officer produced such highly advanced technology? Had it been a decoy? Had the house of Sukuna lost the information warfare?

However, the Sacula family was known for its dauntless courage, fortitude, and vigor. They weren’t the type to engage in information warfare or similar tricks. Not that we looked down upon them for that. On the contrary, we probably actually feared them. That family was able to ignore gathering intelligence precisely because they had the power to just cut off the heads of their enemies, no questions asked. If anyone wanted to gain information, they were welcome to ask and even visit. However, once they considered you an eyesore, they were ready to crush you from head to toe at a moment’s notice. That was the horror of Sacula’s lair of violence. Thus, the information must have been true. I couldn’t believe it, but I had to accept it.

Apparently, Sir George’s adjutant had been involved in making the airplane. It seemed like the adjutant was still young. Apparently, a trainee. A military academy student. A peasant. Our expert spies had relayed the information in such a doubtful tone that they had resembled trainees themselves. It had sounded too strange. Everyone had held their breath. How could such a small, ordinary figure have conquered the skies? He reconstructed a mythical machine capable of flying through the air! We had expected a god-like being, yet it was a mere mortal...

But apparently, that mere mortal had killed a bear by himself at a young age.

It seemed like he was so knowledgeable about the early period of the ancient civilization that even priests sought out his wisdom. Allegedly, he had fought and defeated a werewolf one-on-one. He was also rumored to be the shadow chef of a famous restaurant in Itsutsu city. Moreover, he had also seemingly turned the Church's teachings upside down, manufactured building stones at will, made great medical advancements, and could generate magic-like fire. It was also said that he had discovered a way to solve food shortages. And apparently, he had wiped out a herd of treants without suffering any injuries.

Our doubts had just kept growing the more we had looked into him. Our intelligence experts had been at their wit's end. Had they not been researching a human? A young boy? In our imagination, Sir Fenix had looked more like a hydra. So much so that we had started to simply refer to him as "the Fiend."

However, before we could unravel his true nature, he had found us. Going by way of His Excellency Count Sacula, the Fiend had proposed to share one of his new technologies with Viscount Sukuna. A recipe for manufacturing soap. Could he have offered anything better to a region famous for its hot springs? It was as if the Fiend had read our minds.

Of course, it hadn't been cheap. However, it had also presented an opportunity for a joint stand against the soap monopoly held by the wealthy merchants backed by the marquis in the royal capital. In fact, the offer had been approved almost immediately after Viscount Sukuna had convened a special summit. Anyone could see its benefits. While some people had been suspicious, it had just been too good an offer. Besides, the house of Sacula was considered extremely trustworthy. They would've never started a war willingly. They needed to stay focused on repelling the demons after all.

"This is almost too gracious of them," my grandfather, Viscount Sukuna, had said. "It would be dishonorable not to repay this debt. Let us invite the count and his cohorts to give them a warm welcome here."

Or, in other words, "Let's confirm the Fiend's true nature." Everyone had held their breath upon hearing his words. Including me. We would finally meet the unknown, mysterious figure.

I was nervous, maybe even a bit scared. But at the same time, I also had a

burning desire to meet him. I was incredibly lucky. To have an audience with such an amazing figure was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity!

“Dear grandfather, it is an honor that you put me in charge of entertaining Sir Fenix during his stay.”

This was my calling as a member of this family. I felt tremendous excitement at the prospect of uncovering the unknown.

At last, the time had come to make contact with Sir Fenix. My grandfather had spotted him separating from the women and heading for a hot spring bath together with the men. I changed into my bathing clothes and joined the other girls who had been selected as members of the reception committee. Sir Fenix was our main target this time. The two older girls were also going to approach the acting count, Lord Itsuki, but that was mostly just for fun.

It was common knowledge that Lord Itsuki’s heart belonged to a woman who had tragically died. As a woman, I respected his attitude, but as an aristocrat, I also believed it also left him open to attack. My grandfather wanted to teach him a little lesson not to show his weakness, which would also serve as a distraction for my discourteous interaction with Sir Fenix. *As always, well played, granddad.*

As soon as we had received my grandfather’s signal, we once again looked at each other and nodded before stepping onto the steam-filled battlefield. Everyone quickly found the person they had been assigned and positioned themselves right next to them. Of course, my spot was beside Sir Fenix.

“I am your hostess. My name is Seire. Would you like a cold glass of water?” I asked with a smile.

“I would love to have one,” Sir Fenix replied with a gentle smile of his own.

“Here you go.”

As I handed him a sophisticated glass full of water, I closely observed him. As expected, he was handsome. Many of the girls, including me, had found him attractive at first sight upon his arrival, but it was a whole other experience seeing his wet body from up close. Above all, I was shocked by the deep scars on his torso. I had heard the stories of Sir Fenix defeating a bear at his village,

fighting a werewolf in the city, and, most recently, annihilating a herd of treants. He was a brave warrior.

However, he hadn't given off any such aura until now. His gentle smile made him look like a quiet, docile intellectual. Regardless, his scars told of his bravery. This young boy had struggled through so many difficult battles that it was a miracle he was still alive.

When Sir Fenix started drinking his glass of water, my eyes were drawn to his neck. Now that I was aware of his deep wounds, each one of his movements appeared precious. They were proof that he was alive.

With those precious movements, he looked surprised and smiled. "This is great service. Thank you for your thoughtfulness. A wonderfully cool refreshment."

"Th-Thank you very much."

He sounded like a young nobleman. My heart skipped a beat. Amazing. Almost the exact opposite of what I had expected. His behavior stood in stark contrast to his simple farmer background and the manly scars on his chest. This was the true Sir Fenix—the true nature of the Fiend.

While I was observing Sir Fenix's physique, the entertainment of the other guests was peacefully moving along. I say "peacefully," yet it was a sort of warfare. According to the plan, two older beautiful women were clinging to Lord Itsuki, playfully seducing him. Meanwhile, I was taking care of Sir Fenix. Only the married Sir George was left alone—he was enjoying an actual peaceful bath.

Not knowing what to do with two beautiful girls leaning on both his shoulders, Lord Itsuki awkwardly voiced his grievances. "Viscount Sukuna, would it be possible to tell your hostesses to leave me be? Just like they did with my vassal."

"Ha ha, what nonsense! A handsome man like you shouldn't stay a bachelor! Your dear father was also lamenting the lack of an heir the other day."

"Even if my father says so, that is still no reason to use such tricks on me."

"But there's also no reason *not* to use them."

Feeling himself at a disadvantage against an experienced opponent like my grandfather, Lord Itsuki cried out for help. “My vassals, your lord has fallen victim to a cowardly ambush. I need your assistance.”

Upon hearing the acting count’s order, Sir Fenix and Sir George exchanged glances.

“Ash, I’m sorry, but I can’t be of any help here...”

“I understand.”

It appeared that Sir George’s new wife had him in the palm of her hand. Or to put it more positively, he was deeply faithful to her. Therefore, he disobeyed Lord Itsuki’s order. What would Sir Fenix do?

“I guess it is just me then,” Sir Fenix murmured and surveyed the scene to assess the difference in fighting power. “Lord Itsuki, I do agree that it is your fault for still being a bachelor.” And just like that, he abandoned the lord whom he served. “You are the acting count, the count’s successor, and you are still single at nearly thirty years old. Even someone without great ambitions would try and take advantage of you by having a beautiful woman seduce you. This should be your wake-up call to find yourself a wife and start a family. Until then, you will have to deal with situations like this.” His extremely serious look made the statement appear like an expression of his loyalty.

“Is that how a vassal talks to their lord?!” Lord Itsuki exclaimed.

“Sometimes it is the duty of a loyal subject to say the uncomfortable truth.” Sir Fenix delivered the finishing blow with a big smile and a bow.

It looked so silly that everyone bar Lord Itsuki broke out into laughter. Even I let out a hearty giggle.

In the end, Sir Fenix had taken our side and ordered the hostesses to continue teasing Lord Itsuki. Following that setup, I should have also happily participated in the teasing.

What a funny guy. He wasn’t just brave and surprisingly knowledgeable, but he also had a good sense of humor. He was full of surprises and talents.

Moreover, it seemed that my grandfather thought the same. With cheerful

laughter, he addressed Sir Fenix. “You are a delight.”

“All thanks to Lord Itsuki. He loves receiving advice from his vassals. It really is a pleasure to serve him.”

I see what you’re doing. Now Itsuki won’t be able to stay mad. My condolences.

“Hm... Lord Itsuki is indeed a pleasant person to talk to,” my grandfather said.

During the brief breaks in their amicable conversation, my grandfather kept glancing at me while stroking his beard. He had started to lay the groundwork for the main topic of the night.

“I haven’t had much of a chance to talk to you, Ash... Or Sir Fenix, was it?”

“Yes. His Excellency Count Sacula bestowed upon me the title of knight this past winter. My full name is Ash George Fenix.”

My grandfather re-introduced himself as well, whereupon Sir Fenix politely bowed.

“I have heard rumors about you for quite some time now. Your name’s been on my mind since Count Sacula showed me the model airplane.”

“My colleagues would be pleased to hear that the airplane left an impression on Your Excellency. The idea originated from one of my coworkers, who had dreamt about flying since he was a child.”

This matched the information provided by our spies. However, the situation was a bit more complex than that. While Mr. Hermes had been an important player in making the airplane, Sir Fenix had provided a strong push forward by pulling all the threads together.

“I cannot emphasize enough how much Hermes contributed. It is hard to find such a passionate and consistent worker.”

Yet Sir Fenix didn’t talk about himself. My grandfather must have thought the same when he uttered his next sentence.

“Hm... This Hermes appears to be very skilled indeed, but I am more impressed with you, Sir Fenix.”

Sir Fenix looked perplexed. Almost as if to say that he was of little significance. “With me?”

“Your achievements have even reached my old ears. Not just the airplane, but also the new building materials, the farming methods and farming tools, and, of course, the soap recipe that you so graciously shared with us. I am struck with admiration.”

My grandfather had gone on the offense. Count Sacula had been hiding their new farming technologies. To bring that secret information up as praise was a power move from the viscount.

Sir Fenix’s expression didn’t change. However, he couldn’t be indifferent to the fact that an outsider had brought up his region’s secret information. Sir Fenix must have been suppressing his reaction. In fact, his next words just glossed over it.

“We worked hard these past few years.” He remained calm and made it sound so ordinary. Almost as if he was operating on a whole other level than us.

“Moreover, you are not just intelligent, you also show great bravery in battle. Your body speaks for itself.”

My grandfather kept on praising him. And in response, Sir Fenix praised someone else. His subordinates, his coworkers, his comrades, his childhood friend—but no mention of a lover. Did he really not have anyone? Even though he was such an accomplished person? What about Lady Maika? Maybe there still was a chance for me.

Gradually, Sir Fenix was cornered by my grandfather. He could no longer run from the praise. In that regard, my grandfather’s experience gave him the upper hand. Finally, the viscount broached the topic he’d been wanting to talk about.

“I don’t think there is anyone else like you under the sun. I would love to have your outstanding talent here in our region.”

That was an almost dangerously direct proposal. For a moment, I panicked as I thought it was careless. And sure enough, Lord Itsuki, who had forced a smile until now, suddenly became serious.

“Lord—Your Excellency Lord Sukuna, that goes a little too far. Sir Fenix is

fulfilling an important duty as a knight in our region."

"Ha ha, I was joking. I wasn't planning on actually luring him away. I just wanted to openly state how jealous I am of his talent."

My grandfather smoothly dodged Lord Itsuki's sharp admonition. Because his statement had been so direct, he could easily play it off as a joke. In contrast, if he had done it in a more concealed way, it would have been harder to walk it back.

"We would greatly welcome and handsomely pay anyone as talented as Sir Fenix, but unfortunately he seems to be one of a kind. Still, we pride ourselves in our territory's picturesque scenery, and at least when it comes to offering relaxation for mind and body, not even the royal capital can beat us." While enumerating our territory's selling points, my grandfather glanced at me. "These hot springs really are good for your health and beauty. Many people say we have the most beautiful women in the kingdom here, but what do you say, Sir Fenix?"

Despite being nervous, I smiled following my grandfather's words. We were always told that a Sukuna woman looked the prettiest when she smiled.

"Yes, I concur. They are very beautiful," Sir Fenix proclaimed while directly looking at my face.

Although I was far down in the succession line, I was still Viscount Sukuna's granddaughter. As such, I had to present myself at my best, and I was used to receiving a lot of compliments day in and day out. Nevertheless, I felt my cheeks turning red. His words had been more powerful than expected. Sir Fenix was using straightforward words that resonated with me... *No, I need to be more honest with myself.* I was happy to be complimented by Sir Fenix. It appeared that I was more attracted to him than I had initially thought. *Come on, grandfather, can you push him a little—a lot more?*

"Oh, I see, I see. Seire right here is actually one of my granddaughters. She is already sixteen years old, but regrettably, she hasn't been blessed with a suitable candidate for marriage yet. If only there were someone as wonderful as you, Sir Fenix, I would love to introduce her to him."

So, what do you say? While I may have been a year older, that shouldn't have

made much of a difference at this age. With upturned eyes, I looked at Sir Fenix to wait for his reply. Apparently, this move made men's hearts flutter. Besides, I couldn't bear staring calmly into his eyes.

Lord Itsuki appeared quite flustered—a sign of how much the acting count valued his vassal. Meanwhile, Sir Fenix himself was wearing a relaxed smile. It didn't seem like he had taken a liking to my grandfather's proposal. His smile resembled a beast of prey baring its teeth.

"One can never have enough talented people around. If Your Excellency can spare any experts, or even just people with promising talent, we would love to welcome them to Sacula."

Taking my grandfather's words into account, Sir Fenix shifted the conversation in a different direction. Unfortunately, I hadn't been charming enough to make him fall for me. *Please forgive me, granddad.*

My grandfather forced a bitter smile when I glanced at him. Since he didn't want to risk his relationship with the house of Sacula, he decided not to push the issue any further and replied to Sir Fenix's remarks. "You make it sound like your efforts and achievements aren't good enough."

"They are not sufficient at all. Although the current situation in Sacula is already more than ideal."

That latter statement sounded like he was emphasizing his refusal of my grandfather's proposal. However, in the former sentence he also said that he wasn't satisfied at all. What was he trying to say?

As if he had read my thoughts, Sir Fenix qualified his statement. "There is still a long way to go until I can achieve my dream," he declared with a burning passion. "It is not enough to revive the rich and abundant life of the ancient civilization from the legends."

A convenient life with convenient tools. A society where it was the norm to take care of the sick and poor. Where the rich and hardworking lived in abundant luxury. In order to achieve such a society, more sages, craftsmen, merchants, and politicians were needed. It was almost as if the legend was contained within Sir Fenix's body and couldn't wait to jump out into the open.

“We do not have nearly enough materials,” he continued. “I take it you started manufacturing soap? Did your shops and ateliers multiply? What about your tax yields? Immigration? How much more time and effort do you have to spend on managing your financial affairs and public order?”

Before I realized it, I felt my breath catch. The air felt hot. And not because of the hot springs, but because Sir Fenix had correctly guessed the recent chaos here in the Sukuna region.

The house of Sacula shouldn’t have had any spies. So, how had he obtained this information? The answer was simple—he hadn’t. He had just known all along that it would end up like that. New technology birthed new commodities, which in turn stimulated the market and led to disorder.

“And your work will keep on increasing henceforth. Just like growing wheat or a spreading fire, change always brings forth more change. It is unstoppable.”

Upon hearing this clear prediction, my grandfather’s voice became husky. “Do you really think so, Sir Fenix?”

“To be precise, it will not happen automatically.” Sir Fenix’s next words stood out like the moon in the night sky. “*I* will make it happen. As long as I am chasing after my dreams, I will have to keep changing things.” At that moment, his eyes were shining bright and burning with passion. He was resolved to move forward in a straight line no matter where it took him. “Eventually, I want to establish an education system that reaches as many people as possible. That will likely not come to fruition in the next ten or twenty years. However, I do not intend to take fifty or sixty years either. In fact, we have already planted the seeds in the Sacula territory,” Sir Fenix declared with a smile.

I felt completely overwhelmed. He was a bigger personality than anyone I’d ever met. He was like a fire burning in the distance. When I had first seen him from afar, he had indeed looked small. However, the further I had walked toward the light, the bigger the fire had grown. And that fire was burning in the Sacula region, not here in Sukuna. Regrettably so.

“With each passing day, the Sacula territory is in need of more and more personnel. But we will not just wait for talented people to show up—we will train them ourselves. In fact, we have already started. For example—” Just

when I had thought I was going to be left behind, Sir Fenix's eyes met with mine. "Seire!"

"Y-Yes!"

I didn't manage to uphold the calm composure required of a hostess. My wavering voice made me sound like a simple town girl. What a blunder! Yet Sir Fenix gave a warm smile. Although "fiery smile" would probably be a more accurate description.

"If you wish to expand your knowledge and create new things, you are always welcome in Sacula."

Was he inviting me now? From what standpoint? Surely not to marry him? Because if that were the case, I should have agreed. I had already considered leaving Sukuna for Sacula if I could marry him. However, I was in awe now that I had witnessed Sir Fenix's greatness firsthand.

"N-No, what could someone as inexperienced as me possibly accomplish?"

As I took a step backward, Sir Fenix moved another step forward.

"That is fine. We do not need you to be exceptionally skilled at this point in time."

"RReally? But you're a hero at your age already. I can't possibly—"

"All that you need is a desire to learn. If you are willing, we will teach you the necessary knowledge."

While I tried sidestepping, Sir Fenix kept pushing ahead. Overwhelmed, I suddenly came to a realization. *He is using the same tactics as my grandfather earlier.* Was this revenge? At that moment, I regained my composure. Sir Fenix wasn't serious about inviting me. I just had to play it off with a smile.

However, as I was getting ready to do so, Sir Fenix preempted me. "And if you desire something that we do not know either, we will just find the solution together!" Sir Fenix enticed me with a smile.

But it wasn't just any smile. It was the innocent smile of a child happily chasing after his dreams, completely at odds with his mature and intellectual manner of speaking.

My face turned hotter than it had ever been. I was no longer able to just dodge him with a smile. How sly. I thought it had all been a lie. Just diplomatic language—a meaningless exchange between aristocrats. But in the end, he genuinely invited me to join him.

“That is how we are currently cultivating talent. Helping people willing to learn to achieve their dreams. If you are interested, you are welcome to join us, Seire.”

“I am grateful for the offer, but...I-I’m not sure how to respond,” I replied in a hoarse voice.

I really didn’t know what to do. Receiving an invitation with such a joyful expression almost made me want to join him...

How did it end up like this? *I* was supposed to seduce *him*. I should have just focused on my job... Yet here I was, wavering. I felt like the fire burning in my chest would never go out again. I really had no idea what to do now.

• • •

The following day, while I was enjoying myself at the hot spring resort, I was summoned to a meeting—it was a direct order.

There were only three people currently here in the Sukuna region who could issue orders to me, a Sacula knight: the acting count, Lord Itsuki; my military superior, Sir George; and my direct supervisor, Lady Maika. However, the order had not come from any of them, which meant it must have come from His Excellency Count Sacula, who was supposed to meet up with us at the resort. Finally, I would come face-to-face with my liege as a knight.

When I entered the conference room, I noticed Lord Itsuki and Sir George already sitting at the long table and a large-built, middle-aged man sitting in the seat of honor. Despite his age, he had a respectable muscular physique. He was none other than Count Gentoh Sacula Amanobe.

“Ash George Fenix, at your service.”

As I took a bow, a grin came over His Excellency’s stern face.

“Oh, there you are! I’ve been wanting to meet you for a while, Sir Fenix!”

The count left his chair with such nimble movements that you would not have thought he was already in his mid-forties. Then, he proceeded to lumber toward me and place both his hands on my shoulders. Or rather, he slapped them. Not out of animosity, but affection. His face lit up.

“Sorry for summoning you so abruptly. I wanted to meet you as soon as possible, so I rushed here without sending any messengers ahead!”

He was extremely friendly from the get-go. Better than the opposite, but still a surprise.

Did he actually ride here himself? Instead of taking a carriage? What an energetic forty-year-old!

“The capital is so boring, but your reports always brighten my mood. Ha ha, I can’t believe we finally get to see each other!”

“The pleasure is mine, Your Excellency. I am deeply grateful for receiving the title of knight from you.” *But I’d prefer if you didn’t hit my shoulders so hard, Your Excellency.*

“That’s the least I could do for someone of your caliber! I wish I could give you more. Don’t you agree, Itsuki?” He invited his son into the conversation.

“I agree, father, but maybe you could be a bit gentler with Ash. He is built a bit smaller than you,” his son cautioned him about his intense greeting slaps.

Thanks for the backup.

“At first glance, he looks frail, but he’s got a sturdy trunk. And a lot of muscles.” His Excellency did not seem to get the message.

“Thank you, Your Excellency.”

“Your appearance lives up to your tales of bravery! You’re a real hero, Sir Fenix!” he complimented me while violently slapping my shoulders.

I reciprocated Lord Itsuki’s apologetic look with a wry smile. I just resigned myself to my fate. *I’d rather he’s overly friendly than hard to please.*

After His Excellency Count Sacula had finished greeting me, he did not return to the seat of honor, but rather sat down on the nearest chair.

“So much for the formalities.”

Wait. That was a formal greeting? It had felt more like an onslaught of casualness.

“Let’s get some food and drinks and discuss things in a relaxed setting. After all, the subject’s a bit complicated...”

“That sounds good. Let me—”

As the person of lowest standing, it should have been my duty to call the hostess, but before I could say anything, His Excellency’s deep, piercing voice resonated in the room.

“Hey, is anyone there? Can you bring us some snacks and alcohol?”

A flustered reply came from outside the room. Given the hostesses’ skills, they must have noticed immediately that the voice belonged to the count. No wonder they would panic.

“Now that that’s taken care of, let’s get to the first order of business.”

“Father, not everyone’s here yet. Shouldn’t we wait until Maika arrives?”

“Hm? Oh, you’re right.”

“You really should behave a bit more like your age...” Lord Itsuki sighed in exasperation, but His Excellency just casually laughed it off.

It felt refreshing to see Lord Itsuki, who was usually easygoing himself, become the voice of reason. His Excellency Count Sacula’s overly friendly and openhearted attitude forced his surroundings to intervene. Quite the spectacle.

“Your Excellency is very quick to act,” I told the middle-aged count sitting next to me.

Yes, next to me. After engaging me in close combat upon my arrival, His Excellency had sat down in the nearest chair. Or in other words, His Excellency had casually sat down in one of the lower seats. And since I could not possibly have taken a higher seat, I had to sit down next to him. I felt terribly out of place, unlike the count himself.

“Hm! Yeah, speed is essential to all aspects of life. Especially when it comes to

defending the territory—you never know when the next demons could show up. If you take too long, there might not even be a next time. You should always act as soon as possible."

"So, in a way, the territory sharpened Your Excellency's senses?"

As a result, he had arrived without any preliminary announcement, did not care about the seating arrangement, and loudly ordered food before the lowest-ranked person could do so. As a citizen of the Sacula region, I had to say that speed was definitely not the norm, though.

"Still, Itsuki and my men often say I'm too hasty."

To no avail, it appeared. Clearly, it would have been pointless to say anything as a newcomer myself.

"Your Excellency, I am quite curious about the royal capital. Has anything interesting been happening?"

"As I said earlier, boring as usual. Lots of mean comments and everyone trying to drag each other down. Oh, by the way!" He sat back upright and his bulky torso leaned forward. "Arthur sends his regards. Ha ha! He would have scolded me if I forgot to tell you all, especially to Ash." Count Sacula's smile was bittersweet, probably because he had to pretend that Lord Arthur was his youngest son.

"I am happy to hear that. Is Arthur doing well? In his last letter, everything seemed fine."

"Yeah, he's doing all right. Although he keeps reminiscing about Sacula and grumbling about wanting to go back."

Just like in the letters I had received.

"As long as he is not bottling things up and restraining himself, I am relieved."

"Ha ha, not sure about that. He would have loved to come along on this trip. Before my departure, he looked at me quite reproachfully."

Given Lord Arthur's true identity, she could not have easily left the royal capital. Unfortunately, if I wanted to meet her, I would have to visit the capital myself.

After inquiring about several anecdotes mentioned in Lord Arthur's letters, someone knocked on the door.

"Ah, that must be Maika!" Lord Itsuki said.

At the same time, His Excellency the count, who had been talking nonstop until now, suddenly fell silent in the middle of his sentence. It was as if time had stopped. As I was observing his motionless bulky body, Lady Maika entered the room.

"I sincerely apologize for my late arrival."

Lady Maika's hair was damp and her skin flushed. Apparently, she had been taking a hot spring bath when her grandfather had summoned her. Naturally, it had taken some time for her to get here.

After bowing, Lady Maika expressed puzzlement at the empty seat of honor. She seemed even more confused upon discovering the middle-aged man sitting next to me. Lord Itsuki and Sir George frantically made eye contact to signal to her that she was in fact not imagining things.

Although she did not understand why the middle-aged man had taken one of the lower seats, she politely greeted him. "Your Excellency Count Sacula, it is an honor to meet you. I am Maika Amanobe, the daughter of Noscula's village chief, Klein, and your daughter Yuika." Her greeting was impeccable despite her confusion, her soft voice music to the ears, and her elegant movements a visual delight.

In contrast, His Excellency remained silent. With sealed lips and a rigid expression, he stared at Lady Maika. The tension was palpable. A thousand times stiffer than my introduction. But why? She was his granddaughter, related by blood.

Maika had not anticipated this reaction either. She squinted while racking her brain at full speed to come up with an appropriate response. Her late arrival was the only possible explanation one could come to. Maika had come to the same conclusion, and took a deep bow with an earnest expression on her face.

"Once again, my sincere apologies. I deeply regret answering your call with such delay."

I probably would have acted the same. However, the count of Sacula just briefly nodded. He gazed at Lady Maika without uttering a single word.

Strange... Even if she had committed a faux pas, he should have just moved on after the apology. Putting aside the matter of forgiveness, he had summoned Lady Maika for a reason, so it made no sense to stay silent.

Heavy silence filled the room. Lady Maika appeared increasingly worried when she decided to try one last time. “Your Excellency? May I ask if I did something rude? I am still inexperienced, but I would love to know if I offended you, so I can correct my ill manners.”

However, His Excellency remained silent. So much so that it almost appeared as if he had turned into stone. Lady Maika was at her wits’ end, so she let her eyes wander around the room to look for help. It was Lord Itsuki who came to the rescue of his beloved niece. With a heavy sigh, he complained to his motionless father.

“Father, you’re embarrassing Maika. Just admit it already.”

Admit what?

Lady Maika and I held our breaths and strained our ears to hear the reason for his bizarre mood.

“Admit that your granddaughter is cute,” Lord Itsuki added.

He thought that his granddaughter was cute? What was strange about that? How did that relate to the count’s stiff behavior?

“C-Cute...?!” The count broke his silence by screaming at the top of his lungs. “But Itsuki! M-My granddaughter is... She is the daughter of the man who stole my dear, beloved Yuika away from me!”

It was difficult to make out what he was screaming, but you could see the pain in his eyes. It would not have been a surprise if he started vomiting blood any moment now. A cry from the soul of a man who deeply adored his daughter.

“Yes. And she’s also the daughter of your dear, beloved Yuika!” The count’s son remained calm, his inner strength exceeding that of his father.

“Y-Yuika’s daughter...” The count’s head was shaking violently, as if he were suffering a convulsion.

His son used that opportunity to raise his voice and press for an answer. “That’s right, father! Your grandchild standing before you is Yuika’s daughter! She’s extremely smart, strong, *and* cute! Don’t you agree?”

“Aargh!!!”

Your Exce— Well, whatever, let’s just leave him be.

The count bent over backward and held his head as if he had just suffered a direct blow upon seeing his granddaughter.

“Admit it, father! You can’t keep averting your eyes forever! My dear sister Yuika married Sir Klein, and together they raised this wonderful girl! Come on, open your eyes and look at her!”

The count clenched his teeth. What was he fighting against? Taking deep breaths, the granddad started facing toward Lady Maika, who seemed to have frozen in panic. However, neither the count nor his successor had noticed her current state, so they continued talking with ever-increasing enthusiasm.

“What do you think, father? Don’t tell me you think she isn’t cute? Can you bring yourself to say that she’s not cute?”

“She is n-no-no—No, I can’t say it!!!” Lady Maika’s granddad yelled while pounding the table. “She is *the cutest*!!!”

“Exactly! She’s *the cutest*! And she’ll be even *cuter* when you *talk* to her!”

“Really, Itsuki?!”

“She’s hardworking and very considerate. She is a great girl, father!”

“Th-That’s awesome, Itsuki!”

“Yes, she is wonderful, father!”

I no longer knew what was going on. What was I supposed to do? For the time being, I just let my embarrassment show itself.

Outside the room, you could hear the pitter-patter of the hostesses who had noticed the unusual situation. Someone had shouted to summon Viscount

Sukuna. I really felt sorry for them.

Meanwhile, Lady Maika, who was just as—or I should say even more—confused than me, had come to hide behind my back.

“S-Say, Ash... Hm... What...” Lady Maika mumbled hesitantly, not knowing how to react to her uncle and grandfather fawning over her. After a brief pause, she pointed at them with her shivering finger. “What is that?”

“I have no idea, and I do not want to know either,” I replied. However, their loud yelling hinted at the reason. “But I guess you could say that your uncle and your granddad lost their minds due to your cuteness.” That was all the conjecture I was willing to make.

Just as Maika and I had lost all motivation to get things straight, Viscount Sukuna entered the room.

“Sorry for intruding. I heard that there was some kind of major trouble?”

I felt deeply embarrassed for bothering the elderly viscount, who was surely busy with other matters. “Your Excellency Viscount Sukuna, my apologies for causing you such inconvenience.” I took a deep bow as I apologized for my rampaging superiors. *Shouldn’t it be the other way around?* “There is indeed some trouble, but it is nothing serious, so you can just leave them be.”

The viscount seemed to already have grasped the situation from listening to the ramblings of the uncle fawning over his niece and the granddad praising his daughter and granddaughter to the skies. He nodded at me with an extremely gentle smile.

“Ha ha, indeed, it doesn’t sound serious. By the way, your food and drinks will be here any moment.”

“Please do not bother with them anymore. And thank you very much!”

“Don’t worry about it!” Now the viscount had started pitying me upon seeing my incessant apologetic bowing. “As a father, I can understand having mixed feelings about your dear daughter’s child.”

“Oh, really?” Lady Maika tilted her head.

“Yes, of course. I also think my grandchildren are cute, but I falter upon seeing

the traits of the man who stole my daughter."

So that's *why granddad over there turned into a stone statue earlier.* And once he had overcome the initial shock, he had talked himself into a state of euphoria, praising his granddaughter's cuteness. How terrifying.

"Besides, as you're probably aware, Sir Klein and Lady Yuika's courtship isn't exactly one of Gentoh's fondest memories," he said, assuming that we knew what he was talking about. Unfortunately, we did not. "Oh? You don't know?"

"No, we do not. We have been too embarrassed to ask..." I answered the viscount's question while glancing at Lady Maika next to me.

These past five years, there had been more than enough opportunities to ask about the beginning of Goddess Yuika and Chief Klein's romance. However, we had refrained from doing so out of respect for Lady Maika's mental health. There was nothing more embarrassing than hearing your parents talk about their love life, no matter your age. Especially if it had caused such a ruckus at the time. Although I was still not sure why I had been roped into this. Nonetheless, I played along, as I could not refuse any request from Lady Maika, who had supported me so much over the years.

"Hm. I guess that makes sense," Viscount Sukuna, who must have had a lot of experience in life, just laughed it off.

"Maika, maybe it is time you should know," I said.

"You think so too?" Lady Maika appeared to agree with my assessment, but still looked for confirmation.

"Yes, I mean..." My gaze wandered over to Lord Itsuki, who was recounting a cute anecdote about Lady Maika, and Count Gentoh, who was enthusiastically listening to it. "Just in case something comes up. Luckily, this time it was resolved like that."

"You're right." Lady Maika dropped her shoulders, admitting that the time had come. "So, Viscount Sukuna, if you know, would you mind telling us?"

"Sure. Do you want me to keep it brief?"

Lady Maika agreed to the elderly viscount's kind suggestion with an

embarrassed nod.

“Let’s see. Do you know about the Royal Sword Fighting Tournament?”

The tournament was famous, so both Lady Maika and I nodded. It was a national sword fighting tournament that took place approximately every five years. Normally, only soldiers and knights from the vicinity participated in the royal capital’s regular competitions, but the Royal Tournament attracted fighters who took pride in their skills from all over the country.

“I heard that it will be held this year.”

“Yes. Since there haven’t been any major demon incidents, it looks like it can safely take place this year.”

Most likely, the schedule of “approximately every five years” was due to the possible postponements caused by major demon incidents. Disaster areas and surrounding territories would only suffer more loss and damages if they had to send their best fighters to a tournament while facing off against demons. Or to put it differently, it was such a prestigious tournament that it was worth sending your best fighters despite suffering heavy losses.

“And it seems the winner receives a gold medal.”

“That is correct. I assume you also know how special a gold medal is...”

A gold medal was the highest possible distinction in the kingdom. It was in another league than the silver ones I had received. According to royal decree, the lords of individual territories such as Count Sacula were only allowed to give out medals up to silver. The royal family alone could award gold medals.

As such, a gold medal was not just the highest of honors for the recipient, but also for their territory of origin. For that reason, it was customary for the gold medal recipient to be granted a wish.

“If you know that much already, then I won’t explain any more. There once was a young soldier from Sacula who participated in the Royal Tournament. Young and strong,” the elderly viscount reminisced. “Needless to say, none of the participants were weak. In fact, many of them were bigger and more experienced than the young soldier. Going purely by appearances, he may have even looked the weakest.” Viscount Sukuna briefly paused. “However, the

young soldier cut down all his opponents, winning in the blink of an eye. As custom dictates, the winner of the Royal Tournament was granted a wish upon receiving the gold medal as proof of his victory."

Lady Maika's eyes sparkled in anticipation as she guessed the conclusion. It turned out the story that she had been avoiding for the past five years was much to her liking.

"And yes indeed, Ms. Maika. The young soldier asked for a young woman's hand in marriage. I'm sure you've already guessed the name of the soldier and the woman."

Of course we have.

So that was how Chief Klein, who was usually so reserved and who loved being dominated by his wife, came to marry a goddess.

Who would have thought that their marriage had caused an uproar on such a big scale? I had always assumed it had been contained to the Sacula region, but it turned out it had unfolded in front of the entire kingdom. No wonder Chief Klein was so respected among Sir George and the other knights. Thanks to his sword skills, he had won his bride in battle.

"Both Yuika and Sir Klein had already been deeply in love with each other at the time. They had met at the military academy and instantly fallen in love," the elderly viscount expanded upon seeing our astonishment.

"So, winning at the Royal Tournament was the condition for their marriage?" Lady Maika asked excitedly.

"You could say that... Although, more accurately, it was to silence the young lady's father, who was opposed to the engagement." Viscount Sukuna glanced at Count Gentoh. "The count cherished his daughter very dearly. She was immensely beautiful, resourceful, and intelligent. The count boasted about her being Sacula's jewel all the time."

That was not hard to imagine given his earlier behavior. He must have been quite the doting parent. And since we were talking about a goddess here, I could sympathize with him.

"The young soldier, on the other hand, was the son of a remote village's chief.

The count raged by himself that he would never hand his daughter to a man like that."

"By himself?" Lady Maika asked.

"Pretty much." The viscount smiled. "The young soldier was widely recognized as a very talented person. His victory at the Royal Tournament cemented his status as an exceptionally gifted swordsman and put him beyond reproach." His achievements were more than satisfactory. It all boiled down to Count Gentoh's stubbornness. "I imagine the count had his own plans for his pride and joy. Paired with his paternal instincts, that led him to ignore the pleas of the soldier and his daughter. As a result, the young couple decided to rely on a victory at the Royal Tournament."

Thus, their marriage ended up being the reward for the gold medal. And since the bride was not opposed to the wedding at all, even the overprotective count had to acknowledge their profound love for each other. As a loving father and high-ranking aristocrat, he swallowed his pride and reluctantly accepted their marriage. *Makes sense.*

"In other words, His Excellency thinks of Chief Klein as a bride thief who forcefully snatched away his beloved daughter," I summarized.

"As a father, it seems that way no matter the groom, but the feeling must have been especially strong in this case." As a father himself, the elderly viscount affirmed my statement with an expression of regret.

At the same time, Lady Maika, who could never have known what it felt like to be a father in that situation, was enamored with her parent's anecdote. Her cheeks were flushed, and she let out a sigh.

"How wonderful... I envy them. I also want to be stolen away like that..."

I could feel her passionately looking at me, but I just forced a strained smile in return. It was pretty much impossible for me to "steal" Lady Maika away. While it may have sounded a bit pretentious to say so, the fact of the matter was that none of her relatives would have opposed us getting married in the first place. And if everyone was giving us their blessing, you could not really talk of "snatching."

Incidentally, Lord Itsuki and Count Gentoh had still not returned to the main topic at hand. Although they probably considered complimenting their niece—or granddaughter, respectively—the main topic of the day. It reminded me of the first time we had met Lord Itsuki. Back then, he had also obsessed over Lady Maika.

Lady Maika, who had briefly pouted over the fact that I had ignored her hints, quickly noticed my concerns. One sigh later, our minds had synced. Using a hunting hand signal, she asked me whether she should “go for it.” My response was of course, “Yes, go for it!” The fact that this hand gesture was commonly used by hunters to announce an upcoming kill was pure coincidence. *We aren’t planning a rebellion.*

Lady Maika briskly approached her bizarrely euphoric uncle and grandfather. On the way there, she washed the look of exasperation off her face and replaced it with the cutest smile possible.

“Dear uncle and grandfather,” Lady Maika spoke in a deadly sweet voice, two tones higher than usual, “could you please stop talking amongst yourselves and include me too? I feel lonely being left out...”

Her uncle and her granddad obeyed her plea with a doting look on their faces. At that moment, it was decided who wielded the greatest power in the room.

“Now then, let us get to the reason why we are all gathered here today,” Count Gentoh proclaimed after collecting himself.

However, he no longer appeared as dignified as when he had first arrived here at a speed equal to first cosmic velocity. It would be at least another few hundred years before that majestic comet showed up again. It was a mistake to let him sit right next to Lady Maika in the first place—probably the worst possible condition for a serious talk.

Count Gentoh presented the topic: “The development of various new technologies in our region in recent years.”

All present fired themselves up and nodded with a serious expression.

“First, I’d like to express my gratitude toward the Territory Reform Promotion Office’s staff, who were in charge of the projects leading to all those

accomplishments, and the acting count, Lord Itsuki, who vouched for the establishment of a new department to begin with. Excellent work from everyone."

"I believe I speak for all my staff at the Promotion Office when I say that we are honored by your kind words, Your Excellency," Lady Maika replied to our superior's words of gratitude with a gentle, dignified smile.

Seeing his granddaughter's elegant behavior, Count Gentoh's solemn facial expression instantly reverted back to that of a fawning granddad. He probably could learn a thing or two from his grandchild. As could the uncle over there.

"Ahem. Right. Now, while I'm happy to see all those developments coming from our region, I also can't deny that everything's been happening a bit too fast. I didn't really get the full picture by just reading your letters back in the capital, so I decided to hold this meeting." Count Gentoh raised a cup of sake while speaking. "But it's not like I want to scold you or anything. As I said earlier, let's talk about Sacula's future over some delicious food."

Following the example of the good-humored, albeit slightly too casual, host, I also raised my cup. "Cheers to Sacula's future!"

And thus, the Sacula region leaders' conference was off to a lighthearted start.

"The biggest problem will be how to disseminate all the new technology. The soap recipe deal worked out quite well—it should be a blueprint for all future deals. That's what we're here to address," Count Gentoh started the discussion after downing his cup.

At the same time, Lady Maika, who had known about today's topic in advance, nodded along while stuffing her cheeks with chicken *tsukune*. "The Territory Reform Promotion Office was in fact thinking of sharing all our technologies currently in development pertaining to the manufacturing, agriculture, and construction industries."

Lady Maika may have been speaking in a formal, polite manner, but she was also adhering to His Excellency's earlier statement of discussing while eating delicious food. Like grandfather, like granddaughter. *Let me reiterate, this is Sacula's leadership summit.*

“Oh, that’s quite the resolve,” Count Gentoh murmured while stroking his goatee. He seemed intrigued. Although he may have just simply been fawning over his granddaughter again. “However, isn’t that a little too generous?”

Lady Maika had stated that we were willing to give up all our secrets except military ones. Naturally, that sounded worrying to a politician. In fact, Lord Itsuki had also frowned upon hearing the proposal in advance. Now, Count Gentoh was expressing the same concerns as his son.

“Each one of the Territory Reform Promotion Office’s achievements is a big deal in its own right. They all have the potential to greatly contribute to the region’s development. So, while it wouldn’t be the end of the world, it would still be a shame to let it all fall into the hands of other territories. What do you say in that regard?” the count asked.

“Well, let me quote our head of planning,” Lady Maika replied and looked at me with a proud smile before her lovely lips repeated my words. “Our current technology is merely the foundation—the best is yet to come, so there is no need to be frugal. And the broader the foundations, the more room there is to expand upon them, building ever higher and faster.”

Lady Maika surveyed the room and gave a budding smile upon seeing her grandfather’s reaction. Count Gentoh was gazing at her in amazement, bent backward in his chair. He resembled a child who had just seen a meteor shower for the first time.

“I love this!” the middle-aged man finally said, smiling. “In the capital, I always looked forward to the Promotion Office’s letters the most. I should have anticipated this much considering how impressive it already sounded in writing.” He sat back up straight with a mischievous grin. “Looks like I’ve got a lot more to look forward to, and it’ll only get better!”

“Of course!” Lady Maika replied with a similarly cheeky grin. “As long as Ash is with us, we won’t have any time to get bored!”

“Wonderful! I feel glad to be alive from the bottom of my heart!” At that moment, the territory’s pride and joy, Noscula’s local specialty—me—had finally been officially acknowledged by the count. “Well? What exactly do you have planned for the future?” Count Gentoh asked while pitching forward with

sparkling eyes.

“I’m afraid we can’t tell you any details here, father,” Lord Itsuki whispered while frowning. He glanced at the door, signaling that the hostesses outside the room were probably part of Viscount Sukuna’s renowned intelligence network.

Of course, that was in no way surprising. Anyone owning a classy resort like this would have made use of it to gather intelligence. When the leadership summit had started, the viscount had left of his own accord, but it was safe to assume that every word spoken inside this room would eventually reach the viscount’s ears.

“But Itsuki, you may be able to discuss it after going back, but that doesn’t apply to me. Can’t you do something?” the count asked.

“Easier said than done. We can’t underestimate Viscount Sukuna. You of all people should know that.”

Count Gentoh sank into a sullen silence upon hearing his son’s reply. Even from the brief interactions I had with the viscount so far, I could tell how skilled he was. Still, there was something that could be done.

“How about we make the viscount our ally?” I proposed.

“Our ally?” Lord Itsuki and Count Gentoh tilted their heads to the side in unison.

“As long as we consider Viscount Sukuna an outsider, we will have to discuss these matters in secret, but if he were our ally, we could just openly tell him.”

“You’re right, but he’s not from our territory,” Lord Itsuki groaned.

“But he is a human just like us.”

He was not a demon beyond reason. As such, there was merit in having a discussion and testing the waters to see whether he could become an ally. There was no need to consider everyone as hostile from the beginning.

However, it appeared that my classification had been too broad for the two politicians. Their mouths stood wide open in surprise. Only Lady Maika smilingly nodded along. I could see how it may have come across as a careless suggestion given that it concerned confidential matters of the territory.

“I do not think that Viscount Sukuna would become a problem. His region’s stability is proof that he knows how to properly handle confidential information.”

If he were bad at it, he would not have gone such a long time without incurring the enmity of a neighboring lord, causing his own downfall. He steadily used information to obtain an advantage all the while avoiding any losses. He had power and understood how to wield it. In that regard, he was an extremely reliable business partner. While he would surely try to haggle, he would not cross any lines either.

“I concur with Chief Maika’s earlier statement that we should share all our current technology with the other territories. Just think of the wealthy merchants who used to monopolize soap.”

At present, the wealthy merchants had been thrown into disarray by the news of emerging soap production from various regions. Begrudging people had sneaked up on them from behind, while their way forward was blocked by more people who had sworn revenge upon them. Until now, the upper-class merchants had been able to fend those people off by using their wealth as a shield and their influence as a weapon, but their authority had started waning now that soap, the source of their power, was also available from other suppliers.

Moreover, the new soap came in a variety of assortments and was much cheaper than the kind sold by the wealthier merchants, who had sat on their laurels and kept a fixed, high price due to their monopoly. It had even started casting a disquieting shadow on their sponsors. *My condolences.* This showed how a monopoly brought about a lot of disadvantages. The grudges sounded especially scary.

“I am not sure if a monopoly’s positives outweigh its negatives to warrant the necessary labor costs and financial expenditures. At the very least, I do not think so. If you have the budget and manpower available, you might as well distribute the technology more generously and gain cooperation in return.”

My view differed from that of the wealthy soap merchants. I had no intention of greedily hogging any technologies that were bound to eventually leak

anyway while delaying civilizational growth and making enemies in the process. On the contrary, I wanted to gain others' favor and increase my allies. Ultimately, incentives required less effort and provided more benefits than coercion, as I had previously proven with Lady Reina.

"And should we not use the opportunity to create powerful allies by giving influential people early access to our technology?"

A special perk limited to anyone becoming a member of our alliance. As long as they paid money, they would be given early access. I could see this offer tempting a lot of noblemen. Besides monetary, human, and material resources would also be more than welcome as payments. *How does that sound? It's my basic plan to enlarge my circle of kindness (and payoffs) beyond the Sacula region.*

At first, Count Gentoh had seemed perplexed, but the more he listened to my explanation, the more serious interest he showed. "You're really something else, Ash. From what you say, it does sound like the best course of action. Any potential losses may in fact be benefits if we consider that we can gain allies rather than enemies," the count mused while stroking his goatee. He had a slightly mischievous expression on his face, like a little brat planning a prank. It looked more fitting than it should have—a bearded juvenile delinquent. "But I see there's a little scoundrel hiding behind all that lavish hospitality. If whoever provides us with the most benefits will get access to the newest technology the fastest, that will surely lead to competition between our allies," Count Gentoh pointed out.

"Oh, I had not thought about that. I was only basing my reasoning upon the principle of repaying kindness with kindness."

Any big favors had to be repaid with a favor of equal value. It was not my intention at all to turn this into a bidding war—that would be a truly regrettable side effect. *And no, my grinning doesn't indicate an evil plot on my part at all.*

"Very well, I like it," Count Gentoh said. "I assume that you agreed to share the technology in advance, Itsuki?"

"Yes... Well, I couldn't help but agree after hearing Ash's explanation..."

"Ha ha ha, understandable! Come to think of it, you often mention proposals

from the Promotion Office in your letters too!”

“I really got myself some reliable subordinates. Although we haven’t discussed with whom we would share the information. My heart almost stopped when you mentioned Viscount Sukuna,” Lord Itsuki joked.

“At the time, I did not really know any administrators from other regions, so I could not make a proper choice,” I responded.

“But now you’ve met one and made up your mind?”

“Yes, he seems like a great choice.”

Viscount Sakuna’s way of gathering and dealing with information was admirable. He had not just sought out the technology itself, but also the developer. I loved anyone who could appreciate the true value of things. Besides, it would be nice to always have a hot spring available for a little break.

“If possible, I would also like to talk to his successors and any other local authority figures,” I added.

While I was hesitant to say it out loud, Viscount Sukuna was quite old. I had to make sure that his successors and his entourage could be trusted just as much before I offered any big favors. Judging from my interactions with Lady Seire, who was currently working among the hostesses at this inn, the viscount appeared to be surrounded by equally enthusiastic people.

Count Gentoh was relieved upon hearing my concerns. “At first, it looked like a bold, careless move, but I see you’ve carefully considered the important points.”

“I am also a trained hunter after all. And hunters pride themselves on their prudence, which is mostly just a nicer term for cowardice.”

“You’re telling me that the hero who fought a werewolf one-on-one and subjugated eight treants is a coward?”

“Yes, indeed. Because if I die, I will not be able to finish my projects and achieve my dream.”

While I was willing to give my life for the revival of the ancient civilization, I was not ready to give up on my dream. I needed to be alive to chase after it. So,

my life may not have been particularly valuable in and of itself, but it was extremely important for me to stay alive. I could not afford losing my life due to a careless mistake.

For some reason, Count Gentoh burst out into laughter echoing through the entire inn after hearing my logical conclusion. “What a delightful fellow! I’ve seen many reckless warriors prepared to die, but I’ve never seen a hero who values his life like this!”

Is that really so strange as to warrant laughter?

“I guess you’re looking at the world through a completely different lens than we do. Now I also understand why Arthur, who usually distrusts others, took a liking to you,” Count Gentoh stated and crossed his arms. He nodded at Lady Maika and subsequently at me too. “I would love to keep talking with you, Ash, but it’s probably better if we settle things with Viscount Sukuna first. One more thing to look forward to. Anyway, that should be all for today,” Count Gentoh concluded.

However, he didn’t officially break up the meeting. Reading between the lines, I left my seat of my own initiative. “I am sure you still have a lot of family matters to talk about, so I will take my leave.” *I won’t be in the way of your private talks.*

After taking a bow, Count Gentoh sent me off with a suggestive statement. “Sorry for making you leave early. Next time, you may join us.” For some reason, his friendly words were accompanied by a carnivorous smile.

“It will be my honor,” I replied and walked through the door.

Lady Seire, who had been waiting for me, showed me the way back to my room. We took a slight detour, most likely following the orders of Viscount Sukuna, who spontaneously joined us.

“Sir Fenix, may I talk to you for a moment?”

“Yes, of course. My duties have finished, so I am at your disposal. Do you want to talk privately?” I suggested, trying to fish for information.

However, the viscount stroked his beard and shook his head. “No, we can’t do that. It would only lead to misunderstanding with the count of Sacula if we

talked privately. And he is *scary* when he's angry," Viscount Sukuna laughed.

"I see. Thank you for your consideration. So, what did you want to tell me?"

"I will officially inform His Excellency Count Sacula later, but since I ran into you, I thought I would let you know in advance."

"About what?"

"I was thinking of organizing a dinner party with the house of Sukuna and the house of Sacula, including you, Sir Fenix."

"Oh, that's wonderful."

It appeared that my earlier statement about "wanting to talk to his successors and any other local authority figures" had prompted him to organize a meeting. What a swift response.

While everyone was aware that the contents of our discussion had been leaked to the viscount, he could not have officially admitted to it. However, the dinner party secretly implied that the house of Sukuna was very much open toward joining forces with the house of Sacula. He had a good grip on things.

"Then I am looking forward to the dinner party. I have brought some alcohol, which we recently brewed in Sacula, and I would love to hear your opinion on it."

After I had let him know that I heartily welcomed the proposal, Viscount Sukuna clapped his hands and gave a broad smile in response. "That's wonderful! I will also prepare a feast for you."

At once, the elderly viscount enthusiastically walked down the corridor with light steps to make preparations.

"The viscount is a very energetic person," I commented to Lady Seire.

"This is the first time I've seen him enjoy himself this much. All thanks to you, Sir Fenix." She bowed her head with a smile that revealed her love and respect for her grandfather.

Maika's Perspective

"Now then, let's discuss family affairs," my grandfather merrily changed the

subject after seeing Ash off. “We are still aristocrats, and while we aren’t perfect, we have always done our best to maintain peace in the Sacula region. So we should also think seriously about the family’s future.” My grandfather’s gaze fell upon my uncle, who grimaced as he realized he was about to be lectured. “Itsuki, despite your age, I’ve yet to hear anything about you getting married or having children.”

“First, Viscount Sukuna teases me, then Ash scolds me, and now you too! What kind of hot spring holiday is this?!”

“If you don’t want to hear anything, you should do something about it.”

“You didn’t remarry after mother died either!”

“Yes, I didn’t officially remarry, but I did have a mistress.”

Upon hearing my grandfather’s words, my uncle spat out his sake, which he had sipped seconds earlier with a bored look on his face. Strange how fast a person’s complexion could change.

“I-Is that true, father?! D-Do you have another child?! I thought you had assured me that there was no one else who could steal the right of succession from Maika!”

“I have another son.”

“What?!”

My uncle’s jaw dropped when he heard my grandfather nonchalantly admit to having another child. To be frank, he looked pretty stupid.

My grandfather grinned as he poured him another drink. “He’s called Arthur. You’ve met him. I heard you two brothers got along quite well.”

I see what’s going on. He’s talking about Arthur. Following various circumstances, Arthur was known as the child of my grandfather and his mistress.

After realizing that it was all just a joke, my uncle crumbled down in his chair. He held his face, which was covered in cold sweat. Slowly, his relief turned into anger.

“S-Stupid old man.”

“Oh, you’re entering your rebellious phase at this age? Ha ha ha,” my grandfather heartily laughed while my uncle reproachfully glared at him.

Ugh. Why was this exchange so representative of our family? My uncle was angry with my grandfather, yet when it came to George, he had behaved no differently.

“As your father, I would love for you to find happiness with someone...”

Upon hearing those words, my uncle calmed down a bit. Apparently he did feel bad for his lack of filial piety by not giving him a grandchild.

“But as a nobleman, it is also worrying that you lack a successor. So much so that even Yae, who is a priestess, seems like a viable candidate for the countship at this point. Luckily, I have a cute and brilliant granddaughter. You make me proud as the head of the family,” he declared with a gentle smile directed toward me, as if to say he was proud and happy as a grandfather.

Thank you. I’ll do my best so you can spoil your cute granddaughter.

“I saw Itsuki’s and Yuika’s recommendation letters. By the time Maika will succeed as count, Itsuki will be the head of the family. As such, I have no intention of objecting to his decision.”

I bowed my head in gratitude to his approval of my eventual accession as Sacula’s count.

“Which brings us to our next issue. Since she is the prospective future head of the family, we will have to arrange Maika’s marriage now. And since this matter falls under my responsibility as the current head of the family, I have to state my opinion.” I felt a tingling sensation. The subject had shifted to my relationship with Ash. “Therefore, I came all the way to this resort to examine Itsuki and Yuika’s number one candidate.”

It had been a long road until this moment. My mom and my uncle helped me pave the way in a lot of ways. For the sake of Ash, I had studied and worked hard, so that my uncle would acknowledge me as the potential future count of Sacula. Moreover, I had made sure to emphasize Ash’s achievements alongside mine. Now I just needed my grandfather, the current count, to acknowledge those achievements. Right here and now.

“But first, and above all, I want to know how you feel, Maika. I have read Itsuki’s and Yuika’s letters, but it’s important to me to hear what you have to say yourself.”

My uncle sent a teasing look toward my grandfather, as if to say, “You’ve learned from your past mistakes with my sister.”

Hey, we’re talking about my future here. Focus on me. When they noticed me pouting, both of them hurriedly sat up straight. *I like these two. They’re easy to handle*.

“Of course, I want to marry Ash. Anyone else is out of question,” I gave a straightforward answer.

After stroking his beard for a short while, my grandfather started grinning. “But aren’t there better candidates out there? In the capital alone, there are many more handsome men than him.”

“Huh?” I imagined this was a test. Did he really think so little of me? “Do I look like the kind of easy girl who would dedicate her entire life to someone just because he looked handsome?”

This was an outrage! My love wasn’t so readily on sale. Especially my current feelings, my first love, were extremely valuable and only sold for a high price.

“Can those good-looking men make an airplane fly in the skies? Create new occupations in their villages, recreate a soap recipe, popularize a once-taboo fertilizer, or save a village from the brink of extinction?”

And all while maintaining a smile and making their comrades laugh? Because that was the kind of man with whom I had fallen in love. The man I still loved after all this time.

“I don’t love Ash because of his looks.”

Well, I do love Ash’s face. And the fact that he’s got some unexpected muscles despite his slender figure! He has great posture too, and I love watching him sit down to read a book with his legs slightly crossed! Still, that was far from everything. If I were only attracted to his looks, he would not have stolen my heart on that fateful evening.

“He is chasing his dream, devoting every fiber of his being to make it come true. A dream that seems impossible to most people, and yet he is pursuing it, ready to get hurt and hurt others in the process. He’s come so far already. Is there really anyone else like Ash?”

No way. If there were that many others like him, people wouldn’t be looked down upon just because they were born a peasant. Hermes wouldn’t have had to suffer because of his dream. Ash wouldn’t be such a shining light. There was *no one* else like Ash.

“Grandfather, if at this stage you really think that Ash is just a slightly good-looking man, maybe you’ve lost the ability to judge people’s character!”

In that case, I would even say that he should retire as head of the family and give way to someone less vulnerable.

My grandfather seemed a little troubled when I glared back at him. “Looks like it will be Yuika all over again if I object. I just wanted to tease you a bit, but it appears that I angered you beyond imagination.”

“Maika is Yuika’s daughter after all. And she’s always telling me that she wants to become my successor for the sake of Ash. If we object to her marriage plans, we’ll end up losing our heads.”

In order to confirm my uncle’s statement, my grandfather’s gaze wandered toward me. I simply nodded. “Of course! There’s no point in becoming the count if Ash can’t be by my side!”

The current count barely resisted breaking out into laughter. “I would have loved to hear that as an outsider. This is more entertaining than any play shown in the royal capital. But alas, as Sacula’s count, I can’t openly laugh at my title being called worthless,” my grandfather grumbled.

At the same time, my uncle appeared slightly more comfortable, showing a wry smile. “You see? Maika’s love is the real deal. I’m honestly jealous of Ash. I hope you can see it the same way, father.”

“I absolutely do. It is the privilege of any man to experience the unconditional love of a woman. Ash must be the luckiest guy in the kingdom.”

The mood had become a little more relaxed. After all, this was just meant to

be the final confirmation—the last step in a decision that had practically already been made.

Finally, my uncle asked the relevant question. “I feel like I already know the answer, but I’ll ask anyway. Father, what did you think of Ash?”

My uncle seemed convinced that Ash had left a positive impression, and so was I. When sending Ash off, my grandfather had said, “Next time you may join us.” In other words, he would no longer be considered an outsider at a family meeting.

“Well, I did tease you a bit earlier, but I didn’t mean to belittle him. Ash has been awarded a great many medals by our family. You chose the right guy, Maika. It will only benefit us to welcome him to the family. I’ll help you catch him in my capacity as the count of Sacula.”

“As expected from my father. I’m glad you don’t need any convincing.”

“I doubt there are many other men like him. He’s a hard worker, talks big but takes even bigger actions, and is very skilled on top of that. I want to watch his story unfold up close. I feel it’s one for the history books.” A complacent smile came over my grandfather’s stern face. Ash had done it again. He had won him over in no time. “Those are my thoughts, Maika. It looks like Viscount Sukuna has also set his eyes on Ash. You need to watch out! You have to snatch Ash and run! For your future as the count!”

“Father, are you telling Maika to forcefully steal away her groom?”

“Isn’t that the kind of person we’re dealing with?”

“Well, you’re not wrong...”

He really is that kind of person. He’s Ash after all!

Thus, all the preparations had been made.

What do you say, Ash? This was the best bouquet that my current self could arrange. Would Ash be happy about the right to share in the leadership of Sacula?

My whole body was shivering. Excitement and fear were swelling up inside of me. I felt uncertain. I didn’t know what the future held, but I knew that I

wanted Ash in exchange for all my efforts.

I had always looked at his face in profile. I had observed it up close as he gazed straight ahead into the distance. As he was engrossed in his readings. Drafting up plans. Eating dinner. Talking to someone. Being serious, cute, cool, a little mischievous. I had seen a myriad of his profiles from all kinds of angles. I knew better than anyone else what he was looking at, what his goals were. As a result, I could stop him when he tried pushing himself too hard. I could keep up with him and follow him wherever he went. And recently, I had also finally become able to anticipate his next move. There was one thing I could say with certainty: I understood Ash better than anyone else did. Even so, I didn't know if he would be satisfied with my offer.

Future count of Sacula—that was an honorable title. And yet it still wasn't enough to help Ash achieve his larger-than-life dream. Even if I were the royal princess, it would have probably not been good enough. So, there was no point in getting hung up on this. I just had to compensate for any deficiencies with my own charms and experiences. As his childhood friend. As someone who had watched his profile all this time. *I can compensate for it, right? I want to believe I can.*

A shiver ran down my spine. My heart was shriveling, as if it had been squeezed by a large hand. I was scared. My fingers and toes were freezing. I never would have imagined that one day the thought of Ash would make me feel like this. My crush had never radiated any cold—he was shrouded in a warm, bright light.

However, things had changed. Looking back, those feelings had been immature adoration. The dreams of a young girl who had yearned to become a princess protected by a knight in shining armor. And while I still admired cute princesses, I had also resolved myself to fight shoulder to shoulder with Ash. Right by his side, I was going to support the red-haired boy who chased after a preposterous dream that could not even be realized with the resources of an entire kingdom. A knight standing next to a knight—comrades in arms, so to speak. I was no longer the girl who was afraid of the dark.

It was strange. How had things turned out this way? But it didn't feel bad at all to realize that I had become more like the person whom I loved. After all,

there was a saying, “Like husband, like wife.” *Husband and wife!* Yes*, husband and wife!*

Phantom Flowers

Evening had fallen. The misty moon had revealed itself in the night sky to observe events in the world below. A quiet breeze carried the scent of spring to the open-air bath where the steam concealed a lonely figure submerged in the water, looking up at the moon. It was like the picturesque scenery off a wall scroll. I approached her from behind.

“I am sorry for making you wait. May I sit next to you, Maika?”

As she had tied up her hair, I could see her bare neck moving as she nodded.

“Okay, I am getting in then.”

After sliding into the hot spring, Lady Maika’s profile came into sight. She must have been nervous. She was quiet and her face looked down as if she was trying to hold back her emotions. This made her appear like a beautiful doll. At the same time, I was charmed by her animated, youthful, blushed skin. My gaze was inadvertently drawn toward her bathing cloth. Embarrassed, she tightly pressed it down with her hands.

“Sorry, I did not mean to stare. You are just so pretty,” I apologized for the conduct unfitting of a gentleman.

Lady Maika’s face turned even more red, and she sent a fleeting glance in my direction. “I’m a bit frustrated. My heart’s racing. Words get stuck in my throat.”

That applied to me too. My heart was bursting with nervousness upon seeing the bewitching figure of the girl I loved in this setting. Not just my cheeks, but my entire body was red. If she had looked this way, two flushed faces would have stared back at each other.

“I am nervous too. I am just pretending to keep my calm.”

Lady Maika was extremely pretty. I was attracted to her. With each passing second, I became more aware of how much I really loved her.

“R-Really?” she glanced at me again.

Her gaze lingered longer than earlier, but even so, it was less than a second.

Maybe one heartbeat. The stuck conversation turned to an awkward silence. This was the first time I did not know what to say to my childhood friend.

“So, uhm...” Lady Maika began to talk and gulped. “I called you here to...”

Lady Maika had invited me to join her here tonight. Most likely, they had finally reached a decision at the house of Sacula’s family meeting, which had continued into the evening. A decision on whether I was suitable to become Lady Maika’s spouse. Given the invitation, it appeared that the result was positive...yet bittersweet.

My sense of guilt prompted me to speak before Lady Maika could continue. “Maika.” I placed my hand upon her cheek and pulled her bashful gaze toward mine.

“Y-Yes, Ash?”

Lady Maika froze upon seeing me take the initiative. So far, I had never shown any signs of reciprocating her feelings. She knew me all too well. She had firmly believed that she needed to corner me with a straightforward confession in order to get a response. In fact, so had I. Until just now.

The goddess’s teasing words were painfully weighing on my mind. *“In that case, it would be awful if Maika ever left, right?”* Before I realized it, they had spread their roots and started tugging at my heart. They had given birth to a budding desire to never let any such thing happen. I did not want her smiling face to leave my side. If she ever risked slipping away, I wanted to tightly grab her hand and pull her back toward me.

“Maika, I love you.”

She gasped as I directly confronted her with my budding emotions. Without realizing, I had put my arm around her waist to stop her from running away. I felt hot. There was a fire burning deep inside my chest.

Paralyzed by my sudden confession, Lady Maika did not know how to express her emotions. It made her look even cuter. I wanted her. Now. Without a shadow of a doubt, I was in love with Lady Maika.

“But my heart lies somewhere else.”

Hearing my follow-up, my childhood friend, the girl who knew me better than anyone else, immediately understood that I was not referring to another person—and how much it meant to me.

“Ash...” Lady Maika finally spoke. It sounded as if she implored me not to say anything more.

“I am sorry. I love you, but my heart had already been stolen before you appeared in my life.”

I pulled my arm, which had instinctively tried to embrace her, away from Lady Maika’s body. The fact that I was able to show such restraint proved that my heart was not fully with her.

“I cannot ever make you happy. Because I will neglect you in order to pursue my dreams.”

It was inevitable—my heart belonged to my dreams. I did not want to abandon the girl I loved and cause her pain.

“I want you to become happy, Maika. And that is not possible with someone as broken as me.” Wishing I had more strength, I let go of my feelings. “That is why, even though I love you, I cannot accept your feelings.”

After hearing my words, it seemed like Lady Maika had lost her voice again. Her lips were moving, but no words were coming out. Distressed, she held her chest and writhed.

“Y-You...” she managed to utter in a hoarse voice while squinting her eyes to hold back her tears. “You can’t say...” She let out a sigh and took a deep breath before screaming in such a high, crystal-clear voice that it could have shattered glass. “You can’t say that! That just makes me like you even more!” With a bright-red face and a heartfelt smile, she grabbed the hand that I had just removed. Her grip was tight. “Don’t do that again! Making my heart flutter like this! Making me fall for you even harder! I will absolutely *not* give up, Ash!”

Please, look at her. This is the girl I love. There was a fiery spark in her eyes, like a carnivorous animal that had just set eyes on its prey. She displayed martial prowess worthy of her Sacula heritage. My hand eventually started creaking. When she had pulled me toward her, I had felt something soft touch

against my chest, but unfortunately, the pain in my hand made it impossible to enjoy the situation.

"I just have to steal you away from your dreams! Even if your first love isn't a person, I'll win against it! After being in love with you for six years, I'm well aware that I need to go above and beyond to become your wife! Don't worry, it'll be all right!"

What is all right? It turned out that Lady Maika's image of me was even more exaggerated than expected.

"From the beginning, I had no intention of giving up, no matter who or what I'd have to fight! Be it human, god, or concept!" Lady Maika loudly declared and abruptly stood up in the bath, causing water to splash.

In the moonlight, the brave girl in her bathing-cloth armor puffed up her chest —which she had inherited from a goddess—and fixedly stared at me.

"Mark my words, Ash! I will never give up! I *will* snatch you from your dreams and make you my husband! *Whatever it takes!*" She issued a no-holds-barred challenge to her romantic rival. Even though she was talking to an abstract concept, her words were extremely moving. They sent shivers down my spine. "Just you wait, Ash! I will make you accept my feelings!"

And they'll flatten me like a bulldozer would.

Ignoring my concerns, Lady Maika yelled, "Strategy meeting! Everyone, gather around!" while leaving the bathroom.

As she walked away, I saw something shining in the corner of her eyes. She was truly a wonderful girl. Even though she had just been rejected, she had put on a brave face to put me at ease— No, that was not it. She must have been sad that I rejected her. Frustrated that her year-long plans had been turned upside down. Nevertheless, her tears had dissolved into a fiery passion. She had cheered up on the spot, showed her fighting spirit, and stopped me from running away. She wanted to cry out of sadness, but she did not give up. She wanted to cry out of frustration, so she decided to take action. She was *not* going to let me get away. I was her prey. No matter the circumstances, she was going to snatch me away and make me hers.

I'll say it again. This *is the girl I love. Wonderful, isn't she?*

The roots of my love still had a firm grip on my heart. I wondered how much further they would have spread by the next time I got to talk to her. Dreading to imagine it, I chuckled.

Maika's Perspective

I couldn't stop crying. Tears just kept flowing, soaking my face*. Dammit, my vision's all blurry now! Even though I've got no time to lose!*

After throwing off my bath clothes in the changing room, I quickly wiped myself dry and put on my normal clothes in order to rush toward the hermitage where my uncle and my grandfather were waiting.

"Strategy meeting! Everyone, gather around!" I energetically shouted as I flung open the door with such force that it almost came off its hinges.

"Yes! Both my father and I are here!" my uncle answered.

Thus, everyone had gathered around already.

That shout was mainly meant to get myself in the right frame of mind anyway.

I grumbled and wiped off my tears before sitting down on one of the cushions prepared on the hermitage's floor. *Sorry to make you wait. I've got good and bad news. Let's start with the good news.*

"He said he loves me!"

"What?!" they both exclaimed at the same time. A joyful look came over their faces and they raised their hands for a high five.

Not so fast! Can't you see the tears rolling down my cheeks? Here's the bad news.

"But he rejected me!"

"What?!" they abruptly lowered their arms and almost lost their balance. They looked like two street performers.

"Oh, so that's why you're crying..."

"It's a serious crime to make my Maika cry!"

You're right, granddad. Ash had committed a grave crime. But that wasn't why I was crying.

"I didn't even get to profess my love!"

He one-sidedly confessed his feelings without listening to mine. After all my preparations, I hadn't even been able to tell him about the wedding gift I'd prepared. He had rejected me before I could say anything.

On the one hand, I was happy that Ash had been closely watching me. He knew that I had been admiring him from the side. On the other hand, I was sad that he hadn't properly faced my feelings despite that knowledge. He had acted in the interest of my happiness but failed to hear me out.

"I was too naive. I very much lacked foresight."

Ash was too gentle. I should have seen it coming and yet I misread him. He hadn't embraced me even though he loved me. Or rather, precisely *because* he loved me. That was how much he had thought of me. The boy ready to put his life on the line for his dreams had racked his brains to ensure my happiness. He hadn't just looked at me from the side—he had looked at me head-on. Just me. Weighing me against his dreams.

My body felt hot. My facial muscles relaxed, and I involuntarily smiled. *It's no good. I just love him too much. Did you really think I was going to give up after you confessed to me?*

Ash didn't realize how much I yearned for him, so I had to make him realize, let him know in no uncertain terms how much I wanted him. I needed to put on a performance that he could not miss, that left no room for escape. Even if I ended up with a dagger in my heart.

I had earned that right for myself. The fact that Ash had professed his love for me meant that I had become worthy of his interest. Because we were childhood friends? Because I was his superior? Because I belonged to the house of Sacula? Or did he simply find me attractive? It didn't matter—any reason worked for me. I had honed all my skills in those areas to make Ash mine. All that I had left to give was my life. Ash was prepared to put his life on the line for his dreams, so I had to show the same resolve. I had to risk my life. So simple, yet so difficult. Usually, people didn't give up their precious life so easily.

Luckily, I had already become incapable of living without Ash. If he was a boundlessly bright sun, then I was a flower that could only grow in his sunlight. For all eternity, I would grow toward the sky to reach his warm light.

I'll teach you what it takes to make this flower blossom. And how to make it wilt. I'll make it clear that I'm willing to trade my life for your love.

"Grandfather, please take me to the royal capital. And bring Ash, of course."

"Hm? Well...it's not impossible if you and Itsuki are fine with it, but why?" He looked at me with a puzzled face.

At the same time, my uncle, who seemed to understand my intentions, grimaced.

"Whoever wins at the Royal Sword Tournament will have their wish granted, right?" I said.

I knew of this custom because someone very close to me had been able to marry thanks to it. Although I had only learned about it earlier today.

My grandfather, who also knew two people who had gotten married this way, instantly realized what I was trying to suggest. "Wait a minute, Maika. That's too dangerous. I've heard that you are an expert swordfighter, but there's always a lot of people who get injured at that tournament. Some even die."

"That's *exactly* why I need to participate." *I need to make Ash understand that I'm putting my life on the line for my love.*

"No, wait, Maika. I won't allow it. As your grandfather, I will forbid it!"

"Are you going to stand in my way?"

"Yes! No man ever wants to see his cute grandchild get injured! If you still insist, you'll first have to defeat me!"

"Well then, grandfather... Let's meet outside." *If that's what it takes to convince you, I'll defeat you a hundred times over.*

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Two days later I was summoned by Count Gentoh.

"So, we're going to the capital. The royal capital."

“I beg your pardon?”

Sometimes, it may be important to start with the conclusion, but you still need a little preamble. Lord Itsuki always praised me for being quick to understand and reach a conclusion, but I could not agree without knowing more. There was a difference between doing business quickly versus carelessly.

“Don’t you want to go there?”

“More than anything!”

Thanks to Father Folke and Lord Arthur, I had been able to review some books from the royal temple’s library, but I wanted to see the whole collection with my own eyes. I also wondered how life was treating those two. I would have loved to talk to their research fellows too.

“Well, no problem then. Let’s go!”

“All right!”

But why was it suddenly decided that we would go to the capital? And why did the count have a bump on his forehead? And most importantly, when would we go?

I see, one week from now.

Until then, we could enjoy the rest of our break. And how long would we stay there?

Approximately two weeks, huh? Maybe we could get the Quid company to bring us some supplies. I’m sure they’d come in handy in the capital. I already can’t wait for it.

And thus, I abruptly obtained my ticket to the royal capital.

Surrounded by an imposing bulwark, many of the residences were made out of stone. Well, those in the so-called noble district at the heart of the capital at least. Wooden constructions were the norm in the outer area, which was not protected by any wall. The lack of a proper wall allowed the city to spread out without limits. It was also a testament to the royal capital’s safety. Here, the kingdom had once started its expansion, pushing the demons further outside while increasing its own sphere of influence. At present, there was virtually no

risk of demons attacking the royal capital. As a resident of the Sacula region, which was the first line of defense against those demons, the sight of this huge city left quite the impression on my mind.

“They do not need all that stone.”

I would have loved to have those resources for Sacula. Even if I conceded for the sake of argument that the royal capital needed a city wall—after all, humans still fought among each other, and bandits existed—those palatial residences in the noble district were hard to forgive.

In their case, it was just a luxury item—superfluous fat. It would have been more beneficial to circulate that stone to the frontlines, where it would turn into supportive flesh and bones, helping defend against the demons. Or at the very least, it should have been used for furnaces and kilns.

I glared at the noble district’s mansions with sincere annoyance. Seeing me like that, Count Gentoh and Lord Itsuki voiced their own thoughts with a satisfied expression.

“As expected, his reaction is completely beyond any expectations. I never get tired of his remarks.”

“I completely agree. Usually, people are impressed by the central district’s tall buildings, which you can’t find anywhere else in the kingdom.”

Compared to the skyscrapers from my past-life memories, these were laughable. There had even been a project to build one with an elevator to an orbiting satellite. Even during construction, it had already pierced the heavens, but unfortunately it suffered a setback due to malfunctioning nanobots and turned into one of that world’s three tragic remnants. Fearing that the nanobots’ self-multiplication could lead to the end of the world, they had placed strict restrictions on their manufacturing, but somehow, they had made a mistake that led to the nanobots not multiplying at all, even though it had been a project headed by geniuses from all over the world. The incident had caused quite the uproar worldwide.

Anyway, Sacula’s residence was situated near the center of the noble district. This was proof of Sacula’s extremely high family status as distant relatives of the royal family. However, and in spite of its location, the residence was made

out of wood, a fact in which Count Gentoh took great pride.

“When our family was appointed count of the frontier region of Sacula, they took the stone with them. Even to this day, our ancestor’s original residence still protects our territory as part of the city wall.”

“That is wonderful, Your Excellency!”

“Ha ha ha! I may not object as much as you do, but you’re right—the capital doesn’t really need the stone to protect itself.”

It appeared that, in accordance with the territory’s stability, the royal family had repeatedly granted more stone to the house of Sacula to use for their residence in the capital, but they had also sent those supplies to the Sacula region. *Our Excellency truly is an honorable statesman.*

His blood relative, Lady Maika, had been so quiet on the way that it had appeared as if she had been meditating. However, as soon as she got off the horse carriage, she started doing warm-up exercises.

“Grandfather, where is the courtyard?”

“Oh, just over there on the right-hand side is the outdoor training ground.”

“Thanks. I’ll go exercise there.” She concisely declared her plans and rushed off. She must not have wanted her body to become stiff after the long ride.

Upon seeing her leave, the newlywed Sir George, who had returned to duty, decided to exercise as well. “Lord Itsuki, I’ll join her.”

“Yes, go be Maika’s sparring partner.”

After the two fighters had taken off, I also voiced my desire to get started on business right away. “Your Excellency, there is someone I would like to meet. May I take my leave?”

“Yes, sure. You can take the horse carriage there,” Count Gentoh agreed on the spot, having already guessed to whom I was referring. “They’re also impatiently waiting for you.”

I can’t wait to see them. With light steps, I climbed back into the horse carriage.

The horse carriage brought me to an orphanage outside the bulwark. It was a splendid building considering that there was not much leeway for social welfare in this world. *You're wondering why I came here? Just take a look at the grandiose signboard.*

"Fenix Institute of Education." There was only one person who could have come up with such a mocking name. Mixing in my indignation with my joy at this reunion, I glared at the middle-aged priest waiting in front of the gate.

"Long time no see, Father Folke! You still look like the same old delinquent, middle-aged research maniac!"

"If it isn't David's stupid brat! It seems like you haven't changed either!"

We both bared our teeth and showed a menacing smile while our eyes assessed each other's fighting power. It had been a while since we had last faced off.



“You’re still as cheeky as ever, only you’ve gotten taller, Ash.”

“You look healthier than ever despite being older. What happened to the dark circles under your eyes and your ragged clothes?”

It felt extremely weird seeing Father Folke look healthier and dress neater than he ever did back at the village. I was slightly creeped out seeing him wearing a smart three-piece suit rather than his worn-out priest robe.

“Are you an imposter?”

“You already did that joke last time.”

“I guess you are the real Father Folke after all if you remember that. In that case...” Once I was sure of who he was, I looked at the building behind him. “Is your uncharacteristic appearance due to the fact that you learned a new trick besides studying?”

“You could say so. I somehow got roped into building an orphanage and ended up becoming a model citizen while looking after the kids.” He sounded pleasantly annoyed.

“My condolences,” I congratulated him. “But are you really looking after the kids? Not the other way around?”

“No way! You’re the first and last brat that’ll ever look after me! The kids here aren’t little devils like you!”

“None of them are on track to becoming little devils?”

“Well... Uhm...” Father Folke’s enthusiasm suddenly withered away.

To us, “little devils” referred to intelligent and reliable kids who liked to study. And it appeared that the orphans here were taking the name “Institute of Education” seriously, like good little devils. I was looking forward to seeing what they held in store.

“By the way, can you change the orphanage’s name?”

“Definitely not. It’s one of my few joys,” Father Folke spat out in a delinquent-like tone of voice.

He was probably the last person anyone would have ever expected to open

up an orphanage. Lady Maika naively had said that it sounded “like something that guy would do,” but as someone who knew the true nature of “that guy,” I would not let myself be deceived. He was not that benevolent of a person.

Seeing it as a sign of the apocalypse, I had promptly asked him in the first line of my reply letter how this had happened. According to Father Folke himself, the orphanage was a result of his research’s booming success since his return to the capital. In his own words, “Everything went so smoothly that I was left with a lot of free time on my hands.”

Whenever possible, he would meet up with fellow researchers of the ancient language and other disciplines, but that was still not enough to fill up his schedule. It was at that moment that a teary-eyed priest enlisting help for an orphanage had appeared on his doorstep.

Father Folke had agreed, saying, “As long as it’s just once in a while to kill some time.” However, he would eventually come to regret that decision, cursing his past self as the biggest idiot and fool in the history of mankind. *An accurate assessment, if you ask me.*

The orphanage had turned out to be a battlefield full of savage tribes. Since the food rations were sparse and terrible, the orphans had resorted to various mischievous deeds to obtain food. In the process, they had also started doing troublesome things for other reasons as well.

The royal capital’s priests had been at their wits’ end faced with those naughty yet skilled children. As members of the intelligentsia, many of the priests had come from the upper echelons of society. They had left their own children’s upbringing to their servants, and as a result, were more than unequipped to deal with orphans whose behavior required extra attention.

At the same time, our beloved middle-aged delinquent priest, Father Folke, had a lot of experience dealing with naughty children from his time at the village. After swiftly singling out the group leader, he had challenged and defeated him on the spot. Quite literally. As it had not been possible to reason with the leader, the delinquent priest had made him cry with his bare fists.

Naturally, the naughty children had subsequently declared Father Folke an outside enemy and had carried out several counterattacks. Unfortunately for

them, the immature delinquent priest had seriously fired back twice as forcefully.

While his conduct had been unbecoming of a priest, it had been effective against the naughty children, whose territorial organization was closer to wild animals than humans. Following numerous clashes, they had eventually yielded to the childish delinquent priest, who was declared their new leader.

As such, Father Folke had voiced his concerns regarding the necessities of his new subordinates. “We do need a bit more food.” Having worked as the village priest, he knew all too well that it was not fair to expect good conduct of someone who suffered from hunger.

So, Father Folke had decided to put his village experience to good use and educate the older—and especially obedient—orphans using the “Ash style.” Meanwhile, he had also made them apologize to the victims of their mischievous deeds. And if a victim had not forgiven them the first time, he had made them apologize over and over again.

While reluctant at first, the orphans had soon changed their opinions upon hearing their boss’s decree. “I’m not telling you to apologize from the bottom of your heart, just make it sound sincere. And once they forgive you, it’s your victory.”

Nothing could have resonated more with those young minds than the word “victory.” They could win against the adults—show them who had the upper hand. And thus, the orphans had given it their all. In a way, they had already been seasoned veterans as they had trained their shrewdness through their prior evil deeds.

Although their attempts had been clumsy at first, they had quickly figured out the adults’ weaknesses. Adopting a meek attitude, they apologized to their victims in crowded areas with all eyes on them. If necessary, they started crying. That way, a surrounding adult would most likely come to their help if things got out of hand. The orphans had made extensive use of that technique.

Once the arguably justified prejudices regarding the orphanage had been eliminated, the first orphans capable of reading, writing, and calculating had started to appear. As someone living in Sacula, I was prone to forgetting that in

this world most people below the status of village chief were not educated. Even just knowing the basics was considered impressive.

Finally, now that the stage had been set, the boss gave new orders. “Use your knowledge to go and snatch us some money for food from the people you apologized to! They aren’t prepared, so use that to your advantage!”

In other words, he had told them to seek employment from the people with whom they had become acquainted during their apology tour, since it would be easy to convince them. And even though he had ordered them to “snatch money for food,” he had meant earning it an honest way. For some reason, that priest just loved talking like a gangster. No doubt he had been one in his previous life.

In any case, thus the orphanage had become the number one orphanage in the royal capital overnight. This had prompted the Church’s higher-ups to passionately invite the leading figure, our delinquent priest, to become an orphanage supervisor. However, Father Folke had readily refused the offer, saying, “I am a linguistics researcher first. I’ll only do it as a pastime.” An obvious reply from a research maniac like him. Anything other than his research amounted to nothing but mere diversion. However, a certain experienced royal used all their charm to make an excessively friendly request, “We’ll build you your own orphanage. I’m sure it would be of great help to Ash.”

In the face of royalty, it appeared that even Father Folke could not bring himself to exhibit his usual insolence and delinquency. As a result, the Fenix Institute of Education was born. No matter how you looked at it, that name was a mockery, which I could not condone. Maybe I should tell His Excellency Count Sacula, who so kindly granted me this name.

“Well, let’s not just stand here. Come on in!” Father Folke briefly sighed before giving a gentle smile. That expression quite honestly did not suit the middle-aged delinquent at all. “I’m not the only one waiting for you. Don’t let him wait too long.”

Inside the Fenix Institute of Education was a lounge room with a round table. It served doubly as a classroom for the orphans and a salon for Father Folke’s researcher friends. At that lounge, I was greeted by a face just as nostalgic as

the priest's.

"Hey, Ash. It's been a while."

"Long time no see, Arthur."

Upon hearing my casual reply, Lord Arthur briefly nodded and greeted me again. Then, she could no longer contain her excitement.

"I've missed you, Ash!" Lord Arthur leaped at me, her body slightly shaking. "It's been such a long time! It's really you, Ash!"

"I want to say not much has changed, but...a bit too much time has passed for that."

The girl I held in my arms was dressed in the same male clothes that she had worn upon her departure from Sacula. However, in that time her body had developed so much that her clothes could no longer fully hide her feminine traits.

While she had not grown much taller, her facial features had become even more soft and feminine. And although they were concealed by padding, the same could probably be said for her hips and shoulders. As we were embracing each other, her hidden femininity became more and more apparent. Around her neck she was wearing a scarf to cover up her feminine Adam's apple.

"You've become very pretty, Arthur," I remarked with a slightly embarrassed smile as my senses were stimulated by her hidden feminine traits.

"S-Sorry, I was just so happy to see you that I jumped at you..." Lord Arthur leaped backward with a flustered expression. Her red face looked so cute that it made me feel guilty toward Lady Maika.

"I am also happy to see you. Just be a bit more careful—we are no longer children."

At this point, it would be too dangerous for us to share a room.

"That's a bit of a shame...but you're right. I guess I've grown enough for you to notice even when I'm dressed like this." The mere gesture of her bashfully running her fingers through her hair appeared seductive.

"Yes, so much so that I am scared to see you in formal dress."

“Scared? That’s not a nice way of putting it.” Lord Arthur expressed her dissatisfaction by pouting her cheeks, but smiled again shortly after. “I can’t believe it. I’m really talking to you again, Ash. There’s so much I want to ask you, and tell you...”

“So do I. Maika’s also been looking forward to seeing you again, but...”

Whenever a letter had arrived from the capital, Lady Maika reminisced about our time together at the academy. I had assumed that she would leap at the opportunity to meet with Lord Arthur during our sudden trip to the capital, but she had left me on my own.

“I’ve heard. Don’t worry about it, Ash. I’ll talk to Maika later.”

“Are you sure? I mean, I do not mind, but...”

As I was showing concern for their relationship, Lord Arthur tapped my shoulder with a lonely look on her face.

“I feel a bit bad for Maika when saying this, but I’m happy it’s just the two of us right now. I get to have you all for myself,” she declared, and urged me to take a seat. After I had sat down, she peeked at me from behind. “Heh heh, it’s been a while since I’ve seen you from this angle. Yes, this feels right. Makes me feel at ease.”



“It feels like we are back at the dormitory.”

“Let’s talk just like back then! First off, tell me about the Territory Reform Promotion Office! I’ve heard that you and Maika are in charge?”

“Yes, indeed. Hermes and Reina are working at the adjacent laboratory as well.”

Whenever I mentioned a familiar name, her face beamed with nostalgia. Whenever I mentioned someone she did not know, her eyes sparkled with curiosity. She seemed happy to discover new sides of her old friends, and enjoyed learning more about the strangers.

“Haa... I wish I could be there...”

She also appeared incredibly frustrated that she was not a part of my stories.

Excited voices echoed through the Fenix Institute of Education’s courtyard. It would have been quite the neighborhood nuisance if the neighbors had not been busy cheering themselves. The majority of the shouts consisted of “oh” and “wow” with the occasional “amazing” or “crazy.” Apparently, everyone’s vocabulary had dried up.

Everyone’s fiery eyes were fixated upon the tendon-powered airplane. When it had been decided that we would go to the royal capital, I had asked the Quid company to deliver a few commodities that might come in handy. This was one of them.

Lord Arthur had unfortunately left the institute already due to her busy schedule, but before going she had asked me to display the model plane to the orphans. Therefore, I had put on a little show, prepared to sacrifice an aircraft. Why “sacrifice”? Because it was evident to me that the children would eventually crush it in their excitement. Although currently, they were just carefully making it fly as I had instructed them. They were even waiting their turn. I wondered how many more minutes that would last.

As I watched them with a bittersweet smile on my face, I noticed a man and a woman in their early twenties standing next to me. Or rather, the man was standing while the woman was excitedly jumping around and shouting, “Wow! This is amazing! Crazy! Ohhh!” She was effectively part of the mob of children.

She did not just look younger because of her baby face, but also because her behavior mimicked that of the orphans. She was frolicking with her eyes wide-opened. She had also been the first to let the model plane fly before all the orphans. *So, another immature adult.*

"Tris, I get that you're excited, but could you maybe calm down a little bit? Just a little..." The standing man admonished the woman while evading her flailing arms. He was one of the few who had not joined the mob.

"Look at it, Lusus! It's amazing!"

"Yes, it is. I'm also deeply impressed, but calm down. You can keep shouting if you want, but could you at least stop moving around?"

"Oh my! This is so crazy!"

The man let out a sigh as heavy as stone, consoling himself for his wasted efforts. Then, upon seeing my calm demeanor, he gave a peaceful smile.

"Please forgive her, Sir Fenix. That's just who Tris is. Her outspoken curiosity is also the basis for her vast knowledge, so it's not all bad."

"Yes, Tris is a brilliant researcher. She has helped me many times. As have you, Lusus."

Ms. Tris was the frolicking woman, Mr. Lusus the man looking after her. Both of them were research friends of Father Folke, regulars here at the salon. They were also my allies, albeit only via letter correspondence until now.

"I am honored by your praise, Sir Fenix. And deeply grateful that you showed us something so fascinating."

"Nothing compared to all the useful information regarding medicinal herbs that you have given me. I will happily show you some more things."

"The feeling is mutual."

Mr. Lusus was a medical science researcher and apprentice priest. In a world where anesthesia and sterilizers did not exist, most doctors just relied on prescribing medicine for internal use. While it went without saying that Mr. Lusus had extensive knowledge of those drugs, he had been researching surgical procedures—an unusual field of study in this world. So unusual, in fact,

that his trial human autopsies had been deemed a problem, and subsequently his patron had cut off all funding. That should have been the end of his research career and a one-way ticket to a church in a remote farm village, even though he had just gone through the trouble of trying to figure out the anatomy of the human body.

However, in his despair Mr. Lusus had come across a middle-aged priest who had somehow managed to return from his countryside exile. That priest had made him an offer. “I’ve heard you cut up a corpse to research the human body? I know this weird brat who wants to do the same. You interested?”

Thus, with Father Folke as a broker, a doubtful Mr. Lusus had written a letter to this apparently like-minded, weird brat. *Needless to say, that weird brat was me. Also, Father Folke’s statement was a bit misleading since I didn’t “want to do the same” but I “*had *done the same” in Itsutsu city.*

The weird brat—me—had happily replied to the letter.

“The anatomical drawings in the medical journals here at the Itsutsu temple’s library are full of mistakes! They are useless! What are the drawings like at the royal capital temple? Oh, I also sent you soap and alcohol, which you can use for disinfection!”

“It’s the same here! My goodness! At this rate, surgery is a dream within a dream! Oh, and thank you for the expensive soap and alcohol! Now I can sanitize myself and my belongings before medical examinations!”

We had instantly hit it off! Since then, we had been exchanging autopsy results and started drawing up our own anatomical map. So far, our joint forces had produced quite accurate results, if I do say so myself!

In the meantime, Mr. Lusus’s financial troubles had also been resolved. At first, Father Folke and Count Sacula had supported him with loans from their own research funds, but eventually, a certain royal had generously decided to become his patron.

“So, Sir Fenix... You said that you may be able to obtain anesthesia following your exchange with Tris?” Mr. Lusus, who had kept calm while admiring the airplane, suddenly started fidgeting. His nervous glance looked this way like that of a child asking for sweets.

“Yes. Since she told me where I could find sulfur, I was able to make sulfuric acid.”

If you mixed that sulfuric acid with ethanol—a sort of alcohol obtained by dry distilling charcoal—you ended up with diethyl ether, the first genuine anesthetic in this world. At last!

While it was a weak anesthetic, it only produced temporary side effects and it was not addictive either—perfect as a first step. Narcotics like opium may have had a stronger anesthetic effect and were accordingly easy to use, but their addictive properties were scary. Moreover, it was hard to calculate the right quantities for those.

“Oh! As expected of you, Sir Fenix! Having made your acquaintance was truly the biggest joy of my life!” Mr. Lusus firmly grabbed my hand with a fiery look in his eyes.

“It is only a very small test amount, but I brought you some. I will give it to you later.”

“I appreciate it! Now I just need to test it somehow... I do have a treatment scheduled soon, maybe I can use it there. Hm, if you’re still around then, I’d love for you to join—no, wait, if he’s here in the capital right now, maybe he should participate?”

Hearing Mr. Lusus getting excited all by himself, Ms. Tris suddenly came flying toward us like an arrow.

“I heard you say something about sulfuric acid and anesthesia. Did you finish it, Ash?”

“It is only a prototype, but yes.”

“Really?! You’re amazing! It’s insane what you manage to do! You’re the craziest guy I know! Can I see it?”

“I have brought some with me, so I will give you some too.”

“Yes! Thanks! I love you, Ash!”

Ms. Tris, who was always upfront about her feelings, hugged me without reservation. I had to admit that physical contact with an older woman was quite

a valuable experience.

“Hey, Tris! Can you stop? You’re bothering him!” After coming back to his senses, Mr. Lusus grabbed Ms. Tris by the nape of her neck to stop her eccentric behavior.

“Ouch! My neck hurts!”

“Idiot! You have to show some more decorum in front of Sir Fenix! He’s a knight now!”

“What? But he is still Ash, right?”

I’ll vouch that nothing on the inside has changed.

“Yes, Sir Fenix is still the same polite and friendly person. I also feel a great deal of fondness for him.”

“Right? He’s easy to talk to, reasonable, and very skilled!”

“However, Tris, he’s matured quite a bit since we first got acquainted. And with someone as talented as him, many people—including the house of Sacula—will be considering him as a prospective groom.”

“What?! You’re getting married, Ash?”

“Don’t ask him directly, you idiot!”

Upon hearing his research colleague’s blunt question, Mr. Lusus raised his fist—with which he performed autopsies—and delivered a precise, hard blow against Ms. Tris’s skull.

“Ouch! That hurt! Like hell! I’ll get a bump on the head!”

“That pain is a natural consequence of your rudeness! Good grief, I’m not saying you need to understand the aristocratic world, but at least hold your tongue—”

“So, if I used the anesthetic now, would it no longer hurt? Can I try it?”

Ms. Tris just kept jumping from one subject to another, leaving Mr. Lusus no time to scold her. At a complete loss, he just sighed. He looked like a man used to this back and forth.

As her behavior suggested, Ms. Tris was an exceedingly passionate natural

historian who jumped at any topic that interested her. Apparently, she loved flowers and she had begun her studies in the hopes of discovering new types. A very girlish motivation. Both Mr. Lusus and I doubted the veracity of that story, though.

Putting that matter aside, Ms. Tris's interests had expanded from flowers to plants as a whole, to birds and insects attracted to those plants, and eventually to animals in general. She herself had put the result of her research into quite simple terms, "I've come to understand that there's a lot of different things that do all kinds of stuff." A very accurate statement. So broad that there was no room for error. Very much like her.

However, her speech and conduct were deceiving. While her knowledge may have been extremely broad at first glance, that also meant that she had a bird's-eye view of things. At one point, when I had written to the natural historian about demons, she had given me a very smooth reply, "Even after researching all kinds of things, demons still seem strange. They're completely different from flowers, trees, birds, or other animals. The only other living beings doing stuff like that are humans."

I would have never thought about humans and demons having a point in common. And when I had asked her how they resembled each other, she had replied that they were both different from other living beings. "There's so many things that are different, but if I had to mention just one, I guess it would be their 'purpose'? Most living beings normally live to survive. While it's mostly the same for us humans, sometimes we walk toward death knowing that we will die. Something like that?"

Tris's sayings were so intuitive that they appeared cryptic, yet you somehow understood them. Likening the meaning of her words to a snake, it was as if I had grabbed it by the tail. You could say that I had captured it, but its head—the real goal—was still slithering away somewhere. After all, it was the head that could bite you. In other words, I had not completely captured the meaning of what she said. That was how it felt trying to understand her statements.

While she was mysterious, her knowledge was the real deal. Whenever Mr. Lusus asked her about a medicinal herb that he had found in a book, she could easily pinpoint its location by relying on the guide of her mind. She was

extremely talented and cooperative, and Mr. Lusus often found himself in the dilemma of having to praise her.

When I had asked her whether she knew about sulfuric acid, thinking it was a shot in the dark, she had just casually answered, “Oh, that one?” She was a living dictionary and reference guide receptive to even the most ambiguous search terms. Ms. Tris was truly a genius.

“Oh, right. Ash, I assume you’re going to visit the royal capital temple?” Ms. Tris asked.

“Yes, I want to have a look at the books here in the capital.” *I consider it my personal main event.*

“Let me know when you’re going. I’ll show you around.”

“That would be a great help. I want to use this chance to study some books that are not available back in Itsutsu.”

“Thought so. I know the locations of most open collections, so leave that to me!” Ms. Tris proudly tapped her chest.

“I’ll accompany you too. Even if it’s not my field of specialty, I can still be of help sorting the books by their contents. Besides, I might discover some things I had overlooked until now with Sir Fenix around,” Mr. Lusus interjected.

“Thanks, you two. I will ask Father Folke as well.” Lord Arthur was probably out of question. I would have loved to have her there even if just for a little bit, but she had to fulfill her duties. *But then again, asking can’t hurt.* “All right, I will let you know when—”

At that moment, a shrill scream sounded from the mob of children. *Looks like they’ve done it.* They had broken the model plane. As I approached them with a strained smile, the culprits were shaking with teary eyes.

“Let me see. What happened?”

Upon taking it into my hands for inspection, I noticed that the edge of the wings had broken off. Part of the skeleton had folded, and the cloth was torn. I could probably fix it myself. Luckily, the propeller was still intact—repairing that would have been beyond my capabilities.

“As you can see, it breaks easily. If you promise to take better care next time, I will fix it for you.”

As soon as I had finished speaking, the children’s eyes sparkled again and they cheerfully promised me to take better care of it. Among them were also some kids who wanted to know how to fix it themselves. That was good foresight, since it was definitely going to break again.

In anticipation of those quick-witted children’s future exploits, I decided on the spot to hold a handicraft lesson. If I left them with a good impression, some might come to the Sacula region after their studies. *I should put some time and effort into this.*

As I started the handicraft lesson, I noticed that a sparkly eyed Ms. Tris and her guardian Mr. Lusus had also joined the class.

Since leaders and representatives from all the regions gathered in the capital, social life was bustling. Even the house of Sacula’s frugal mansion had a lounge reserved for social gatherings. Following a joint invitation by His Excellency Count Sacula and His Excellency Viscount Sukuna extended to “anyone with free time on their hands,” everyone available had gathered at that lounge.

“Count Gentoh, thank you for the invitation. I heard that you met the famous Phoenix in Sukuna? We would love to hear some interesting stories about him!”

“I concur. I have been looking forward to Your Excellency’s return this whole time.”

“I believe everyone here is thinking the same, including myself. Once I heard that Your Excellency had returned, I was eagerly awaiting an opportunity to meet with you.”

There were men and women of all ages, but according to my advance briefing, all of them were nobles coming from remote regions. In other words, the same people to whom Count Gentoh had flaunted the model plane and spirit lamp. He appeared to fully enjoy the onslaught of attention from the attendees.

“Ha ha ha, I brought you all an exceptional souvenir that will hopefully live up to your expectations. But first, let’s have a drink to get the conversation going!”

On Count Gentoh's signal, the waiter handed glasses to the attendees and poured liquor from a porcelain vase. As the diluted, amber-colored liquid filled up the transparent glasses, a sweet scent rose up into the air.

"Oh! I've never seen alcohol like this."

"It says 'Quid company' on the bottle."

"So, it has to be from the Sacula region. But this scent... Could it be...?"

After hearing the attendees' remarks, Count Gentoh urged them to have a taste for themselves. Still, the smirk on his face already indicated that their hunch must have been right, ruining the surprise. While half-expecting the taste already, the attendees took a sip and feigned surprise to please the host.

"Oh, no doubt! This is distilled liquor!"

"I knew it! Sacula even mastered the art of distilling liquors now!"

"Excellent! Now we can drink as much as we like!"

As expected from someone with noble manners, the attendees did not choke upon tasting the distilled liquor, which was still considered a rarity in this world. So much so that it was usually not served at regional leaders' mansions. While this was partially due to the expensive manufacturing costs, it was also a result of the capital nobles keeping the distilling method a secret. It was yet another one of their monopolies to hog all the money and spite the territories that they disliked.

Notwithstanding this, many of the attendees would have tasted it before at other social gatherings. There were also some habitual drinkers who lamented not being able to enjoy this strong yet exquisite flavor that was unlike any brewed liquor more often. Among them was a shrewd woman in her thirties. She was an officer stationed in the capital as a representative of Baron Nepton's territory on the eastern seaside of the kingdom.

"Hm, this tastes like it's distilled from wheat. What a refreshing, dry taste. You don't get that from ale!" a nobleman said.

"Wheat? This one's from grapes. It tastes younger than Count Batsuka's one, but I like the different flavor," Baron Nepton's officer remarked.

“Oh, two different flavors at once! As expected from Count Gentoh! What a delightful surprise!”

I was happy that they enjoyed the liquor that we had distilled ourselves. It was an honor to receive praise from people with such a refined palate for our first batch.

“I forgot how strong liquor can be. But I also want to try the wheat one... May I?” the woman asked while holding her voluptuous red cheeks.

As Count Gentoh agreed, the waiter placed another glass of alcohol together with a glass of water on the table. “Please have some water first. It will slow down the intoxication and it will help you get a clearer taste of the liquor,” the waiter said.

“Thank you. Oh, I don’t think I’ve seen you before.”

“Yes, this is my first time here in the capital.”

“I see. Sorry to make you serve our table after such a long journey.”

The good-humored Nepton military officer cordially smiled at the waiter. Just as she was about to pick up her glass, she hurriedly looked back over her shoulder—a so-called double take.

To tell you the truth, the innocent-looking waiter was me. It was not unusual for trainee knights and fresh recruits to be waiters at social gatherings organized by the house of Sacula, which was known for its military power. As a result, the Nepton officer probably had not paid much attention to me at first, but she must have found it extremely strange to notice silver medals on a waiter’s uniform. Especially the one awarded by Baron Nepton.

“That’s our tsunami medal! And a silver one at that?! There’s only one person in all of Sacula who has that!”

It appeared that the other attendees had understood what the Nepton officer was trying to say, as they all half-rose to their feet.

Count Gentoh, who was clearly enjoying this little prank, introduced me with a big grin on his face. “As I said earlier, I brought an exceptional souvenir. Sir Fenix, please introduce yourself.”

“My name is Ash George Fenix. I was granted the privilege to serve as a knight for the house of Sacula. It is an honor to make your acquaintance.” *Just to be clear, I was against this surprise entrance.*

“What?! The Phoenix! Y-You’re the Phoenix boy?”

“Really? He’s not an impostor? C-Count Gentoh, is he the real deal?”

“He’s got our tsunami medal...three Sacula battle medals...as well as two culture ones... And is this a Sukuna steam medal?”

As the instigator, it really should have also been His Excellency’s responsibility to do something about the chaos in front of me, but...

My liege, could you please stop laughing and calm this place down?

“Ha ha, that was a good laugh.” Count Gentoh sipped his liquor and observed the uproar, amused.

What a cruel liege. While I was not able to say anything due to my standing, the attendees objected to the surprise in my place.

“Count Gentoh, could you please stop with pranks like these?”

“Yes, I almost thought my heart was going to stop.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize my souvenir was troubling you. Should I have him leave?” the count jokingly asked.

“No, not at all!”

Everyone retracted their complaints at once. *Couldn’t you have calmed them down a bit earlier?*

“Now then, Sir Fenix. Since everyone’s relaxed now, could you tell us some stories?”

“As you wish. Although you might come off as a slave driver, Your Excellency.”

“I don’t mind,” he consented with a rather brief reply.

I knew he’d say that.

Count Gentoh’s mental fortitude truly left his surroundings at a loss. His skin really could do with being a little thinner. He ignored everyone else’s opinions

and just did whatever he wanted. If he had not been surrounded by such gentle saints, he would have long since been beaten to death. His Excellency had only narrowly escaped death by my berserker rampage disguised as a saint's mission. In a way, we were two of a kind, so I needed to treat him kindly.

"Well then, with your permission, I will tell everyone present about our territory's recent accomplishments and our future plans."

The attendees who had caused a stir in regard to Count Gentoh's surprise suddenly became very serious upon hearing my starting remarks. As expected from leaders and appointed representatives working in the royal capital.

"I brought the distilled liquor—the spirits you have been drinking—as a sample of our work. As most of you will have guessed already, this is a prototypical batch manufactured in the Sacula region. It has only aged for two years, so there is still a lot of room for improvement." I said that last sentence while smiling at the Nepton officer, who appeared to like spirits. "In simple terms, these spirits were distilled by heating ale and wine to the point of evaporation and extracting the concentrated alcohol."

"Wait a minute!" Just as I was about to continue my explanation, the Nepton officer yelled in a voice unbefitting of her intelligence and beauty. "Th-That's Count Batsuka's secret technology! Some say he's using alchemy and manufacturing it with the divine protection of the monkey god! You can't just reveal that so casually!"

The fact that he kept such a simple method secret was the reason why this world had lower standards than the ancient civilization. Since I had my liege's permission, I was going to keep making all kinds of information public.

"No problem. I have received His Excellency's permission to disclose these details, and if you keep listening, I am sure you will understand why I chose to reveal this information. But thank you for your concern. I will remember your thoughtfulness."

I made an important mental note to myself to remember the Nepton officer as a good person. Baron Nepton's territory was situated on the coast, and he was on good terms with Count Gentoh, so I hoped to maintain a good relationship in the future.

Baron Nepton had sent us the seaweed necessary for our soap bar experiments, which meant that there was a chance that she had been involved in those negotiations. As such, this was a fair exchange of kindness.

“Now then, in order to distill liquor on a commercial scale, we will need advanced metalworking technology—including furnaces with extreme heating power—to produce large equipment capable of steadily extracting alcohol from common liquor.” The foundations had already been laid by our skilled team at the Territory Reform Promotion Office’s laboratory.

The various territory leaders and representatives nodded at the mention of the required technology. They must have assumed that I put all the cards on the table knowing that the method alone did not amount to much.

“Our current distillation equipment is still at a prototype stage, but this is our estimated selling price for commercialized spirits.”

I distributed a written report from the Promotion Office to all the attendees. Originally, I had planned to only present it to Viscount Sukuna, but once it had been decided that I would go to the capital, I had asked Lady Renge to make some more copies in a rush. The woes of living in a society where copies were handmade.

“Is that the actual price?” The Nepton officer swallowed her saliva. “Only half the cost of the spirits currently on the market? I can enjoy this taste for that cheap? It’s like a dream come true!”

As I had thought, she seemed to like her alcohol. Her eyes sparkled as she realized that she could buy two bottles for the price of one.

“Since Count Batsuka is keeping his methods a secret, I cannot give you a reason for the current price... It is either artificially raised because he has effectively monopolized the technology, similar to the soap situation, or his distillation equipment is not as efficient as ours.” Either one was possible. And I had more good news for the Nepton officer. “But this price is only an estimate based on the prototype equipment. Once we improve the apparatus and other territories start distilling liquor, the taste will be diversified, and the price will most likely drop further. Especially in the regions with a large output of grapes and wheat, where there is already a large amount of source liquor available.”

Upon hearing the term “other territories,” all attendees including the Nepton officer stared at Count Gentoh, as if to ask, “Did you just hear what your vassal suggested?” The count dismissed their looks with a brief nod, urging me to go on. The attendees seemed to understand.

“Y-You mean to say that the house of Sacula is willing to sell the spirits distillation equipment?”

“If you are interested.” However, there was a catch. “We will gladly sell the distillation equipment, but its maintenance and management require the appropriate knowledge. I mean, it is not very pragmatic to call over someone from a different territory every time the machine breaks down.”

“Yes, that makes perfect sense,” the Nepton officer agreed and dropped her shoulders. After voicing her disappointment as a spirit lover, she expressed her doubts as a diplomat. “So, why did you bring it up?”

Because I’ve prepared a solution, of course. “Our territory is prepared to accept students from across the kingdom. I am sure there are many inquisitive minds overflowing with talent in your territories, and if they wish, we will provide them with an opportunity to learn our technology.”

If there was no one with the right expertise, you had to rely on help from other regions. To solve that problem, you simply had to educate your own people.

“So, rather than selling the equipment itself, you want to reveal the manufacturing process?” the Nepton officer’s gaze restlessly alternated between me and Count Gentoh.

Given the precedent of the wealthy soap merchants and Count Batsuka, it was commonly understood that technology was not made public. However, there was also the unique precedent of Sacula revealing their soap recipe. Everyone’s expectations were rising.

“Our research to increase agricultural output has also produced some positive results. While we still need to conduct experiments in regard to grapes, we have already obtained enough data to confidently report that we managed to increase our wheat yield. We also developed an alternative method for producing the charcoal necessary for thermal power, which we will hopefully

diffuse in the near future."

I could already see the banknotes piling up as I presented all of Sacula's cards. The attendees were busy calculating the values of each project as I mentioned them. Some covered their mouths to hide their gasps, some blinked rapidly, and others broke out into cold sweats. Everyone was racking their brains at full speed.

"The exchange students will have opportunities to learn all of the technologies I just mentioned. Depending on the circumstances, it may even be possible for them to participate in further studies."

I would love to welcome as many skilled helpers as possible, but it depended on the individual student's capabilities and the state of the research at the time.

"I see. That's indeed of great interest." The Nepton officer withheld her personal opinion and replied in a prudent tone of voice. "What will be the conditions for accepting exchange students? Has that already been decided?"

"Yes. Although there may still be some adjustments." During my stay at the hot spring, I had decided on the general framework through discussions with Viscount Sukuna. "First, we will ask for some monetary compensation to cover for our research and development costs. Those funds will also be used to maintain a proper study environment for the students. So, please be understanding."

Everyone naturally nodded in agreement to my sensible proposition.

"Next, we would like for the territories to form official cooperative relationships. Specifically, to increase trade and provide relief in times of disaster. Those two points will be the minimum requirements."

In regard to trade, my aim was to share resources between territories, so it would be easier to get hold of them in various places. For disaster relief, I was hoping that the territories could provide food, clothing, and shelter to the areas affected by famine or destruction from demon attacks. It would not have to be without any compensation, but at a reasonable price.

To sum it up, I wanted to redirect excess resources to the places that were lacking them. I had no intentions of making any profits or getting ahead of other

territories.

“Those are exceptional conditions, one could say... Of course, we still need to look at the details,” the Nepton officer cautiously noted.

This was a brutal society, in which conditions that sounded too good to be true easily aroused suspicion. While I simply wanted their cooperation to cover for our lack of resources, it appeared that they did not fully trust my proposal. So, in order to meet their expectations, I added a little wicked twist.

“By the way, we can only receive a limited number of exchange students at once. Therefore, with all due respect, there may be a screening process if there are too many applicants.” *The screening process may be secret, but I promise it’ll be fair. And I don’t think it’s fair if someone who invests one copper coin gets the same privileges as someone who invests one gold coin.*

Guessing the implications of my statement, the attendees exchanged glances, sparks flying from their eyes.

As they were locked into staring duels, the Nepton military officer quickly replied first. “As a representative of Baron Nepton, I will seriously consider the offer. It sounds promising. I will also promptly start conversations with other territories,” she declared with a broad grin.

In the background, you could hear some of the attendees clicking their tongues while putting up a calm smile. This would evolve into a fierce fight behind closed doors.

“By the way, I know you’re still young, but do you have a fiancée, Sir Fenix?” the officer asked.

“Well, not really...”

Although, there was a girl whom I liked and who had declared to snatch me away. I reflected on how to explain my complicated relationship with Lady Maika, but all I could muster was a wry smile.

The Nepton officer nodded as if she had understood the situation. “In that case, would you like to meet my daughter? Due to our standing, I gave her a strict upbringing, and she turned into a wonderful young lady. She is my pride and joy.”

To avoid being left behind, everyone else also spoke up.

“Oh, my daughter is also currently looking for a suitable marriage candidate!”

“Sir Fenix, do you prefer younger or older women?”

Somehow, they had roped me into their below-surface conflict. It felt as if countless arms had started dragging me into the water as I was minding my own business leisurely floating along in a swim ring.

If I had aspired to get married, this would have been a very welcomed uproar, but after rejecting Lady Maika, I had no intentions of accepting any offers. For the time being, I decided to just sidestep the issue until everyone calmed down.

Just as I was coming up with some evasive remarks to build up a protective wall, Count Gentoh, who had been busy drinking all this time, stepped up in front of me. “Hey, everyone! Could you please calm down a bit?”

My liege, what happened? Did you run out of spirits? I still need those for future presentations, so there won’t be any second helpings today. And aren’t you drinking a bit too much?

Since I had not expected him to help me out at this stage, I was preoccupied with the remaining quantity of the spirits that I had brought to the royal capital. However, Count Gentoh’s following words were in fact nothing else than a lifeline.

“As his liege, I can assure you that he would in fact be great husband material, but it would be better to postpone your marriage proposals until after the Royal Sword Fighting Tournament.”

Upon hearing Count Gentoh’s advice, everyone present, including the Nepton officer, fell silent with a disappointed look on their faces... But only for a few seconds.

“Oh, I see, you’ve already got someone in mind, huh? And you want to win her over at the Royal Tournament.” Childish excitement came over the Nepton officer’s mature face. “How romantic! Suddenly, I can’t wait to see this year’s tournament!”

There was a big misunderstanding going on. They thought I was going to

participate in the Royal Sword Fighting Tournament, but I had barely remembered its existence until now. No way I was going to fight in it.

"That's what it's all about! The winner of the tournament may ask for all kinds of things, but there's nothing more exciting than someone fighting in the name of their passionate love!"

"Three tournaments ago was the last time the winner asked for someone's hand in marriage, right? And wasn't that also a Sacula knight?"

"Yes! Headhunter Sir Klein! That tournament was a blast!"

"It's wonderful how passionate Sacula's men are!"

While the men clenched their fists and worked themselves into a sweltering frenzy, the women swooned over the romantic heroism.

And then I realized why I had been given the opportunity to visit the royal capital. I had not been invited personally so much as brought along—or lured along, I should say, knowing I could not resist the allure of the capital.

As I glanced at Count Gentoh, who was no doubt an accomplice, he gave a devilish smile, as if to say, "So you finally realized?"

"Come to think of it, I heard that Sir Fenix is an accomplished fighter."

"It's quite the feat to have three silver battle medals at his young age!"

"We can definitely look forward to a good fight!"

I'm sorry to disappoint you all, but it's not me *who will go berserk at the tournament.*

They were probably not even aware she was here—His Excellency's granddaughter. No wonder she had been training daily and exchanging violent blows with the mansion's guards, including Sir George. *And my role in all of this? I'll be the winner's trophy.*

As usual, Lady Maika had spent most of the day swinging her sword and only made it to dinner at the dining room at the very last moment. It appeared she had just come out of the bath—her damp hair unevenly stuck to her forehead and the nape of her neck.

“Ah, this smells great! What’s for dinner?”

Rejoicing at the scent filling the cafeteria, she sat down. Naturally, her seat was next to mine. Although, of course, there was nothing natural about that. Why did a simple knight like me have dinner together with the count’s family? And it was not even an official public dinner, but just a regular private meal. But apparently, I was the only one worried about the class system. The house of Sacula’s pure-blooded father and son, Lord Itsuki and Count Gentoh, were fully engaged in friendly chatter.

Lady Maika’s face beamed upon seeing the food on the table. “Ash, you made this, right?” She turned toward me.

She was correct, but there were more pressing matters at hand than identifying the cook. Why were they so hellbent on treating me like a family member? Their behavior was more terrifying than any of my usual scoldings.

As I reflected on my lack of resignation, Count Gentoh picked up on Lady Maika’s statement. “Oh, you can tell? Yeah, it was in fact Ash who cooked tonight’s dinner.”

“Of course I can tell! It’s a Hamburg steak with wine and tomato sauce. People here in the capital still don’t really eat tomatoes,” Lady Maika replied with as much conviction as if she had just proclaimed that the sun rises every morning.

Count Gentoh was disappointed by her overflowing confidence. It seemed that he had wanted to surprise her. Lord Itsuki smiled wryly, implying that he had predicted this outcome.

“More importantly, let’s start eating. I can’t wait to taste Ash’s Hamburg steak again!” Lady Maika said.

“I wanted to see the surprised look on her face after she took a bite...but this smell is also making me hungry. Let’s dig in.”

On Count Gentoh’s signal, everyone reached for the Hamburg steak, tonight’s main dish. Count Gentoh’s face lit up immediately after taking his first-ever bite of the Hamburg steak.

“Oh my! This is delicious! The sweet and sour sauce—that must be the

tomatoes. It's a lingering flavor just as rich as the meat."

For his second bite, Count Gentoh made sure to add an ample amount of sauce. His hearty appetite made you forget about his advanced age. On the other hand, Lady Maika and Lord Itsuki, who had eaten the Hamburg steak before, tilted their heads in confusion. They scraped off the sauce before taking a second bite.

After thoroughly savoring the meat itself, Lord Itsuki nodded. "I get it. This is a different mixture of meat than usual. Did you use fewer fatty ones? It tastes quite light and refreshing."

"That's perceptive of you. You are right." I had tried to hide the meat's lighter flavor with the rich sauce, so I had not expected anyone to notice on the second bite.

"Ha ha, even if I'm not as crazy about Hamburg steak as Maika, it's still one of my favorite foods. What meat did you use? I've never had this taste before."

"The main ingredient is pork. Instead of beef, I added pig liver and heart as well as some soybeans."

A pseudo-tofu Hamburg steak. High protein and low fat.

"Soybeans? So that's why it tastes lighter than usual. I could eat this all the time."

"Is it that light and refreshing? I feel like the flavor is quite rich..."

"That's the sauce, father. It has a robust flavor because of the strong seasoning. Yeah, this tastes great. And most importantly, it's easy on the stomach! This could be a good light meal for when I'm exhausted."

Indeed, it seemed like a great, gentle dish for Lord Itsuki, who tended to skip lunch when he was busy. *I should give Chef Yacoo the recipe once we get back to Itsutsu.*

Count Gentoh grimaced at his son, as if to say, "Don't be such an old man."

By the way, I'd just like to point out that Count Gentoh is still fully present despite all the liquor that he drank earlier.

Of course, Lady Maika, who was the fussiest about Hamburg steak among all

present, had also noticed the difference in the meat. After listening to my explanation of the meat ratios, she once again surveyed all the dishes laid out in front of her.

Tonight's menu consisted of the following: Hamburg steak made of pork, pig innards, and soybeans with tomato sauce and red wine. A seasonal vegetable salad with cheese dressing. A dry scallop-based seafood soup with garlic. And finally, a special citrus fruit juice with salt and honey.

Only Lady Maika had noticed the reasoning behind the menu. She had studied beside me longer than anyone else, and our accumulated knowledge was practically the same. Accordingly, she was the only one to notice. She blushed and looked down. The fleeting glances of her upturned eyes were borderline foul play.

Steeling my defenses by pretending not to notice, I continued eating. This prompted her to pout and glare at me. However, once she resumed her meal shortly after, she again looked happy.

"Before I forget, let me tell you about today's gathering," Count Gentoh changed the subject as the harmonious dinner went on. "Ash did great. Although I was friendly with all the attendees already, everyone showed interest in our proposal."

"Of course, we're talking about Ash after all," Lord Itsuki chimed in.

There it was again. The platitude that I had heard countless times until now. Eventually, I had stopped paying much attention to it once I had started hearing it an estimated twenty times a day.

"No one escapes Ash's persuasion," Lady Maika remarked.

That statement I can't let slide. I can't persuade everyone*.*

But for some reason, Lord Itsuki nodded. "Yeah, that's about right. I assume he also received lots of marriage proposals?"

He had brought up the subject with a smile on his face, but it sent cold shivers down my spine. Not that I had done anything wrong—consciously. I had not agreed to any marriage meeting, so I had not even entered the realm of infidelity. My only sin was rejecting Lady Maika's confession. *That's a bad one.*

Worthy of the death penalty.

Regardless, Count Gentoh was the worst offender here for choosing this topic in the first place. In a matter of seconds, I tried to come up with every conceivable excuse and simulate how they would play out in my head. At the same time, I observed Lady Maika's reaction. While her mouth was still smiling, her eyes looked cold, like razor blades made out of ice.

According to my mental simulation, the most effective response seemed to be buying some time by using Count Gentoh as a shield before prostrating myself. I mentally prepared for the maneuver. *I really haven't done anything wrong, but sometimes you just need to apologize even if you're not at fault...*

However, I noticed that Lady Maika's gaze was not directed at my resolved, trembling self, but rather at the food on the table. In the blink of an eye, her cold, sharp look eased up, as if it had been blown away by a spring breeze.

"Well, obviously. It's Ash after all." Lady Maika smiled as she picked up a glass of the special fruit juice. In spite of her smile, there was still a little sharpness left in her eyes. Apparently, the spring breeze had not been strong enough to blow away her annoyance. "I know better than anyone else what a charming person Ash is. I can imagine he's popular." Her smile grew bigger as she continued speaking. "But at the same time, I also know better than anyone else how difficult it is to break down his walls."

Her gaze now resembled that of a hunter looking at her prey—and that comparison still seemed like understatement. It was a boiling mixture of strong self-confidence and mad longing, implying that she was the only one capable of conquering my heart. She was almost like a brave warrior from an epic tale who sets out to defeat a worthy opponent. Her expression was a bit too savage to be that of the hero, though. She looked more like the princess of darkness ready to attack.

"The only one capable of conquering Ash is me. And maybe..." the princess of darkness murmured.

While Lady Maika was assessing her strength, Count Gentoh had come to the conclusion that it was the right time to take an overly sophisticated envelope out of his inner breast pocket.

“If Maika is not jealous, I would love to invite you to this party, Ash. I don’t want to keep it a secret from her and find you cut up in an alley afterward.”

It turned out he had brought up this preposterous topic as a test to predict the danger ahead. An unexpectedly prudent move considering his normal speech and conduct. It was also befitting of a count whose territory was constantly on alert for demons. Still, that was a pretty dangerous topic. I softly wiped the sweat off the palms of my hands.

“I don’t have any objections if it’s work-related... What kind of party is it?”

“On paper, it’s an opportunity to socialize with people who are usually not in the capital. With the Royal Tournament approaching and all...” Count Gentoh, who seemed to feel an aversion even toward the envelope’s decoration, laughed scornfully. “Ha ha, but they probably just want to probe into our internal affairs, since we’ve been doing quite well lately. And possibly, if circumstances permit, crush us under their feet...”

“That does not sound like a very fun party. I am not good at those kinds of interactions...”

When dealing with a clearly hostile person, more often than not any attempt at reasoning was futile. And I had always been bad at dealing with unreasonable people.

“Yeah, that seems like something Ash would hate. He refers to those people as annoying biting lice...”

I owed a debt to Lady Maika, who upon my selfish requests had always dealt with those types so far.

“But I’ll have to pass this time. I’m just too busy training. Sorry, I wish I could take care of the biting lice!” Lady Maika apologized with a cheerful expression, which was indicative of her trust in me. “Either way, I know you can do it, Ash! You say you’re not good at it, but that’s according to your standards, which means you’re actually decent at it!”

“I am not sure that is how it works...”

In fact, I was so averse to meeting with those people that every fiber of my being revolted at the mere thought of going to that party. I let out a sigh.

“Is it really out of question? Even though you’re so well-spoken?” Count Gentoh asked for confirmation while stroking his chin.

“I am afraid so. I would really prefer to sit this one out... Especially because I do not want to commit any careless blunders.”

If I had the time to go to a party with so few benefits, I would rather go to the royal temple and enjoy talking to Ms. Tris and Mr. Lusus.

“All right. I won’t force you if you’re not up to it. Although I’m sure *she* would feel more comfortable if you were there.”

“She?” I scratched my head. *Someone I know?*

“It’s a party thrown in honor of Her Highness the Princess by her supporters.”

The princess?

Since he had mentioned her comfort, that meant that not even her “supporters” were truly on her side.

I scratched my head as I remembered my last year at the military academy. My roommate who was always brimming with curiosity. Presuming upon her kindness, I had promised to always borrow her strength when needed. My finger moved from my forehead to point at the decorated envelope in Count Gentoh’s hand.

“Who sent that tasteless envelope?”

“Marquis Datara. It’s hideous, right? This golden leaf here is in pretty bad taste.”

“Oh, is that the marquis who has a giant werewolf cemetery in his territory?”

That envelope was a display of power. It was a transparent attempt at showing off the abundance of their metal resources and their advanced metallurgy technology. Depending on the recipient, that could have provoked envy and greed. However, in my case, it only reminded me of the ill-prepared assassins whom I had beaten at their own game three years ago.

That marquis used his power as crudely as ever, and was going to host a party with my old roommate as a guest. That was more than enough reason for me to go borrow her strength.

“I changed my mind. I would love to attend this party.”

This kingdom’s princess was in a complex and delicate position. The reason dated back six years ago, when the middle prince—the second-in-line—had died in an accident.

At the time, rumor was going around that it had not been an accident but an assassination. However, such rumors were commonplace whenever a noble or influential person died, so high society did not give it too much thought. The problem was the person who had come under suspicion.

At first, that disgrace fell upon the youngest prince, the third-in-line. It was quite well-known that he and the second-in-line had been on bad terms, among other things due to the family situation on the maternal side. You could say it was reasonable to suspect him. Even the third-in-line’s faction had to begrudgingly accept this. They resigned themselves to waiting for the rumors to die down while denying the allegations by saying that such cruelty was not the royal way.

Altogether, the royalty and their aristocratic followers had presented a rational response. Not least because even with the second-in-line gone, the throne’s succession had not been affected. The disgraceful rumors surrounding the third-in-line were thus akin to a safely contained fire.

And that fire did indeed soon die out. However, not in the way that the youngest prince’s supporters—or most of the high society, for that matter—had hoped. The fire had blown away the entire mansion, quite literally. The third-in-line had also died in an accident.

The rumors were no longer just rumors. One prince perishing in a deadly accident? Possible. Two princes having such “accidents” in such a short period of time? Highly unlikely. So, the authorities set up an investigation examining the possibility of conspiracy and assassination regarding the two princes’ deaths. The subjects of this investigation were those who would profit the most from the victims’ early demise.

Thus, the fourth-in-line for the throne, the princess, had become the prime suspect. The king’s deep affection for his first baby girl may have also played a role in her becoming the new target of the rumors. At the time, she was only

eight years old. Although she possessed certain powers as royalty, she was not able to exert them at her young age. Accordingly, the rumors did not stop and people started to believe them.

It was none other than Marquis Datara who made a dashing appearance before the princess to stop the accusations. The noble that provided the kingdom with metal resources flatly rejected the rumors, arguing very logically that a young princess her age without any real supporters would never have killed two of her older brothers.

At first glance, the marquis merely appeared like an extremely loyal vassal to his king. Even the lords who hated his guts had to admit as much. Nevertheless, as those lords had expected, Marquis Datara was indeed not worthy of such praise. Instead of trying to calm the situation down, he fanned the flames.

“If you’re suspecting Her Highness the Princess of killing her two older brothers, shouldn’t you also doubt the innocence of His Highness the Crown Prince? The succession may be guaranteed, but that doesn’t exclude other motives.”

Naturally, the crown prince’s supporters could not stay silent following such a statement. The two factions started accusing each other of being the culprit, investigating the opposing camp and criticizing even the most trivial of behaviors that would have never aroused any suspicion.

Meanwhile, the princess had been completely turned into Marquis Datara’s puppet. Although she did not speak out herself, the marquis was spreading the word in her name. The little princess could only quietly lock herself in her room and hold her tongue to avoid being used as a puppet as much as possible.

Incidentally, the fourth-in-line was the king’s first baby girl, and he did indeed deeply love her. The conflict between the crown prince and the princess grew more intense by the day, and just when the lords anticipated things would get violent, the king finally made his move. Or rather, because the situation had escalated this far, the king finally decided to intervene.

The king sought advice from a distant relative. They were the head of a distant region, who did not have any interest in the power struggle in the royal capital despite their military prowess.

“It’s about my daughter.”

“Yes, it’s horrible what’s happening to her,” the provincial nobleman casually replied.

“Hm, we can’t ignore the royal family’s infighting any longer. It looks like some mischievous bug has been stoking the flames.”

“A bug with a loud, shrill voice.”

“Only a prominent nobleman outside the royal family would gain something from tarnishing the reputation of the prince and the princess.”

Marquis Datara was most likely plotting to strengthen his own influence by driving the conflict between the throne heirs to its bitter end. While it seemed obvious that he was trying to take root in national politics by installing the princess as a puppet ruler, he may have even been planning to eventually usurp the crown. He would do so under the pretext that the current royal family devastated the capital because of their own selfish disputes, and thus, they could no longer be trusted to ensure the well-being of the nation. That bug was the epitome of the saying that “The guilty are audacious.”

“Your Majesty, how do you plan on dealing with the situation?” the provincial nobleman asked.

“We have to tear away the mischievous bug. We can no longer deal with it in a roundabout way.”

“Yes, that’s true. If only Your Majesty could have acted sooner, this situation could have been avoided...”

The man sitting on the throne gratefully nodded upon hearing the provincial nobleman’s warmhearted advice, which translated to “You really should have done something sooner.”

The king explained why he was unable to do so in his position. “You’re sure not mincing your words. A king ideally sits idly on his throne. Would you not agree that if a dragon soared through the skies every day, the kingdom would be in chaos and eventually perish?”

“Yes. Even our territory wouldn’t be able to handle one every day.”

“If you and your men can’t handle it, then no one else can. That is why I ask you for advice.” The king laughed. “Would you be willing to shelter my daughter?”

“Your Majesty’s adorable daughter in a rustic province like ours?”

“Well, the bad bug is sticking to my daughter. Officially, she will be going to one of Viscount Sukuna’s health resorts to recover from a bout of illness. Once the princess is out of the picture, I can’t see the bug causing any more uproar.”

While the king did not show any emotions, as a father himself, the provincial nobleman recognized His Majesty’s reluctance to send his beloved daughter to a faraway place. So, the provincial nobleman fell to his knees and took a bow before replying to the fellow parent. “Very well, my liege. Our family will do everything in its power to protect Your Majesty’s daughter.”

Delighted, the king took his vassal’s hand. “Your words mean the world to me. I am counting on you.” The king faintly bowed his head—an unthinkable gesture—before smiling. “This may even end up being a good experience for my daughter. She is a very curious and strong girl.”

And thus, Her Highness the Princess assumed the guise of the provincial nobleman’s child and traveled to a remote territory.

As you’ve probably guessed by now, that nobleman was none other than Count Gentoh Sacula. Considering how he managed to just stay his usual self when facing the king, it was no overstatement to say that his mental fortitude was unrivaled in the entire kingdom.

Speaking of the true identity of Her Highness the Princess, who had disguised as Count Gentoh’s son and gone to Sacula brimming with curiosity... I felt relief at the thought that I would finally be able to call her by the name that she had whispered into my ear that night.

Since Marquis Datara hosted the party, naturally his faction made its presence felt. In fact, it was more of a gathering of Marquis Datara’s supporters than the princess’s supporters. Apart from Datara’s faction, there was the Sacula faction—the provincial noblemen led by Count Gentoh. They had suddenly declared themselves supporters of the now second-in-line after the princess’s return to the royal capital.

“We’ve managed to gather quite a lot of people,” Count Gentoh cheerfully said after surveying the room. The ratio of guests was about seven to three in favor of the marquis’s faction, but for the count that still appeared to classify as “quite a lot of people.” As expected, the provincial nobility did not care much for the royal capital’s social life. “It was worth telling them that you would attend. See over there, it’s Baron Nepton’s military officer, Raino.”

The Nepton officer was wearing a beautiful dress. She smiled this way and bowed to greet us.

After reciprocating the bow, I whispered into Count Gentoh’s ear. “Am I just bait to gather your supporters?”

“Otherwise, no one would have come. The provincial nobility here doesn’t like to convene in places like this. They don’t show up if there’s nothing for them to gain. Gatherings hosted by the central nobility don’t really interest them.”

“Just like me, then. I can understand them.”

“Me too, to be honest.” Apparently, Count Gentoh had also ignored the invitations prior to the princess’s return, yet he had slyly coerced me into attending this time. “Did I inconvenience you by asking you to come?” my superior checked in with me.

“Until I learned the reason why,” I answered honestly.

“And afterward?” he continued asking cheerfully.

“I am firmly convinced that one should repay kindness with kindness. I am thankful that you gave me the opportunity to do exactly that.”

My reply improved Count Gentoh’s mood even further, and he laughed out loud. “You really are a good-natured person. I’m proud to call you my knight.”

“The honor is all mine.”

While I was engaged in a pleasant and lively conversation with my liege, the same could not be said for Datara’s people surrounding us. They were whispering among each other and looking this way, mostly talking about me. Probably because my standing was by far the lowest in the room—a knight with a farmer background. Most likely thanks to Lady Maika, I had never come across

any people in Sacula who cared about my social status, but here in the royal capital, it seemed to be of great importance.

“Our ancestors used to sleep in huts alongside the farmers and soldiers when they laid the foundations for the city. The same applied to the nobles here at the capital. But while they have long forgotten, we still remember. That’s the difference between us,” the highest-ranking person of the Sacula region explained.

In the remote provincial territories, there remained a feeling of fellowship even among people of different status, whereas here in the royal capital, it was the be-all and end-all of life. The Sacula aristocrats may have been a bit too frank, but then again, that was the distinctive charm of a region with such severe outside pressure. Among the Itsutsu guards, some older soldiers had even boasted about sharing meals with Count Gentoh and Lord Itsuki out of the same pot.

“Don’t worry about them. Just treat them as biting lice.”

“Oh, I will. I am great at that.”

I was a veteran bug handler. For example, it was only annoying noise to my ears whenever someone called my silver medals mass-produced junk or meaningless decorations. There was no need for them to believe or acknowledge me. Those who did not acknowledge me were heretics, and if they did not know the expression “Those who believe shall be saved” already, there was no need to teach them either.

Unruffled, I tried telling apart the faces of the Sacula faction and those of the Datara faction. At the same time, the man standing next to me clicked his tongue.

“Pesky bugs all around us. I want to pinch and crush them.”

“There is no reason for Your Excellency to respond to their provocations.”

“You say that, but making fun of your silver medals equals making fun of those who presented them to you. Meaning my house.”

Oh, right. “Please just put up with it for now. This is no place to solve anything with brute force.”

“Hm... That’s why I don’t like these gatherings.” Count Gentoh, who seemed to hate parties just as much as me, took two glasses off a passing servant’s tray. “Here, have a drink with me.”

“If you do not mind.”

But was it really okay to drink this? A drink prepared by someone who had tried to assassinate a member of the royal family?

“He can’t afford to have corpses at his own party,” Count Gentoh reassured me.

“Why not? I would do it if necessary.”

Just in case, I sipped the drink before my liege. As I was making sure it did not taste off, Count Gentoh gave me an odd look.

“Only someone confident enough to build his own support base back up from zero would dare such a desperate move,” he said, implying it did not apply to Marquis Datara. “But yeah, you could probably pull it off. I mean, you came from a farm village and made your own little circle in the blink of an eye.”

“But *only* if necessary. As a very last resort,” I emphasized my peace-loving manners and common sense.

In return, Count Gentoh replied with a fiendish smile, as if he was the devil praising his four horsemen. “How reliable. She’ll be here soon,” Count Gentoh whispered when noticing the movement of the waiters, butlers, and maids.

It appeared that the second-in-line, Her Highness the Princess, was about to show up. Marquis Datara and his followers, who had received word from the butler, gathered around the entrance. Since the provincial leaders had only just noticed the commotion, they had no choice but to congregate further away. In the blink of an eye, the door opened in front of the crowd.

“We’re going in. You ready?” Count Gentoh asked.

“This is easier than chasing a deer through the forest,” I replied.

After smiling at each other, we marched forward together as liege and vassal. His Excellency Count Sacula made use of both his title and muscular physique to steadily and nonchalantly push ahead. He bumped shoulders with several

members of the Datara faction, but he just brushed it off with an audacious "Oops, sorry." *Amazing. You wouldn't think he's a noble.*

At the same time, I smoothly slipped through the gaps opened up by Count Gentoh's barbaric acts. *Quite slick if I may say so.*

"Now then, Your Highness. Please make yourself feel at ease over—"

It seemed that Marquis Datara had just finished greeting Her Highness the Princess when we finally pushed past the crowd of people. Without any delay, Count Gentoh cut him off.

"Marquis Datara, I see you've already welcomed the guest of honor. Splendid!"

Social etiquette required greeting the party's host. However, once the formalities were over, Marquis Datara could not hog the princess. She was free to enjoy the party as it pleased her. And since that meant that the princess would probably hang around the Sacula faction, Marquis Datara had gathered all his followers around the entrance to stop her. Unfortunately for him, the defensive wall did not hold in the face of the count's reckless actions—*I mean, bravery*.

"Your Highness, I have come to introduce you to the house of Sacula's pride and joy, whom I mentioned to you before." Count Gentoh tapped my back and dragged me out in front of Her Highness the Princess.

You're messing up my formal knight uniform! All my slick maneuvering through the crowd was for nothing...

After reproachfully glaring at Count Gentoh for a brief moment, I looked ahead. There stood the familiar princess whom I was about to officially meet for the first time.

"It is an honor and privilege to meet you in person, Your Highness Princess Alicia."

Upon hearing me call her true name for the first time, the princess gave a very sweet, feminine smile, different from the ones she had shown as Arthur. Even though her countenance was the same, her new frame of mind made a world of difference.

“The honor is mine. I am glad to finally meet the Phoenix.” Lady Alicia carefully chose her words, trying to suppress laughter. “I have heard a lot about you from Count Sacula and Father Folke, but would you mind introducing yourself?”

“Yes, Your Highness. I am Ash George Fenix, knight of Sacula.”

“Ash—Sir Fenix. I’ve been meaning to talk to you for a long time.” *As the real me*, her words implied. To any outsiders, however, it merely sounded like a first meeting with someone about whom she had heard rumors.



“Oh, I should probably also introduce myself. Although it seems there may be no need?”

“Yes, I am afraid there is no need. Your Highness’s name has indeed come to my ears in Sacula.” Whispered by Lady Alicia herself the last night of the outdoors training camp. I had only returned the favor by formally introducing myself. There was no need for her to introduce herself a second time.

Lady Alicia nodded and smiled broadly at this back-and-forth whose true meaning only we understood. “I will take your word, then. Are you alone today, Sir Fenix?”

I was here with Count Gentoh, but I assumed she was asking whether I had a female partner. After I shook my head, Lady Alicia closed in from the formal distance for greetings to engage in more friendly conversation.

“Then, I would love to talk to you. I have been talking to Father Folke and his friends because I am interested in science and technology.”

“I would be glad to join you if that is your wish.”

“Of course. Didn’t I tell you that I’ve heard many rumors about you, Phoenix?”

It seemed that Her Highness the Princess had grown extremely fond of various articles marked with the phoenix symbol and sold by the Quid company. Through the count, she had acquired soap, ointment, a spirit lamp, and even a tendon-powered model plane, the most expensive item.

Of course, I was well aware of this already. After Lady Alicia had approached me about wanting a spirit lamp and a model plane, I had put in a special order with Mr. Quid out of my own pocket. At the prospect of doing business with the royal family, Mr. Quid had been quick on his feet to calculate a discount price.

While I had sent the special lamp and model plane as a gift to the royal family, I had thought of them more as a small token of gratitude toward a friend who was still doing favors for me despite living in a distant region.

As we were talking with each other, Lady Alicia and I managed to escape the Datara faction’s crowd and joined the Sacula camp. Marquis Datara had tried to stop us, but Count Gentoh had intercepted him with his characteristic loud

voice. The others did not dare interrupt the princess while she was engaged in a pleasant conversation. We kept talking even after reaching the Sacula camp.

“The phoenix-mark items are always so intriguing and of such high quality. Would you happen to have any new information? I can’t wait for your newest invention.”

“Let me see. We are looking to produce a new ointment after changing the formula. Thanks to Mr. Lusus and Ms. Tris here in the capital, we managed to come up with a more effective combination.”

“Ah, yes, I know those two. I met them at Father Folke’s place.”

“And we have also made some progress in regard to preserved foods. We managed to conserve some food inside bottles while maintaining the flavor.”

“That sounds wonderful. Once it is finished, would you mind sending me some?”

“If you wish, I can send you some by this summer.”

By the way, I had already told her all this information through letter correspondence with Father Folke as an intermediary. In fact, some of this research was only possible due to the books and knowledge obtained by Lady Alicia in the capital. Her Highness the Princess was the Territory Reform Promotion Office’s permanent honorary vice head of planning. In other words, our current discussion was merely an advertisement to anyone listening. We were going around starting fires to put out ourselves later. *How horrible of us... Let’s continue!*

“Phoenix...” Instead of calling me Sir Fenix, Lady Alicia preferred to affectionately call me by my nickname when publicly acting as the princess. “Could you tell me what you have planned next? However much you’re able to say.”

“Let me see. There are so many things I want to do, so it is difficult to just choose one... But that is precisely the problem I am trying to solve right now.”

“Oh, how so?”

“By recruiting talented people and training them.”

I was referring to my desire to accept exchange students, which I had already mentioned at the gathering in Sukuna and here in the capital.

Lady Alicia eagerly listened to my explanation as if she had heard it for the first time. “Fascinating. I would love to participate if that means I can learn Sacula’s advanced knowledge.”

“We would warmly welcome Your Highness’s talents if at all possible.”

That last sentence was not scripted. I was honest about wanting to once again study together with her.

Upon hearing my reply, Lady Alicia smiled broadly.

The surrounding provincial leaders had become alert to our exchange. They loved novel things and were well-aware of Sacula’s recent remarkable products. Naturally, they must have been wondering about the territory’s future development. And among them, there were people eager to get their hands on our technology, like Officer Raino, whom I had already attracted. Currently, she was proudly explaining the situation to a curious friend of hers.

But it wasn’t just people from the Sacula faction who had listened. People affiliated with Marquis Datara were scattered around the room as scouts, and not all of his followers were completely loyal. Especially the people who only hung around the marquis for their own gains had been hooked by our profit bait.

The royal capital nobles had little interest in novelties. However, they also could no longer afford to ignore Sacula’s innovative technology. On the one hand, Marquis Datara’s influence had started waning following rumors that he may be the true culprit behind the princes’ assassinations. On the other hand, Count Sacula was undoubtedly on the rise. Rather than staying loyal to the marquis, it would be more beneficial to change to Sacula’s faction.

That left Marquis Datara with the short end of the stick. He must have been seething with anger, outwitted at his own party. That’s why he resorted to one of his crude techniques.

“Hello there, knight of Sacula!”

A fat, sturdy man in his late twenties had forcefully pushed his way through

the crowd. He looked like a trained fighter who had gotten out of shape. There were gold and silver ornaments stuck to his elegant clothes, but they did not match his unrefined expression.

His lack of respect from the start was more akin to a bandit than an aristocrat. Chef Yacoo at least looked like a combat-experienced bandit chief, whereas this guy would have been a petty underling. A world of difference between him and our master chef.

Anyhow, I instantly recognized the underling. Even though I was no social butterfly, I knew the names of the neighboring territories' leaders. Especially those with a bad reputation.

"Oh, if it isn't His Excellency Viscount Yanga. Thank you for going through the trouble of coming to greet me."

"I'm impressed. You know who I am? No wonder the house of Sacula decided to knight a farmer like you," Viscount Yanga said in a loud voice, emphasizing the word "farmer."

I did not think he was trying to intimidate me. Surprisingly, many people thought that speaking loudly, being overbearing, and yelling about other people's shortcomings made them appear more distinguished. However, I was not easily frightened. Moreover, I considered farmers to be the bedrock of civilization, so it had no effect on me. It just made me classify him as a "no-good politician."

This small fry was the leader of the territory east of Sacula. Despite being a frontier region, it rarely ever suffered damage from demons. If you believed Viscount Yanga's own reports, they were under attack several times a year, on par with the Sacula region. However, this was widely rumored to be a lie among the other provincial nobles. After all, in previous generations, there had been no more than two or three attacks a decade. There was no way it had increased that much so fast.

Based on information from the Quid company, I believed the rumors. It was almost unfair how little demons showed up in our neighbor's yard. Maybe the terrain was just harder to access from the Roaring Dragon mountain range. Or perhaps being located closer to the kingdom's center than Sacula provided

more protection. Maybe it was a combination of both.

Either way, currently Viscount Yanga was sitting cross-legged and off guard on the territory's throne. Why was he so disliked? While his father had been bedridden, he had contested his older brother's succession right and usurped the title of viscount.

Considering that all the vassals had been on the side of the previous viscount and his rightful heir, the younger son would have never stood a chance alone. Therefore, as a countermeasure, he had enlisted outside help. *And if you know your history or just have a good imagination, you'll know that calling outside help when your own region is in array is as effective as asking a group of thieves to play firemen. There's no way it'll go over well.*

And as expected, it had not gone over well for the Yanga region. The older brother and his vassals had vehemently opposed the power grab and firmly stood their ground, which had quickly led to bloodshed among the viscount's family. With the administrators in disarray, the government had been forced to shut down, devastating the civilians' lives.

The Yanga region's overall income had decreased, farming villages had fallen into poverty, and those who could no longer provide for themselves had resorted to banditry, which in turn had led to higher military expenditures and a tax increase. A textbook vicious circle.

Seeing that outcome, it made me appreciate the laws of succession. They provided a logical and appropriate means to transfer power during peaceful times. Fights between the powerful never led to anything good.

However, there were also people who looked at the desolated Yanga region and considered it a success story. Notably, the power usurper and his outside backer. The former, the current Viscount Yanga, was more than satisfied after fulfilling his wish of obtaining power. The latter was also happy at positioning an easy-to-control puppet as the leader of a remote region. It must have been a great deal without drawbacks for both of them. Especially for the outside backer. They must have been ecstatic.

As you've probably guessed from the fact that the current Viscount Yanga has come to the party as one of Datara's followers, the overjoyed outside backer

was none other than Marquis Datara.

Marquis Datara's chess piece arrogantly looked down upon me. "I've been hearing quite a few stories of bravery from the house of Sacula these past few years, but recently we've also been blessed with the opportunity to subjugate demons in large numbers. As many if not more than Sacula."

"Oh, is that so?"

According to Mr. Quid's information, they had discovered a new type of demon called "bandits-stealing-farming-tools" in the Yanga region. If he included that new species, then he was right—they probably had as many if not more demons than Sacula. Meanwhile, we took pride in our extremely low number of bandits. Even the other provincial leaders praised us.

"That is a disaster."

Having to deal with that new species of demons was no joke. Even if there had been real demons, I would have given the same answer. It was better if there were neither bandits nor demons. A soldier was best served with some free time on their hands.

Most of the surrounding nobles from remote regions nodded in agreement. Except for Viscount Yanga.

"A disaster? Far from it. Our soldiers welcome the opportunity to prove their honor in battle with great glee. I assumed the other territories' soldiers felt the same, but it seems this Sacula knight here considers it a disaster rather than a chance for glory! I realize now how brave my soldiers are!" Viscount Yanga laughed loudly.

Apparently, he was trying to denounce me as a coward. Since cowardice was important as a hunter, I did not really mind that insult. If that was all he had to contribute, he should have gotten lost. I wanted to talk to Lady Alicia.

Of course, Viscount Yanga had come here with the purpose of disturbing our conversation, so he was not going to leave. It was probably an order from Marquis Datara. He didn't want to see me and the princess together.

After boasting about his soldiers' bravery, the obedient lapdog started bragging about his own achievements before becoming the head of his region

in an even louder voice. The stories were all extremely bloody. Like viciously slaughtering a band of thieves, hunting a large boar, or fighting three werewolves at once. He was effectively declaring that he lacked any administrative skill with a confidence equal to the volume of his voice.

Lady Alicia had politely let him know that he was a nuisance, but the viscount had just ignored her. Three times. Completely violating all etiquette. People who could not read a situation really were something else. No wonder royal capital nobles thought so poorly of the provincial leaders after seeing a representative like him. He was the poster child of hicks.

“Hey, pal, come to think of it, you also defeated a werewolf, right?”

Calling another lord’s vassal “pal” went against all rules of etiquette. Neither Viscount Sukuna, nor Officer Raino, nor the princess Lady Alicia had ever called me that.

“No, Your Excellency. I only stalled it to buy some time.”

“Oh my! Please accept my apologies. I killed two and one ran away, so I thought that a Sacula Knight could comfortably take care of one!”

“I am not that great of a fighter.” I was pretty confident that I would not even last a minute if I had to fight two werewolves at once. Against three, not even a second.

“No, no! Fighting a werewolf at all is already a big feat. I’m just exceptional.”

“Yes, you are right.” *If you were telling the truth.*

It seemed like one of the provincial leaders that had suffered a demon attack before shared my thoughts. “It’s hard to believe that you would even survive a one-on-one fight with a werewolf...”

I understood the urge to say something like that, but in an effort to avoid a messy situation, most others and I had just kept our mouths shut.

As expected, Viscount Yanga responded in an even louder voice. “I can’t ignore that remark just now! You doubt the bravery of the house of Yanga and the house of Sacula?”

See, it’s gotten messy. Who said that just now? Come out so I can scold you.

Before I even got a chance to sigh, Viscount Yanga had seemingly decided something on his own. “Very well! I will prove to you my bravery right here and now! Time to duel!” Viscount Yanga yelled while flailing his arms. It looked somewhat comical due to his wobbling chin. “Although I’ll need to fight a knight on par with my skills. Otherwise, it won’t prove my courage.” Viscount Yanga’s glaring eyes locked onto me. “I assume a renowned Sacula knight wouldn’t run from a duel.”

Unfortunately for the teeth-baring lapdog, I was no fan of such savage customs. “Depending on the terms, I will turn tail and run.”

Several provincial leaders burst into laughter upon hearing my reply. Not to make fun of me, but rather of the comical difference in enthusiasm.

“A-And you call yourself a knight?!”

Yes, a very professional one. I get paid and everything. “I do not know what it is like in Your Excellency’s territory, but the Sacula knights’ assignment is protecting the citizens, not displaying their strength or accumulating honor. Whether the opponent is a demon or a bandit, if a fight is unwinnable, it is our duty to escape and inform others of the danger at all costs. It is my responsibility as a knight to avoid any unnecessary dangers.”

A Sacula knight could not afford to lose. By any means necessary. They stuck it out until the end and always won. If you asked me for the secret to the Sacula knights’ renowned bravery, I would have to say their resolve to drop sword, shield, and honor, and run. *That’s what they taught us at the academy.*

Viscount Yanga had ground his teeth in seething anger when I had not accepted his challenge, but he had finally regained his composure. A sneer came over his reddish face. “Ha! I expected more from a renowned Sacula knight. Turns out you’re just a coward! Sacula’s military reputation just dropped like a rock!”

“Oh, why is that?”

The viscount’s sneer grew bigger upon hearing my reply. “Why, you ask? Because you ran away from my challenge!”

“When did I say I would not agree to your duel?” I smiled back at him and

mimicked his bewilderment. “You asked me if I would run from a duel, and I said it would depend on the terms. So, how can you say I ran when you have not even told me the terms?” *As an adult, you should properly listen to what people say.*

As I was playing dumb, the stifled laughter around me became louder. Lady Alicia had averted her eyes, and her shoulders were shaking from laughter. According to her faint murmur, she was impressed by the destructive force of my verbal warfare hearing it again for the first time in a while. *I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself.*

“Well then, Your Excellency, what are the rules? If the winner is whoever weighs more, then I am afraid I will have to bow out...” It was quite clear who was bigger.

“Are you calling me fat?!”

“Nothing of the sort. I just gave an example. I have been challenged to a duel like that before and suffered a crushing defeat,” I said in a serious tone while the onlookers burst into laughter.

In verbal quarrels like this, the winner was decided in a roundabout way via the surrounding people’s reactions. However, I had to be careful not to be too direct, since these were all people with the power to start a war.

“A physical fight of course! With swords! A sword fight!”

“One-on-one?”

“Of course!”

I had made him promise not to have anyone else interfere on his behalf. Viscount Yanga had probably just agreed in the heat of the moment.

“So, a one-on-one sword fight. I am not that great of a sword fighter...”

“Aha, you’re going to run this time?!”

I pensively squinted and observed the viscount’s physique. He was a bulky man of commanding appearance. Most likely, he used to properly train in the past, but now that trained body was coated in several years’ worth of fat. I imagined he had been living the good life since becoming head of his region.

Hence, I concluded that his fighting power would not pose a threat.

"Well, given those terms, I do not need to turn tail and run." *I'm essentially saying, "Against you, I can win."*

The surrounding crowd cheered. Viscount Yanga was also extremely pleased with my answer.

"My, my, what is going on here?"

At that very moment, Marquis Datara made his entry. Even the count of Sacula was not capable of stopping the host from checking on a racket like this. Especially since the marquis was probably the instigator.

The lapdog was wagging his tail at the appearance of his master. "Marquis Datara, you've come at just the right time! We're going to have a duel to entertain the guests!"

"My goodness, you young people are full of energy."

"As the host of the party, would you be our third-party witness?"

Without batting an eye, His Excellency the Marquis, who apparently was a third party, instantly agreed. How very interesting. The capital nobles seemed to have a different definition of the term "third party" than the rest of us.

Since it would have been too barbaric to have the duel inside, we moved to the courtyard. In a matter of minutes, swords were laid out before us. There was a vast selection ranging from short to long and thin to thick.

"Please pick the weapon of your choice."

"With pleasure, Your Excellency." Viscount Yanga hurriedly bowed and rushed toward a sword. With as little hesitation as if he were reaching for his personal blade, he grabbed a sword that perfectly fit his stature.

"I'll have this one!"

They're not even trying to hide their conspiracy.

I forced a smile and picked up a sword that was comparatively shorter and thinner. After examining two more blades, I realized that Viscount Yanga's sword must have been the only decent one. The remaining swords all looked

very refined, but upon closer inspection, there were small cracks beneath the surface of the blade.

In order to harden steel, you had to put it through a heat-treating process called “quenching and tempering.” Failing to reach the right balance of temperature caused the metal to become brittle and crack. Even at our laboratory, we had failed a fair number of times trying to produce lathes because it was so difficult to get the timing right. That experience now helped me examine the swords’ condition.

“Do none of these swords suit your taste?” Viscount Yanga asked with a smirk on his face.

He had not mentioned my name since earlier. Had he forgotten it? Not that unlikely with him.

“No, I am just hesitating because each one is a gem. As I mentioned earlier, I am not too great at sword fighting, so I worry I will break it.”

“Hmph, that was beautifully said. You’ve got taste,” Viscount Yanga praised my choice of words while suppressing the twitching of his mouth.

At the same time, Marquis Datara joined in the conversation. “As expected from a Sacula knight—you’ve got an expert eye. These swords were forged by a master blacksmith of the Datara region.”

I’m not sure you can call the man who forged these defective blades a “master blacksmith.”

They looked like they would break upon the first real exchange of blows. But then again, it probably did require skill to make brittle swords that look this good. What a waste of talent.

Was it a ploy so that the viscount could boast about his infinitely superior skill, given that both weapons came from the same master blacksmith? I was actually looking forward to seeing what explanation they had prepared. What a shame that I would not get a chance to hear it.

“I am hesitant to use such a refined weapon, but I will pick this one.”

Since the result would be the same either way, I chose a short sword of

average width and length. It was light and allowed for agile movements.

Once I had made my choice, Marquis Datara ordered his servants to remove the remaining swords. After all, it would be bad if the tampering came to light. Although, most people must have noticed the unnaturalness of the course of events, since Viscount Yanga was a terrible actor.

Lady Alicia looked slightly nervous. She too must have sensed something was wrong. However, Count Gentoh strongly reassured her that everything would be fine. I was grateful for his trust, but what exactly did he think I was when he said, “He won’t die even if you kill him”? Of course I will die if I am killed. In fact, I *had* been killed before.

Although I did not remember the exact cause of my past death because I had too many past-life memories all mingled together, I had a hunch it had to be related to my recent nightmares. The feeling of the reinforced ceramic blade piercing my stomach was too real to just be a dream. How had an antiquity like that even survived? In hindsight, that was an out-of-place weapon. But then again, the nightmare where I passed out from inhaling exhaust gas also felt very lifelike. The excruciating pain of my lungs gradually losing its function...

Maybe one of them was the real cause of my past death while I had survived the other. Or perhaps they were just nightmares inspired by fictional stories. I did have quite a strong imagination. Regardless, the fact that both dreams made me relive the feeling of my life force leaving my body was undoubtedly a result of my past death experience.

And once you’ve died, your sense of fear is all out of whack. Fearless, I distanced myself from Viscount Yanga.

“Earlier, you said that you’re not good with swords.”

“Yes, indeed. I prefer bows and spears.” *Followed by stones and daggers. Although if I’m allowed to include them in the list, traps and poison are my favorites.*

“Hmph, spears, huh? I guess you’re used to long tools because of your upbringing.”

“Right, because I was a farmer. When I encountered the werewolf, I also

fought him with a shovel and a pitchfork that were lying around. Luckily, I was familiar with those tools."

As I just brushed off his taunts, Viscount Yanga became indignant. I even felt a little sorry for him seeing how ineffective his provocations were. But what was I supposed to do? I just did not feel any shame about being born a farmer, so there was no way I would lose my composure. *Try something else.*

Once our taunt warfare was over, Marquis Datara rose to speak. "Now then, we will start the duel between Viscount Yanga and Sir Fenix. I pledge, on my honor, that this will be a fair fight."

That pledge was broken before spoken.

"I pray for a good fight and the safety of both," the marquis concluded his little speech.

It looked like my inner voice had not reached Marquis Datara, who was now giving the start signal.

With a war cry, Viscount Yanga came leaping at me and swung his sword down from high above his head. It was a rather reckless all-out attack, but probably a good choice considering I had a defective sword. The weight and momentum behind this attack would have been enough to break my sword no matter whether I chose to block or deflect the blow. Therefore, I adopted an oblique stance and evaded the blow.

"Huh? Well played, you read my attack."

Why, thank you, I replied in my head and continued to nimbly dodge his successive blows going upward, sweeping sideways, and falling down diagonally.

Viscount Yanga was not a gifted swordsman. Even with a generous assessment, I would not have placed him above the upper bottom tier. I had already anticipated as much when examining his build, but I could probably even take him on barehanded. That was exactly why I had accepted the duel, but I did not understand why he had challenged me with that level of skill.

Lady Maika would have knocked him down right after evading the first blow. Glen would have cut him down together with his long sword. But since I was his

opponent, Viscount Yanga got some good exercise.

The viscount continued swinging his sword with no hopes of hitting me, and when it looked like his stamina was coming to an end, I decided to go on the offense. After dodging a downward strike, I lightly tapped the viscount with my short sword to make him lose his balance and gauge the durability of my weapon. *Yep, this'll break,* I concluded, and took a few steps backward to distance myself. Viscount Yanga seemed somewhat relieved upon seeing me back away. He must have thought he could take a short break. *Well, let's fulfill his wish. This next blow will settle the duel, and then he can rest all he wants.*

I charged at him and accelerated as fast as possible. At this speed, I could only run in a straight line. Viscount Yanga hastily adopted a defensive stance and I violently struck his blade with my defective sword. I put all my weight and momentum behind the attack. So much so that I bumped into him.

As expected, my sword broke. If we had been locking swords and pushing, I would have ended up defenseless in front of Viscount Yanga, but since I had known that my sword was defective, I had chosen a different strategy. Using the remaining momentum from my sprint, I slipped past the viscount.

I could see a smile coming over his weary face, but his gaze did not follow me. As the broken sword's fragments were flying around, he had momentarily closed his eyes, and thus created a fatal opening. While he may have been convinced that he had won after breaking my sword, that was blind belief.

Coming out behind the viscount, I abruptly stopped in my tracks and held my sword— which had turned into a sort of dagger after breaking—up to his throat.

"Do you yield, Your Excellency Viscount Yanga?" I asked him from behind.

His back was shivering. As he carefully turned his head to confirm the situation, he stared at me in incredulity. He did try throwing himself forward, but failed as I had tightly grasped his collar. I was an experienced hunter—I did not let my guard down until I had finished off my prey. Since my opponent did not show any signs of giving up, I glanced at the referee, Marquis Datara.

"Your Excellency Marquis Datara, should I finish him off?" *If you want, I'll dispose of your lapdog.*

Following a moment of hesitation, Marquis Datara shook his head and declared me the winner. What a coldhearted master, that he even hesitated at all. I shrugged and presented the broken sword to the coldhearted marquis.

"I am terribly sorry. It looks like I was right. I did not have the skill to wield such a gem of a sword."

If I may sing my own praises for a moment, "gem of a sword" was a great choice of words. While most gems had impeccable hardness, their tenacity and toughness were lacking, and that made them weak to impacts no matter how hard they were. In other words, they were brittle like that sword. That was a fatal flaw for a weapon used by a foolhardy soldier. From the beginning, my choice of words had implied that the weapon was defective. *I'm glad they enjoyed my praise.* If I had compared it to glass, they probably would have been offended.

In that vein, I probably should have put in a good word to justify myself for breaking the sword of a master blacksmith. After all, I did not want Datara's renowned metalworking industry to suffer. Even though I had known that it was defective, the sword had still been an exquisite work of art. I needed to treat it with respect.

"It seems like I really should stick to farming tools. A Sacula hoe or shovel would not have broken like that." By the way, those were not works of art. Just regular tools forged by an everyday blacksmith. "Trying another territory's weapon like this really makes me appreciate our farming tools' durability. A shovel and a pitchfork withstood multiple blows from the werewolf's atrocious claws." While the master blacksmith's sword had broken into pieces after a single direct hit. "Maybe I should ask for a shovel next time I get challenged to a duel. I guess I am really not a skilled sword fighter if I cannot even wield a master blacksmith's blade. Ha ha ha!"

Of course, this all just applied to me—I was a unique case. A bad sword fighter who had managed to defeat Viscount Yanga by barely exchanging any blows and without suffering any injuries. For anyone else, Marquis Datara's metalcraft must have been excellent. I truly loathed my lack of talent. If there was anyone else as unskilled as me, they probably should also steer clear of Datara's weapons. And maybe buy them from Sacula instead? Even our farming

tools could be wielded quite easily in fights against werewolves, since they were rustic, unlike certain dainty, difficult-to-use swords.

I made the rounds and amicably explained to the surrounding guests the difference in Datara's and Sacula's metalworking industries using today's example as an illustration.

While I was thoughtfully providing this helpful information, Lady Alicia had once again joined me. "Are you trying to abate your opponent's influence?" she whispered.

"I am just doing a little follow-up because I broke the master blacksmith's sword."

This was unrelated, but apparently, during war the most military gains were made during pursuit battles. A pursuit battle was a sort of bonus fight that took place after winning a decisive battle, taking advantage of the defeated enemy as they were retreating. Just a little piece of trivia. Not related to the current situation in any way.

As I smiled at Lady Alicia, she reciprocated with an impish grin. "It really doesn't get boring with you around. I'm really enjoying myself. I'm glad you're here, Phoenix."

I'm also happy I get to see your smile up close.

After the uproar from the duel had calmed down, the crowd dispersed again to mingle at the party. Well, the Sacula faction at least. The Datara faction snugly gathered in one spot where they quietly moped. As a result, the Sacula faction could enjoy the party to their heart's content.

It was understandable that the Datara faction was no longer in a party mood after losing in such a public and humiliating fashion. They probably would have loved to go home, but unfortunately, their ringleader, Marquis Datara, was the host, so they could not do that either. Besides, some of them were living here.

Meanwhile, my head was about to explode from meeting so many new people. I had not met most of the guests before, and following my showy performance, many came to introduce themselves. Luckily, Lady Alicia was happy to keep me company, and as a result, everyone kept it brief. They

formally introduced themselves and invited me to speak again if the opportunity arose. Unlike a certain viscount, they were all very courteous.

“Sir Fenix, you’re very popular.” Ms. Raino approached me after I had finished greeting most people. “My apologies. I am sure you must be tired, but I couldn’t resist talking to you.” She smiled apologetically before also addressing Lady Alicia. “Your Highness, I sincerely apologize for the tactless intrusion and wasting your precious time.”

“I don’t mind. I didn’t think I could have the phoenix all to myself anyway. Don’t hold back, Officer Raino.”

“I appreciate your generosity, Your Highness. I’ll try to keep it brief.” Ms. Raino smiled at me. “Your performance earlier was impressive. It made me once again recognize the skill of Sacula knights.”

“Thank you.” But half of my former classmates could have won that duel. Without the sabotaged swords, probably even more than half.

“Heh heh, I like how your look implies that he wasn’t a difficult opponent. But you know, Viscount Yanga was runner-up in the last Royal Tournament.”

“Really? So, five years ago?”

“Yes, he put on quite a performance. Although he was a bit *slimmer* back then.”

“Ah, I see.” He used to be strong in his heyday. Five years ago, that should be right after Viscount Yanga’s coup. Most likely he used to properly train before becoming viscount and just lying on his back with his legs outstretched all day. “But that does not really say much about today’s duel.”

“Maybe, but he’s won several duels like this one over the last few years.” That said even less. Who knew what tricks he had used in those duels? “Anyway, after today’s duel I’m looking forward even more to the Royal Tournament, Sir Fenix.” Ms. Raino clenched her fist, convinced that I would participate. The beautiful and intelligent woman looked cute making that playful gesture.

“Yes, I think you can expect a stellar show.”

“Oh, you sound quite confident in yourself.”

Considering that someone much stronger than me was going to participate, I had all the reasons to be confident. I was looking forward to her reaction in a few days' time.

Ignoring the meaning behind my smirk, Ms. Raino smilingly took her leave.

Once we had seen her off, Lady Alicia covered her mouth and giggled. "Officer Raino really thinks you will fight in the tournament. Well, so do most people, in fact."

"But you seem to know who will actually participate."

"Yes, she told me herself," Lady Alicia confirmed and gazed at me. It seemed like she wanted to say something.

"Your Highness? What is it?" I tried fishing for information.

"Nothing." She shook her head with a composed look. As always, she was great at holding things back.

"You know you can be upfront with me."

"Thanks. But this is something I can't say precisely because it's you." I wondered what I must have looked like at that moment. It felt like my disappointment was showing. "Don't make that face. I'll keep working hard so I can tell you someday," Lady Alicia proclaimed with an unexpectedly cheerful expression. I felt a little relieved that it did not seem to be any bad news. Still, I could not help but wonder.

"Well then, I am looking forward to that day. So, make sure to remember. Or my disappointment will be immeasurable."

"Heh heh, that much?" Lady Alicia chuckled and wiped away a tear of laughter upon hearing my obstinate question. "All right. I promise I will definitely tell you someday." She went on to silently mouth my name as if to make a vow. For a moment, she averted her eyes in embarrassment, but immediately regained her composure. "Heh heh, it's been a while since I had this much fun at a party, Phoenix."

"I am glad you are enjoying yourself." *Looks like I've become quite the gentleman. Maybe I can become a senior gentleman sometime soon?*

“People have started dancing. Would you do me the honor? In commemoration of this day.” She extended her hand.

“With pleasure, Your Highness.” I politely grabbed her hand and led her to the floor.

We stood out among the crowd, but that was inevitable as she was the princess. I would have also stared in their place. However, as a gentleman—and also personally—I could not refuse such a request coming from her. Thus was the nature of our relationship as it had crystallized two years ago.

The song started, but before I could make my first step, Lady Alicia broke out into laughter yet again.

“Is something wrong? I am not very confident in my dance skills, but you are not going to tell me that I messed up escorting you here?”

“No, not at all. You’re very smooth.” I had almost broken out into a cold sweat there for a moment. “It’s just that...I never would have thought we’d end up dancing like this when I first met you.”

“Me neither.”

When I had first met Lady Alicia, she had disguised herself as Lord Arthur. Even during the dance lessons at the academy, she had always played the male role.

“It’s so much fun being around you, my Phoenix.”

We both started our dance with a smile, and as the song progressed, our steps gradually became closer.

A Riot of Cherry Blossoms

The Royal Sword Fighting Tournament was held at a former fortress, not too far away from the royal castle. Back during the kingdom's founding period, when the demons had still existed in larger numbers, the royal family's ancestors had built the fortress to protect the citizens and lay the groundwork for future prosperity. These ancient and honored remnants were this nation's birthplace. Apparently, the fortress's original form had been preserved as much as possible in order to praise the great achievements of the founders and inform posterity of the cruel conditions at the time.

Seeing how the rampart and the defense tower had been knocked down to place the noble visitors' seats made me realize how peaceful the times were. The founders would be raging at the sight of this fortress, which had become useless for any wars. Nevertheless, as a spectator, I appreciated the nice view of the arena in the courtyard.

I had been allocated a seat together with the Sacula family, quite high up on the stands. While it was a bit far away from the actual fighting grounds, it provided a commanding top-down view and spacious seats for a comfortable spectating experience. Further down, the seats were so closely packed together that the spectators ended up bumping each other's elbows, and there were standing stalls too. However, since the lower seats were the closest to the arena, even some renowned nobles intentionally watched the tournament from there. In fact, the upper seats were only so spacious because this tournament was considered another opportunity for the high-ranked nobility to make courtesy calls and discuss business. Just like the dance party, it was a social meeting place.

Nepton Officer Raino was currently making the rounds. She opened her eyes wide upon discovering me. "Sir Fenix?! What are you doing here in the stands?! I was just about to wish your liege good luck because I heard that the house of Sacula's representative is fighting in the next match!"

"Well, I am not a participant, so naturally I would be here, no?" *I never once said I'd fight myself. Although I'll admit that I didn't clarify the*

misunderstanding.

It was not unusual for the entrants to stay secret until the day of the tournament. Each noble house was allotted a bracket for which they could send a fighter. And since one could only participate via their referral, the participants fought in the noble houses' names rather than their own. Even the matchings were listed under the sponsor's name so that the spectators did not know the fighters' identity until right before the beginning of the duel when they entered the arena.

"Th-Then who is the house of Sacula's representative?"

"I promised you a stellar show, right?"

Without directly answering Officer Raino's question, I shifted my attention to the arena. The opponent had just been introduced, so she would get her answer soon. Getting my hint, Officer Raino swallowed dryly and looked down.

Inside the ring, the man who had been introduced first assumed the starting position. He looked like a typical sword fighter, wearing steel-reinforced, full-body leather armor and carrying a helmet in his hand.

Moments later, his opponent's name was announced.

"Up next, fighting for the house of Sacula—Maika Amanobe Sacula!"

Upon hearing the announcement, the crowd was momentarily dumbfounded. It was very rare to come across a female participant in this tournament. However, she was not the first one, and the older spectators, who had witnessed multiple tournaments, should have seen a female fighter before. Therefore, if it had just been any woman, the crowd should have resumed their cheers after an initial surprise. However, the silence dragged on because the house of Sacula's representative had "Sacula" as her family name.

The applause still had not resumed. As the bewilderment was spreading across the arena, the girl carrying the Sacula name made her entrance. She appeared like a leading actress. Her hair fluttered in the wind in tandem with her leisurely pace, and her gentle smile did not suggest that she was about to engage in a fight. She was wearing light, breezy leather armor made up solely of a breastplate, shin guards, and coverings for wrists and hands. No helmet. Most

importantly for the spectators, she looked *extremely cute*. No doubt they must have found it hard to believe that such an adorable girl would fight in the tournament. However, once she had assumed the starting position opposite her opponent under the fervent gaze of everyone present, the crowd realized that the cute girl would indeed fight. Roaring applause ensued at once.

"S-Sir Fenix! That girl, that girl...!" Officer Raino was shaking my shoulder in her extreme confusion.

"You heard right. It is Maika Amanobe Sacula. The granddaughter of..." I looked at the count, who together with his eldest son was cheering for Lady Maika as loudly as possible. Probably louder than their battle cries. To me, they simply looked like a granddad and uncle who had come to support their beloved relative, but they were in fact the top leaders of a region. "...His Excellency Count Sacula."

"W-Wait, what?!"

It must have been shocking in more than one way. From the fact that she had not once showed up at a social gathering since coming to the royal capital to the fact that a noble's relative was participating in a tournament where people potentially fought to the death. Still, the most shocking part was yet to come, shortly after the start of the duel.

"Now, this is where it gets interesting, Officer Raino."

The two duelists inside the ring bowed and drew their swords. Even from afar, you could tell that Lady Maika's opponent did not look fully prepared. For some reason, he was groundlessly underestimating Lady Maika for being a young girl.

"Looks like this match will be over in an instant. Make sure to watch closely or you will miss it," I warned.

"Huh? What?" Officer Raino's confusion just kept increasing.

Just stay quiet and don't look aside.

The judge signaled the start of the match. Lady Maika's opponent took half a step forward from his middle-level posture and lightly swung his sword. His aim appeared to be lightly striking Lady Maika's sword. However, it did not make sense as a first move. The blow was too weak to break her weapon or even

brush it aside. Could it be that he was holding back? *My condolences, then.*

The opponent looked puzzled. The girl had not blocked the blow. In fact, she had disappeared from his sight. The man's glance alternatively switched between his sword and the spot where Lady Maika had stood moments before. It probably took him about two seconds to notice the blade point at his neck. While it was a blunt sword, its point must have still felt cold and heavy.

"Shall we continue?" the girl asked in a serene voice while pressing her sword against her opponent's neck through the crack between his armor and helmet.

"N-No... I give up."

Upon hearing his capitulation, Lady Maika sheathed her sword with the grace of a flying bird. It was such a quick duel that the arena was even more dumbfounded than earlier, during her entrance. Lady Maika did not seem to care and raised both her arms to celebrate her victory. She looked in our direction, where her uncle and grandfather normally—albeit with wild enthusiasm—cheered for her, unlike the rest of the crowd. I also clapped moderately and bowed my head.

Thereupon, murmuring voices started spreading throughout the venue, mentioning "headhunting" and saying things like, "There's no way I'll ever forget that technique." In the blink of an eye, the murmurs had spread across the arena like fire in a desolate field. Of course, that also included my neighbor.

"Are they saying 'headhunting,' Sir Fenix? Is that the legendary headhunting technique?"

"I do not know about legendary, but...our teacher did call it 'headhunting' when he taught Maika and me."

Our teacher was of course Chief Klein. And while the technique was called "headhunting," its aim was not to chop off your opponent's head. In fact, it was not even an offensive technique at all. "Headhunting" referred to a way of dodging your opponent's attacks.

According to this world's theory, one of the keys to success in battle was to let your opponent strike first and then make your move after throwing them off balance—the theory of second-move advantage. Headhunting was an evasion

technique that had evolved from that logic. First, you dodged your opponent's attack, and then you used the opening to move to a position from where you could safely land a blow yourself.

Originally, it had not really been a specific technique, but people had started calling it "headhunting." And once that name had caught on, Chief Klein had also started using it, despite thinking it was an odd name choice, which I agreed with. Why give it such a dangerous name even though it was not even an offensive move? At most you could call it a counter.

After evading an attack, Chief Klein slipped behind his opponent's back and held his sword against the nape of their neck, forcing them to surrender. Exactly how Lady Maika had won her first match. As a result, the spectators who still remembered Chief Klein's victory had referred to it as "headhunting."

"Both you and that girl trained under headhunter Sir Klein? That explains your skill..."

"Compared to Maika, I am a pupil unworthy of my teacher." Although people always praised my keen perception, I could not disappear from my opponent's field of view like that.

"Pupils of the legendary headhunter Sir Klein... Wait a minute..." Officer Raino racked her brains as if she had just remembered something. "If I remember correctly, headhunter Sir Klein asked for His Excellency's daughter's hand in marriage after winning the tournament. They became an ideal for many couples across the kingdom at the time. A famous love story."

"So I have heard. However, Chief Klein never told me himself. He seemed too embarrassed."

"And Lady Maika is His Excellency's granddaughter..."

"That is right."

After processing my answers for a while, Officer Raino asked one final question.

"So...does that mean...Lady Maika is *Sir Klein's daughter*?"

"Yes, she is his only daughter." *Did she really have to think it through that*

hard?

In response, Officer Raino's cheeks flushed. She started yelling in a high-pitched voice as if she had come across a gold mine. "No way! I can't believe I'm looking at the legendary lovers' daughter with my own eyes! I want to know what she's like! From here I can vaguely tell that she's lovely, but she must be really pretty, right? And why is she fighting in the tournament?!"

All this talk of romance had stimulated Officer Raino's feminine side and sent her into overdrive. Overwhelmed, I did not know how to deal with this fierce yet beautiful beast of prey.

Luckily, Count Gentoh came to my rescue. "Officer Raino."

"Oh! Y-Your Excellency, I apologize for getting carried away," Officer Raino hurriedly extinguished her burning curiosity with a superior showing up.

"Don't worry about it! By the way, do you remember how I told you marriage proposals for Sir Fenix should wait until after the tournament?" Count Gentoh asked with a satisfied smile.

"Yes, I remember."

"That wasn't just an expedient lie—I meant it literally. Depending on the results, someone might end up stealing away Sir Fenix."

"Does that mean...?"

"Wouldn't you agree that Sir Fenix is quite the sinner? To make a talented girl like her, who's also Sacula's heiress, go this far?" Count Gentoh said with a grin on his face.

"What a twist! Sir Fenix being the prize... I like it! That makes it even more exciting! Headhunter Sir Klein's daughter seems so passionate! Like father, like daughter!" Officer Raino very flexibly turned her head to look over her shoulders. *How did she do that? What's her neck made of?*

I was slowly beginning to understand why the legendary headhunter Sir Klein did not like to talk about his marriage proposal. While Count Gentoh strategically laid the groundwork to block all my escape routes, Officer Raino was just genuinely enjoying herself. Admittedly, it did sound like a romance

straight out of a fairy tale. Still, as the person in question, I had mixed feelings. It was unexpectedly embarrassing and awkward. I just wanted them to forget about the whole thing.

Officer Raino had started questioning me about the start of my romance with Lady Maika and how we felt about each other. As I was struggling, Mr. Lusus unexpectedly came to my help. I had not anticipated seeing him here.

“Sir Fenix! You really were in the spectator seats!”

“Can I help you, Lusus?”

“In fact, yes you can.”

Apparently, Mr. Lusus was part of the medical team treating the wounded during the tournament. While bloodshed was not the goal, the matches were still harsh enough that they regularly resulted in deaths. There was a lot of work for the doctors, so they could use anyone with medical knowledge.

It had already seemed like Mr. Lusus wanted to ask for my help back at the Fenix Institute of Education, but he had probably refrained from bringing it up because he had thought I would be participating in the tournament. However, as it turned out, the house of Sacula’s fighter was not me. Therefore, he must have run up here to the nobility seats to check whether I was available.

“I am terribly sorry to interrupt your viewing, Sir Fenix, but would you be able to help me treat the wounded?”

“Of course. I can only do first-aid treatment, but I will help however I can.”

Mr. Lusus humbly smiled as if he had just seen an end to the stormy weather. “Your help exceeds that of a hundred people.”

That might be a little exaggerated. I smiled wryly and turned toward my liege. “Your Excellency, you heard what he said. May I go?”

“I’m not going to tell you no. However, don’t blame me if Maika gets angry.”

“I will watch her matches whenever possible.” Judging from the other performances so far, it did not look like her matches would drag on too long, so I would likely be able to make time for them.

“You’ve got amazing faith in her.” Officer Raino looked at me, deeply moved.

“Yes, I know her skill with a sword better than anyone else.”

After all, our morning and evening training sessions were still ongoing whenever I was available.

Mr. Lusus had brought me to a treatment room with bunk beds. Several medical workers were busy treating patients. According to Mr. Lusus, all the patients in this room had comparatively light injuries. The severely wounded people were taken to separate private rooms.

Promptly, a young person who looked like he had just lost his match was carried into the room. Mr. Lusus and I nodded at each other and proceeded to examine him. Apparently, his armor had absorbed a hit from a sword against his right-side flank. The blueish black bruises looked painful.

“Do you have any trouble breathing? No? I see. I will touch it now, so tell me if it hurts.” Mr. Lusus interviewed and examined his patient in a much softer voice than usual.

I was watching from the side. It did not seem like any bones were broken, so a painkiller and anti-inflammatory drugs should do the trick. I took the medicine out of the medical kit and handed it to Mr. Lusus, who gratefully nodded after proclaiming his diagnosis.

As he wrapped the patient’s body in bandages, the next one already arrived. Quite the busy day. Or perhaps the other medical workers were just slow. How much time did it take them to rub some ointment on an injury? Since no one else was available, I walked up to the patient.

“What happened? It looks like your left ankle is swollen.”

“Huh? Are you a doctor? I assumed you were a fellow knight...” The patient eyed my uniform and tilted his head.

Yeah, I don’t exactly look like a medical professional. “I am assisting Dr. Lusus today. He is busy at the moment, so I will start with a simple physical exam.”

“Hm... Well, I guess as a fellow knight you’re used to dealing with wounds.” For some reason, he was convinced and proceeded to roll up the sleeve of his trousers to show his left ankle. “I think I slightly twisted it. It doesn’t hurt too much, but I have another duel coming up, so I wanted to get it checked out.”

“I see. Lay down on the bed. I will have a look.” I grabbed his ankle and slowly rotated it while asking the patient how much it hurt. “Yes, it looks like a minor sprain. Nothing serious. But it will likely get worse if you keep competing.”

“Oh, okay. I obviously intend to keep winning, so is there anything you can do?”

Resting would have been the best treatment, but I guessed that was not an option for him. It looked like he would fight in the next round regardless of whether he received treatment or not. Therefore, all I could do was try and stabilize the ankle as well as possible.

“Let me see... If you intend on pushing through, I can make it slightly less bad.”

I suggested tightly wrapping a bandage over a poultice of medicinal herbs. That would somewhat stabilize the ankle’s movement and slow down the rate of inflammation.

“How tight will it be?”

“It would be faster if I showed you. It is more effective the tighter it is, but I will adjust it to your preference.”

When I wrapped it as tightly as possible at first, he frowned to signal his discomfort. Thus, I nodded and loosened it a little.

“Yeah, it’s still tight...but my ankle hurts less.”

“Because the bandage is shouldering the ankle’s load. I am sorry I cannot help you any further. Do you think you will be all right?”

“Well. I shouldn’t really ask for too much after injuring myself. I’ll try to fight as best as I can. So...” After repeatedly checking his ankle’s condition, the man nodded with a confident look on his face. “I should be able to fight well enough like this. Thanks for the treatment.”

“I am glad I could help. If the pain gets worse, feel free to come back.”

“Will do.” The man started walking trying to put as little weight on his left leg as possible. Suddenly, he stopped in his tracks. “Please forgive my rudeness. My name is Seus Argos, knight of Nepton. What is your name, if you don’t mind me

asking?”

The man represented the house of Nepton. It looked like there were a lot of good-natured people working for them.

“You were not rude at all. I am Ash George Fenix, knight of Sacula.”

“Sir Fenix? I believe Officer Raino mentioned you.”

“Yes, that is probably me. She was talking with me just a little bit ago in the stands.”

“Oh! Officer Raino was speaking quite highly of you, so I hoped to run into you.” Sir Argos glanced at his left foot before smiling and scratching his head. “I didn’t think it would be in the care unit rather than the arena.”

“Somehow Officer Raino mistakenly thought that I would be participating in the tournament. Fortunately, Sacula’s fighter is much stronger than me.”

“I’m looking forward to meeting them. I’ll take my leave now.”

Sir Argos bowed his head and briskly walked off. His manner of speaking was distinct, his movements energetic, and he had a refreshing martial spirit. After seeing him off, I shifted my focus to the next patient.

The first day of the tournament had come to an end, and it was time to close the care unit. Today had been the day with the most duels. Luckily, no one had died so far. The biggest injury had been an arm fracture, and a rather mild one at that. The contestant had been in a lot of pain but was not in danger of dying. An open fracture—bones piercing through the skin—would have been fatal in this world. It was also impossible to completely recover from a comminuted fracture with the current level of medical advancements. That’s why everyone had been relieved upon discovering it was just a simple bone fracture, which could be treated.

Working together for a whole day had strengthened the sense of community amongst all the medical staff. Now that our shift was over, everyone was getting ready to leave. *No, wait a moment...* The room was still dirty from today’s activities. Extremely unsanitary conditions, with sheets covered in bloodstains and dust.

“Who will clean the treatment room?” That would be a dreadful job, so we should have prepared a token of gratitude.

Mr. Lusus frowned next to me. His reply was as unpleasant as a lump of mud. “We’ll leave it like that for tomorrow’s shift.”

“Come again?!”

Something clattered in my mind. It was probably the sound of my tolerance and restraint breaking into pieces...and a merciless war machine emerging.

“Are you planning to work under such unhygienic conditions tomorrow?” I asked.

“We’ve been requesting cleaners for years, but so far the organizers have not done anything.” Mr. Lusus grimaced. The others looked dreary and exhausted too.

While they had the right to veto, it was also obvious that there would be more patients with lacerations tomorrow. There had already been quite a few today. And every medical professional knew the consequences of bacteria entering those wounds. The medical technology in this world may have been underdeveloped, but since some knowledge had been inherited from the ancient civilization, the concept of hygiene existed. Yet it was disregarded.

Not on my watch! I was furious, naturally. It was a treacherous affront to that age-old knowledge and a massacre of medical ethics and good morals. *The Imperial Supreme Court of Ash rules those repulsive misdeeds crimes of high treason punishable only by capital punishment.*

“Very well. Time to clean up then,” I forcefully proclaimed.

Everyone else looked troubled. After spending the entire day tending to the wounded, they probably did not have any energy left. Understandable, especially since the tournament would continue for another two days and people would keep getting injured.

“Do you have a plan, Sir Fenix?” Mr. Lusus, who already knew me to some extent, asked in a hopeful voice. And he was right. It was not my style to recklessly stay up all night with a never-give-up spirit.

“In essence, we need more people. Therefore, if we can convince others to help, our problem will be solved. First, who is actually the organizer of this tournament?”

It may have been pointless to enlist helpers without talking it through with the organizers first. Following my question, someone replied saying, “The royal family.” That made sense. After all, it was the Royal Sword Fighting Tournament. In other words, I needed to approach the royal family to solve this problem. *Piece of cake.*

“I will talk to Her Highness Princess Alicia. You all should go rest and prepare for tomorrow’s shift.”

Having connections was great. At once, I ran off toward His Excellency Count Sacula.

The next morning, the treatment room was cleaned to perfection. Yes, perfection. In fact, it was even cleaner than yesterday morning before the first patient had been brought in. There were no traces left of any blood or dust on the floor, and it no longer looked like an antiquated sickbay, but rather an elegant medical ward. The rattling bed’s frameworks had been reinforced, and the white sheets were of visibly higher quality than the previous ones.

Mr. Lusus and the other coworkers, who had seen the room on the first day before the first patient, stood petrified in the doorway upon seeing this degree of perfection. As I had been taking a nap, I arrived late, and my first job of the day was pushing everyone inside.

“All right, everyone! Let us give our best today too!”

Today I had come prepared with a white gown, fully motivated to work hard. Hopefully, there would not be too many seriously injured fighters.

“Sir Fenix! How on earth did you manage this overnight?” Mr. Lusus pressed me for an answer.

“As I told you last night, I just talked to Her Highness Princess Alicia.”

Lady Alicia was the architect of this dramatic remodeling. Count Gentoh had relayed my message about the medical ward’s condition to Lady Alicia, who then had dispatched a platoon of her personal servants and maids alongside a

horse carriage to the house of Sacula's mansion.

"Greetings, my name is Amin. Her Highness Princess Alicia ordered us to clean the Royal Sword Fighting Tournament's medical ward in accordance with Sir Fenix's instructions." The representative maid had introduced herself after making the very disciplined group form a line.

When researching livestock manure, Lady Alicia had been in charge of summarizing the report on the importance of hygiene. Accordingly, she immediately knew what needed to be done upon receiving my report. I had been right to place my trust in her. In fact, she had exceeded my expectations. Certainly, I had not expected her to send help. She had saved me a lot of trouble. I had been prepared to entice help from the nobles of the Sacula faction.

Since the reliable supreme commander had left me in charge of the field operations, I had promptly led the assault on the medical ward. We had temporarily carried the beds outside to thoroughly clean the place. The laundry unit had washed the sheets using the princess's beloved phoenix soap. Here the horse carriage had come into play—it had transported a load of sheets. Even though we had washed the old sheets, they would not have dried in time. Anticipating this, Her Highness Princess Alicia had assembled sheets from her surroundings and stuffed them into a carriage.

"Meticulous, as expected."

Gratefully, I had put the top-quality royal sheets on the shabby beds. Meanwhile, the servants and maids had also shown great competence. While carrying the bunk beds, one of the maids had noticed them rattling.

"Sir Fenix, should I call my family for help?" she had suggested with a frown. Apparently, this girl was quite direct about expressing her emotions.

"Why? Is there a problem?" I asked.

The maid had assured me that everything had been progressing smoothly before going on to voice her discontent with a fierce, combative look on her face.

"I've heard that you treat the wounds of our kingdom's chosen top warriors

here in this room after they've fought to the best of their abilities. But look at the beds! They look like they'll break any minute! I don't think that's worthy of warriors who sustained wounds in honorable combat!"

I see. I nodded. She was right. When I had first entered the medical ward, I had also felt that it was lacking.

"I appreciate your input. By the way, what does your family do for a living?"

"They run a small woodworking shop." *Makes sense. Growing up surrounded by woodworkers would make you fussy about such things.*

"In that case, would you mind asking them? Let me know about the costs."

"Okay! I'll go home and fetch someone!" After a brief salute, the maid had hastily run off.

Seconds later, another maid had taken her place. "We should discuss the matter of the costs with His Excellency Count Sacula and Her Highness Princess Alicia."

At that moment, it had dawned upon me that I probably should not have taken a decision on my own for an operation essentially run by the princess.

"Please excuse my ignorance. Thank you for letting me know. Could you make the arrangements?"

"Yes. Thank you for trusting me."

After confirming what was necessary, the maid had left again as quickly as she had appeared. All the while the treatment room had gradually become cleaner. Even though the clean-up crew must have been hastily put together, they had cooperated remarkably well. It was most likely thanks to Lady Alicia's perceptive choice of personnel. She had gathered those who excelled at cleaning and doing laundry, those great at physical work, and supervisors capable of managing impromptu suggestions on-site. A beautiful mix of talents.

"Well done. Looks like Her Highness Princess Alicia has a good grasp of your strengths and weaknesses."

A faint smile had come over the supervising maid's serious face upon hearing my admiration for Lady Alicia's ever-expanding set of skills.

“Yes, indeed. If I may say so, Her Highness is our greatest pride and joy.”

Lady Alicia seemed to enjoy her vassals’ favor. As such, they had followed her urgent orders without any hesitation. In the end, we had finished cleaning right before dawn. After confirming their presence for the next day, the royal cleaning troops had retreated.

“And with that, you can now fully focus on your work today without any concerns! There are some spare sheets over there, so feel free to use them if the others get too dirty.”

“Wow... You resolved our request that had been pending for years in less than a day...” Mr. Lusus said.

“As you should know, Mr. Lusus, Her Highness Princess Alicia is very knowledgeable about medicine and hygiene herself.” And she was his patron.

“S-Sure, I knew that Her Highness had expertise in a surprising number of fields, but...” Mr. Lusus shook his head, as if he had just woken up from a dream and found himself in front of a treasure chest. “I didn’t know she could take such decisive actions. The princess may be sponsoring my research, but I’ve never properly met her.”

“Oh, really?”

Lady Alicia had frequently mentioned Mr. Lusus in her letters, so I had assumed they were close. However, thinking about it again, it was obvious that the princess could not freely meet with a researcher of the Church. Perhaps she had met him as Arthur. I felt a shiver upon considering my misunderstanding.

“Anyway, let us show our gratitude toward Her Highness’s thoughtfulness by doing our best today!”

All the medical workers, including Mr. Lusus, agreed with much more enthusiasm than the previous day.

“Say, Sir Fenix, could you do commentary?” asked Ms. Raino, who for some reason had stayed in the house of Sacula’s seating area on the second day. It seemed she had been lying in wait to ambush me, seeing that Lady Maika’s fourth match would start soon. While I was helping out at the medical ward, I had received permission to take off my white gown and spectate Lady Maika’s

duels. Of course, I was still on call in case of an emergency.

“I am not sure there is really much to explain. As you have seen for yourself, Maika won all her matches in a matter of seconds so far.”

The most I could say was “The match has started,” followed by “And she won.”

“I guess you’re right.” Ms. Raino smiled wryly. “But maybe you could tell me how she does it if you don’t mind? Unless it’s a secret technique, of course,” she hastily added the last part. It may have sounded redundant, but she was emphasizing her allyship with the house of Sacula, signaling that she had no intention of spying on us.

“It is not really a secret, so I can tell you,” I replied without much thinking, as it was Village Chief Klein’s original technique. However, I quickly qualified my statement with a “probably,” realizing that it was one of our region’s top-class techniques and I should have asked for my liege’s permission. “What do you think, Your Excellency?”

“Yeah, I don’t mind. Just knowing doesn’t mean you can master it anyway.” Count Gentoh seemed to be aware of the headhunting technique’s nature.

“Well then, let me explain about headhunting. But keep in mind I’m the lesser of Chief Klein’s disciples.”

Ms. Raino nodded in eager anticipation. Unfortunately, the explanation would probably be less exciting than she expected.

“At its core, it is based upon your insight.” And that was essentially it.

“Insight? You mean anticipating your opponent’s moves?”

“Yes, just think back to Maika’s first three duels.”

In the first round, she had hunted her negligent opponent’s head by evading his half-hearted attempt at striking her weapon. In the second round, her next opponent had learned from the first match and attacked her with all his strength, only to find her dodge his attack and go for the head. In the third round, she had avoided her nervous opponent’s lackluster attack and proceeded to headhunt.

In all rounds, she had won with a single move, the headhunting technique. She didn't even sweat. It had been so easy that she had sighed during dinner, saying that it may not even have been necessary to train so intensively.

"Now then, did she move before or after her opponent?" I asked.

"Uhm... Let's see... Huh? I don't know." Ms. Raino tilted her head with a sharp, discerning look.

"The correct answer is right before or at the same time."

Since headhunting relied on launching a counterattack after dodging your opponent's attack, the aim was to move before your opponent. Inferring the type of attack, its direction, and timing, you started evading before the actual attack. So, before your opponent had made his first move, you had already made yours. As a result, there was no way for the opponent's attack to land. Quite obvious. But also extremely confusing.

"You've got to be kidding! How is that possible...?"

I had wondered the same thing when Chief Klein had first taught us.

"If you observe your opponent's breathing, posture, muscle tension, and line of sight, you can guess their next move."

"I've heard that talented knights and soldiers can do that... But with this much precision?"

Well, she's doing it, so... Quod erat demonstrandum.

"Since you're Sir Klein's disciple, does that mean you can also do it, Sir Fenix?"

To be honest, I was able to do it a little. *Which I'm quite proud of, so I'd like to boast a bit. Ahem.* At first, I had thought it absurd and impossible, but after training with Lady Maika day after day, I had learned how to do it. However, I had been limited to her as an opponent. Due to the daily repetition of our exercises, I had become able to predict her stances by observing her footwork and line of sight. Thus, during our duels, I just had to guess her attack by comparing her movements to those of her training stances. As a result of repeating that process over and over again, I had also gradually learned how to apply it to other opponents. Accordingly, my defense enjoyed a good

reputation.

“I can predict my opponent’s movements, but I am not able to dodge the attacks.”

Naturally, if you stopped at just guessing their movements, you still ended up getting hit head-on by the opponent. You had to use that knowledge to evade their attack and put yourself into an advantageous position to counterattack.

And where was the most advantageous position? For a start, their optical blind spot. If your opponent cannot see you, they cannot react. Next, their mental blind spot. Some fearless fighters were aware that their opponents aimed for their blind spots, so they reacted accordingly. When dealing with cautious opponents like that, there was no point going for their optical blind spot. Thus, you had to discover their mental blind spot—the spot to which they paid the least attention. Even if they could see you, catching them off guard made them unable to react. And finally, their positional blind spot. If by any chance you faced a powerful expert fighter without any mental blind spots, your last resort was the positional blind spots occurring due to the laws of physics. Human movements were limited by the mobility of their joints, shoulders, and hips, and their muscle output had an upper limit too. After dodging multiple attacks, it was possible to discern a positional blind spot, where it was difficult for your opponent to react. In the case of humans, their backs generally covered all three of these spots. Headhunting was the logical conclusion of that principle.

“You have to guess your opponent’s move not knowing when they will strike. At the same time, you also have to see through their defenses. Do you think you could do it?” I asked.

“If you can pull that off, you’re essentially invincible...” Ms. Raino murmured.

“Exactly.”

That was the reason why Chief Klein was as strong as a demon and Lady Maika had been the top of our class. Since Lady Maika was not officially on the military register, it was unclear how she would have ranked among the soldiers and knights. However, I had never seen her lose since she had mastered the headhunting technique. Not even once.

Once I had finished explaining the headhunting technique to Ms. Raino, the crowd broke out into roaring applause. It signaled the entrance of our Lady Maika, who quickly became this tournament's center of attention.

"I wonder what technique her opponent will use."

The two contestants exchanged a greeting bow under the tense stares of the crowd. After hearing the start signal, the two fighters just kept silently glaring at each other.

"Oh, I see what he is doing."

"What do you mean, Sir Fenix?"

"It looks like this opponent noticed that headhunting requires you to attack second."

"I see! If you're fighting someone who specializes in counterattacks, you're at a disadvantage going first," Ms. Raino explained while clapping her hands.

"That is right. Unfortunately...that's still not very effective against the headhunting technique."

"What?" Ms. Raino voiced her surprise. Since the fighters had finally made their first move, I just pointed downward.

For the first time in this tournament, Lady Maika had launched an attack. Her normal attacks were just as pointed, proof that she was taking her daily practice seriously. While she showed great swordsmanship, she also managed to conceal her preliminary movements, only performing the most necessary of motions.

As expected, her opponent was taken aback by her sharpness and only barely dodged the attack after losing his balance. However, Lady Maika predicted his evasion and followed up with a second and third strike with her long sword. Her opponent desperately blocked the attacks, but even from a distance you could tell that Lady Maika was calm and collected, almost as if this was merely practice for a theater play.

Still, her opponent's defense was also excellent. No wonder he had made it to the fourth round. While his stance may have been imperfect, he had averted

five strikes so far. However, this appeared to be his limit. Reaching the conclusion that he would be unable to block the next attack, he took the chance and launched a forceful counterattack. His refusal to give up and his judgment were commendable...but ineffective against his opponent. Lady Maika had predicted his all-or-nothing counterattack, dodged it, and headhunted. Heartbroken, her opponent fell to his knees and gave up. This was the end of the line for him at this tournament.

Later on, he would become well-known as the expert swordsman who had exchanged six blows with Lady Maika. However, I never checked whether he was happy with that reputation.

Ms. Raino pointed at the arena with a surprised look on her face. As her personal commentator, I provided an analysis.

“If I had to classify headhunting, I would call it a technique of counterattacking, but in essence it is just a method of discernment. In other words, it is a way to gain knowledge. Once you get to Maika’s level, it no longer really matters whether you go first or second.”

As long as you knew your opponent’s next move, there was not much of a difference between moving first or second. The only difference was whether you read their attack or their defense. Afterward, you just had to keep going for their blind spots.

“Unbelievable! Is there any way to beat it?”

“Of course, there is.”

If you managed to read their movements. The important thing was to avoid steadily gazing at one spot and rather look at the whole picture. If someone rigorously trained their stances, they were capable of eliminating all necessary movements, which automatically made their attacks harder to discern.

For example, I virtually never could see through Chief Klein’s preliminary moves. Lady Maika’s motions were also very difficult to perceive. Meanwhile, Chief Klein always said that my movements were still very obvious. Although recently, Lady Maika had been praising me by saying that they were harder to see.

“It may have a showy name like ‘headhunting,’ but it is a very basic fighting technique. You just predict your opponent’s movements. Accordingly, the countermeasure is also very basic.”

“In other words, simply training your own skills and perception...”

“Yes, that is the only way to fight on even ground.”

Unfortunately, this isn’t some fantasy fiction where you can use your signature move to finish off any opponent no matter how strong. If you wanted to defeat someone of the same skill level, you needed to train yourself beyond your limits to stand a chance. And some luck. Maybe some praying too.

After Lady Maika’s duel was over, I once again put on the white gown at the medical ward. Moments later, I faced this tournament’s biggest incident. Sir Seus Argos was carried in on a stretcher, drenched in sweat. The virile face of the usually energetic Nepton knight was full of agony. All the medical workers had recoiled upon seeing the knight on the stretcher, as if they had stared into the eyes of death itself.

A broken bone was sticking out of Argos’s right arm. An open fracture—a troublesome injury with an eighty percent fatality rate given this world’s medical standards. And it looked like Sir Argos himself also understood this.

“Can you help me? If you can’t fix the bone, just chop off the arm. I’ll be of better use to my liege with just one arm than in a tomb.” The soldier squeezed out those words in a firm voice while turning pale.

Hearing the soldier’s chivalrous request, the medical staff bit their lips in frustration. Anyone would have been deeply moved by his resolve. However, no one was confident enough to say they could save him.

The biggest problem was the inevitable intense pain accompanying both procedures, be it fixing the open fracture or cutting off the arm and stopping the bleeding. No matter how tough a patient was, self-restraint alone would not be enough to calmly withstand the pain of such surgery without anesthesia. Naturally, the patient would wriggle in pain. And the more they struggled, the longer the surgery dragged on, increasing the bleeding and the risk of bacterial infection. As a result, the survival rate was low.

The medical workers were overcome with worry and groaned as they did not feel up to this dangerous task. However, there were two people who had not even flinched. In fact, they were voluntarily moving toward Sir Argos. While lifting his arm above his heart, they stopped the bleeding by applying pressure to the artery under his armpit and started a detailed medical exam.

“Hm, inferring from the bone’s cross section, it broke cleanly. It’s unlikely there are bone fragments scattered inside the flesh... What do you think, Sir Fenix?”

“I agree with you, Lusus. Even if there were any fragments, they would be negligible. Moreover, it seems that the bone missed any nerves and large blood vessels. The bleeding has already diminished.”

“That was lucky.”

“Yes, let us prepare for the surgery.”

As you’ve probably guessed, the two people that didn’t flinch were Mr. Lusus and me. We had experience doing autopsies and recently obtained anesthesia. We were not afraid of death.

For the time being, we focused on stopping the bleeding and preventing any further hemorrhaging. Obviously, we were not capable of performing a blood transfusion or even determining his blood type. We had to make do with the blood currently inside Sir Argos’s body. Although if push came to shove, it might have been possible to substitute blood with saline water. For that, one just needed to keep in mind the salt density.

“That should do it for now. Sir Argos, we will have to move you to a private room for surgery. Please put this in your mouth and inhale.”

I handed Sir Argos a glass flask with cotton padding covering its round bottom.

“Sir Fenix, what is this...?”

“There is liquid medicine inside.” Or diethyl ether, to be more precise.

“Erm...okay?”

“It is absorbed by the cotton padding, which then releases it into the air.” By

increasing the surface, you could speed up its volatilization. “And once you inhale the medicine, you gradually start losing any feeling in your limbs.”

“I’ll feel numb?”

“You will temporarily become less sensitive to pain or maybe even not feel it at all.”

The medical workers gasped in awe, but the patient stared at the unfamiliar flask with unease. I could not blame him—I did not know how effective it would be either, since this was my first time using it.

“I understand your hesitation. We only developed this drug several days ago, and this will be our first time giving it to a person.”

“It’s that brand-new? No wonder I hadn’t heard about it before... Are you sure it’ll be all right?”

“Yes,” I asserted with confidence.

Normally, I would not want to make such a decisive statement before a first trial, but for the time being, I had to exaggerate a little to gain his trust. Unlike Sir Argos, I had access to my past-life memories and the ancient civilization’s texts, which told me that the anesthetic would have some effect even if it was weak. Either way, it was better than cutting off his arm without administering anything.

“Just like you have built up your physique through daily training, we manufactured this drug through rigorous research. According to the ancient civilization’s texts, it is completely safe.”

It was certainly a valuable, non-addictive anesthetic. Maybe it would cause a little nausea and headaches as a side effect, but that was about it.

“Please trust us. I cannot promise you that I will definitely save you, but I promise that we’ll do our best.”

Even if we failed, he would contribute to the further development of medical science as a valuable case study of surgery with anesthesia. If by some chance Sir Argos did not survive, I would make sure to provide Baron Nepton with all our information on anesthesia to pay my respects.

“So...even if I die, I’ll be of use to my liege?”

“Yes, I give you my word,” I firmly asserted again, even if I risked upsetting Count Gentoh by acting on my own authority.

“I don’t think there’s any better option for a knight like me who carelessly injured himself. At least I won’t die in vain... Are you really sure it’s okay to share your secrets?”

“I intend to maintain a good relationship with Baron Nepton in the future. Besides...” I had a feeling that Sir Argos would survive without any complications. “I believe in you, Sir Argos.” I admired Sir Argos’s steeled body, including his wounded right arm, and smiled. *What a specimen.* You could not attain such a body without rigorous training and the right diet. “Looking at your tough, trained body, I can tell that you are not fragile enough to die from a wound like this.” No doubt he had excellent stamina. I was confident he would calmly endure the intense and draining surgery.

“You believe in me...?”

“I mean, I am sure you are also confident in yourself, right? I’m sure you believe you can beat any enemy.”

“Ha ha, you’re saying that right after I lost my duel.”

Damn. He had lost—I had guessed wrongly. I should have known from the serious wound. What a blunder on my side.

“But you are still alive,” I added as calmly as possible, covering my embarrassment. “In Sacula, survival in defeat is celebrated even more than victory.” I was just intuitively making words up on the spot. The most important thing was to keep going and somehow put a positive spin on this. “I am sure you know which one is more difficult: coming back alive after winning, or after losing.”

“Well, yes, the latter...”

“Exactly. Thus, the latter are admired in Sacula.”

Be it a patrolling soldier who, covered in blood, escaped a demon attack to report back to the city or the survivors of a demon-subjugation squad who

returned to report their failure.

"Survivors are hurting both physically and mentally. How distressful must it be to escape while suppressing the pain from your wounds? How vexing must it be to leave your fallen comrades behind? It would be much easier to just remain and fight until the bitter end." But they chose the hard way—continuous suffering. Gritting their teeth, forgetting their shame, and withstanding their pain. "Without the information from those defeated survivors, Sacula would have long since been destroyed. That is how valuable their information was. They were the true heroes protecting our territory." There was a saying that history is written by the winners, but that was not quite right. History was written by the living. Not the winner or the losers—those who survive. "You resemble our region's greatest heroes." *At least that's what I think. No matter what anyone else says.* In my mind, he was a hero.

It appeared that my passionate impromptu speech had invigorated Sir Argos.

"Being compared to Sacula's strongest, famous for their military prowess, is an honor beyond my wildest dreams. Now I definitely can't die, Sir Fenix."

Good, I lured him in. I had broken into a cold sweat there for a second, but everything had turned out all right.

Sir Argos stared at the glass flask with a fiery look. "Don't worry, Sir Fenix. In return for your trust, I promise to stubbornly cling onto my life," he said, and then he energetically inhaled the anesthetic.

All right. While leaving the anesthesia mostly up to Sir Argos himself, I started preparing for the surgery. I lined up the scalpel and forceps that Hermes had made for me, a clean towel, and rubbing alcohol. Then, I changed into a fresh white gown. Mr. Lusus followed my example. We had to make everything as clean as possible before attending to the wound. We covered our mouths with a cloth and wrapped a bandana around our heads to prevent any hair from falling out.

Once we were done with our preparations, Mr. Lusus whispered into my ear. "Excellent speech, Sir Fenix."

"Yeah, but I was quite nervous." I nodded while disinfecting my hands and the surgery tools.

However, it appeared that Mr. Lusus had a slightly different understanding of the situation. “Seeing Sir Argos’s positive attitude, I’m sure this surgery will go well. You were aiming to improve his state of mind to help stop the bleeding and improve his recovery, right?”

“Huh? Uhm...yes...”

He was referring to the saying that sickness and health start with the mind. Adrenaline, which is secreted in times of excitement, has a strong stanching effect. At the same time, negative mental states such as stress were said to decrease immunity to diseases. At the very least, a positive mental attitude did not have any negative effects. Still, I had not considered that at all.

“That was more a coincidence than anything... I just said what came to my mind.”

“Ha ha ha, maybe it was the phoenix’s divine protection. Anyway, thanks for the lesson. Encouraging words like that are also an integral part of medicine.”

Well, as long as everything is progressing smoothly...

There was a life on the line, so if luck was on my side, all the better. No doubt this was Goddess Yuika’s divine protection. It looked like my prayers were still reaching her. After all, Lady Maika had not suffered a single injury so far.

“Sir Fenix, thank you for saving our knight,” Ms. Raino had greeted me with a courteous bow at our seats on the last day of the tournament.

Lately, she had been quite friendly toward me, but today she acted with utmost politeness and respect in her capacity as a diplomat.

I reciprocated in the same polite way. “I am glad I could be of help to my dear friends of the Nepton region. The surgery was only yesterday, but how is Sir Argos feeling?”

“He was complaining about nausea and dizziness, but at the exam this morning Dr. Lusus said those were side effects of the drugs used during surgery.”

“We used an anesthetic that numbs the human body’s sense of pain. Unfortunately, when using strong drugs like that a correspondingly strong side

effect is unavoidable.”

Ms. Raino seemed slightly confused by the word “anesthetic,” but she pieced together the meaning from the rest of my explanation.

“I guess it’s similar to how fields need both sun and rain—if either one continues for too long, they start wearing out.”

“Yes, any strong medicine has potentially strong side effects. Was Sir Argos in pain?”

“He may be Nepton’s boldest knight, but even he’s not unaffected by the pain.” Ms. Raino nodded with a serious expression before covering her mouth and smiling. “However, he put on a brave front, saying it was nothing... I don’t think death will dare touch him.”

“As expected from Sir Argos. May I go visit him after the tournament?”

“Of course, we welcome you. I’m sure Sir Argos will be pleased too.”

After we had finished talking about yesterday’s incident, Ms. Raino started directing her attention toward the arena.

“Uhm...would it be okay if I joined you to spectate the duel again today?” As it was not my place to decide, she asked Count Gentoh, who seemed puzzled at her request.

“We can’t just leave you out on the last day after you watched the whole tournament together with us. Especially given your enthusiastic support for my granddaughter. So, would you do me the honor and keep cheering for her until the end?”

“With pleasure! Thank you, Your Excellency!” Ms. Raino sat down next to me with a smile similar to that of a little girl who had just tasted the best cake of her life.

“I can’t believe I’ll get to witness her victory in this seat! It will be a sight to behold with two such picturesque people like Lady Maika and Sir Fenix... I can’t wait to see how it all ends.” She already seemed greatly delighted that she would get to experience the play’s climax from a special seat.

Today, I was actually feeling kind of nervous myself. Once Lady Maika had

won the tournament, my future would greatly change. My mixed feelings stemmed from the realization that this fact did not seem to bother me at all.

By the way, no one here had even considered the possibility of Lady Maika losing. Even Ms. Raino, who had only met her recently, was convinced of her upcoming victory.

Following the announcement of the semifinal, Lady Maika entered the arena to thunderous applause. Although she had been completely unknown before the first round, her graceful appearance and brilliant swordsmanship had captured the hearts of the crowd, men and women alike.

So far, she had not injured any of her opponents. As the crowded care unit suggested, most duels these past few days had been quite hard-fought and violent. However, Lady Maika had garnered a reputation as a swordswoman of spotless integrity whose matches were easy on the eye. Hopefully, that would continue until the end. At the back of my mind, I fondly remembered her arguments and fights with Moldo and his gang. That autumn, the sword tournaments at the academy had been something else.

Lady Maika's opponent in the semifinal was one of Marquis Datara's knights. He was the only capital nobility knight who had made it this far, showing once again how strong the provincial soldiers truly were. In fact, the Datara knight in the semifinal had also originally served under a regional leader before being lured away by the marquis. So, in essence, everyone left in the tournament came from outside the capital. This was also the reason why some capital nobles looked down upon the tournament as a festival for savages. *I think I'm beginning to understand why the organizers are slacking off on the side, out of the crowd's sight...*

"Sir Fenix, what do you think of her opponent? Does he look stronger than the previous ones?"

"Not really... So far, his behavior does not suggest so." Just from his normal walking posture, I could tell that his balance was slightly off. He looked like someone who skipped out on basic training. In that case, Lady Maika's fourth-round opponent was probably stronger.

"I guess that leaves only the finals then."

Albeit a bit prematurely, I agreed. There was just one thing that had caught my eye. The Datara knight was wearing a light neck protector on top of the regular helmet and armor. This may have been a countermeasure to prevent Lady Maika's sword from hitting his neck. I prayed to the dragon god, the god of war, that I was wrong.

As if to ridicule my concerns, the Datara knight launched his attack as soon as the starting signal had sounded. The audience gasped. They were amazed and excited to see him take the initiative without any hesitation after witnessing the previous rounds. He must have had a plan. However, before the crowd had any time to speculate, Lady Maika had moved behind his back and held her sword to his neck. Nevertheless, her opponent did not yield. Fearlessly, he swung around his sword.

For an instant, to the crowd it must have looked as if he had attacked at the same time or earlier than Lady Maika. They broke into applause for the Datara knight, the first contestant to escape her headhunting. On the other hand, there were also some sullen faces and cynical smiles among the spectators. All of them were experienced fighters. As such, they recognized that Lady Maika's attack had been obviously much faster. If she had not stopped herself, she would have cut right into her opponent's neck, leaving him no chance for a counterattack.

In response, Lady Maika frowned ever so slightly, and the two contestants glared at each other. It seemed like she was wondering if her opponent really had not noticed that she had been going easy on him.

Meanwhile, the Datara knight once again launched an attack at her. His sword came swinging at the same speed as earlier, and once again, Lady Maika hunted his head. This time around she did not stop just before hitting his neck, but lightly touched his protective gear. It was her second attempt at making him realize her intentions to avoid any bloodshed.

However, her opponent yet again swung around his sword. While this could have just been an instinctive reaction, his failure to yield said otherwise. The spectators were losing their minds, as they were under the impression that the two fighters were evenly matched. At the same time, Lady Maika seemed to say something to her opponent with a calm expression. Since the Datara knight was

concealing his face under his helmet, his response was unclear, but I grasped the situation from reading Lady Maika's lips.

"This will not end well..."

"Wh-What do you mean, Sir Fenix? Are things looking bad for Lady Maika?" Ms. Raino expressed bewilderment at the Datara knight's strenuous efforts overturning her predictions.

"He upset Maika. She will no longer go easy on him," I replied to her question with a mournful expression.

I felt truly sorry for him. Maybe our goddess could have saved him, but alas, I had decided that it was good enough to pray to the dragon god. The only thing I could do now was wish him good luck and pray for his soul.

Maika's Perspective

I had gone for his neck twice. The first time I had stopped just short of it, and the second time I had lightly touched it. My opponent should have realized I had won, no matter how thick-headed he was. Nevertheless, the knight in front of me clung onto his sword, unwilling to give up his combat stance. What was he trying to do? Did he want to get hurt? Anyone else would have given up after being shown such a difference in skill.

"I think you noticed that my sword hit you. Do you still want to continue?" I asked the man in the thick armor and helmet.

"Your sword hit me?" His voice ridiculed me from within the helmet. His shaking sword made his scornful laughter as apparent as his fighting moves. "With a weak blow like that, you won't even be able to cut a radish. There is no need for a warrior who fights with his life on the line to yield to a blunt sword that doesn't even try to take his life. Stop pretending to be a knight and give up before your lack of determination gets you a scar on your pretty face."

Upon hearing my opponent's provocation, my mind switched to serious mode, replacing my inner wooden sword with a sharp metal one. *Fascinating. So you're fighting with your life on the line, huh? You third-rate knight.* I let my rage flow into my sword, heating its iron and sharpening its blade with an intent to kill.

“Very well, in that case, please don’t surrender under any circumstances. I will dye you blood red with my blunt sword.”

I cut through the air to get a feel for my sword after infusing it with my murderous rage. As I once again fixed my gaze upon my opponent, he charged at me with his dull blade. It seemed like he had difficulty moving in his cowardly heavy armor. Even under normal circumstances, I was able to distinctly read most of his sluggish movements. This duel was akin to an all-you-can-eat buffet.

Using my left leg as a pivot point, I rotated my hips. I slightly folded my arms and diverted the momentum from my rotation into the tip of my sword. I aimed for the solid part of the helmet’s edge with as much force as possible, as if I was about to ring a large bell. The resulting sound of the blow was even louder than our village’s warning bell. My opponent, who hadn’t seen my attack coming at all, was unable to parry the blow or brace his legs, and the shock hurled him onto the ground. *How brittle.* That was quite the grandiose reaction to a sword that “couldn’t even cut a radish.”

My fallen opponent was full of openings, but I just looked down upon him while waiting for him to stand up. He shakily pulled himself back up, but as soon as he was on his feet, I once again cut him down. This time I hit the side of his torso, and yet again my opponent clumsily collapsed onto the ground. For the second time, I looked down upon him and waited for him to stand back up so I could knock him down again. *Again and again*. Each time it took him longer to get back up. It looked as if he was making some kind of appeal from the ground, his helmet facing toward me.

“What’s wrong?”

I was still going easy on him—I had no intention of taking his life. The blows hadn’t even been hard enough to make him unconscious. He should have been able to stand.

Just stand already so I can cut you down again. I clearly heard you say that you wouldn’t yield to a sword that doesn’t even try to take your life. Surely, a knight putting his life on the line wouldn’t be so fragile as to break from this?

At the very least, I had come here with the intention of putting my life on the line in order to confess my feelings for Ash to the whole world. I was standing

here resolved to pull through and win even if my arms would break and my legs got smashed.

Come on, give me a chance to prove myself. Stand up and swing at me with the intent to kill. I'll cut you down and make Ash listen to my confession.

However, in the end, I didn't get that chance. The Datara knight remained on the ground and declared his surrender. How pathetic. I couldn't contain my contempt for the opponent at my feet.

"This is what you get for trying to take advantage of my restraint." I tapped his shoulder with the tip of my blade. It was a formal gesture, signaling that I could have taken his head. He should be glad that I spared his life. "You should be ashamed of yourself for relying on your opponent's restraint in a possibly fatal duel."

The unsightly conclusion left a bad taste in my mouth. A bitter aftertaste, as if my own resolve had been sullied. The faces of my male friends popped into my head. Glen, Hermes, and, of course, Ash—none of them would have fought so unpleasantly. They meant everything they said, and their actions were even more serious. They were honest to their own feelings, their goals, and their feelings for others. Knowing their nobility, I took all the more offense at someone bragging about risking their own life without meaning it.

As I had no intention of celebrating my victory, I turned my back on him. I could hear sparse applause coming from the stands. *Well, I may have gotten a little too excited. It almost feels like I bullied an amateur. My dad will lecture me if he finds out*. However, when I glanced at the section applauding me, I caught a glimpse of the red-haired boy.

I wondered how he had perceived my words. I would be happy if they sounded just as strong, bright, and passionate as his whenever he was talking about his dreams. Just like he was yearning for his dreams, I was yearning for him. And I had no intention of losing this battle for love to his dreams.

When I had left the arena after the semifinal, I ran into a maid in the hallway. She didn't seem hostile, so I greeted her with a polite bow. In response, she took a deep bow.

"Lady Maika. I am a maid serving Her Highness Princess Alicia. My name is

Amin.”

Ah, she’s with Alicia, formerly known as Arthur. Since she had introduced herself with a smile, I reciprocated it.

“Hello, Ms. Amin. What can I do for you?”

“Her Highness would like to meet you if you have time. I realize you must be tired, but would you be available?”

My face beamed upon receiving this lovely invitation. “I gladly accept the invitation. Don’t worry about my stamina—a duel like that doesn’t even count as a warm-up exercise.”

“Not even a warm-up exercise? Her Highness was right...” Ms. Amin seemed a little exasperated. What had Alicia said about me? As if she had heard my question, Ms. Amin started murmuring while walking ahead. “Her Highness said that you were already at that level when you were eleven, so you wouldn’t have any problems.”

When I was eleven... Oh right, when I beat Moldo and his gang to a pulp at the Itsutsu tournament.

“That brings back a lot of memories.”

“So, it’s true,” Ms. Amin replied with even further exasperation. Had I said anything wrong?

As I was scratching my head, we had arrived in front of a gorgeous door.

“This is the royal family’s antechamber. Her Highness is waiting inside. Are you ready?” she asked.

I replied with a nod. I didn’t need to prepare myself to meet with my good friend.

When I opened the door, I was met by the princess in a pretty dress standing in the middle of a luxurious room.

“Lady Maika,” the princess called my name while reaching out her hand. “Well done on winning the semifinal! I am looking forward to seeing your magnificent swordsmanship in the finals too.”

“Your generous words flatter me, Your Highness.” I fell to my knees, took her hand, and exchanged greetings. These rules of etiquette were tailored to male knights greeting noblewomen, which made sense considering that most knights were in fact men.

“Lady Maika, there is something I need to tell you right away.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“In this room, there are only people I fully trust.”

“So, can we stop pretending?”

“Yeah.”

As expected! Since I had received immediate permission to forgo formality, I stood up and gazed at my friend. She had become really pretty. I couldn’t believe she had once passed as a boy. My cute, beautiful close friend was standing right in front of me. I reached out and hugged her in her pretty dress.

“It’s been a while, Alicia!”

“Yeah, I missed you, Maika!” Her voice sounded a little tearful.

“You’ve become so pretty! I almost didn’t recognize you!”

“Thanks! But you’ve also...”

“Become pretty? Heh heh.”

“I was going to say cool.”

What?! I wanted her to say pretty!

When I pouted, Alicia started giggling. “I mean, you looked so gallant while fighting... Surely, you heard the women’s shrill voices?”

“There’s a lot of people cheering for me. I expected more booing from enemy territories, but so far it’s been a pleasant experience.”

“I’m glad to hear that. There aren’t really any other contestants with as much support as you. You truly are a charming flower.”

“Heh heh, are you also supporting me, Alicia?”

“Of course! Unfortunately, I can’t cheer as loudly as Count Gentoh and my

dear brother Itsuki due to my status... But you're winning even without my cheers, right?"

Yeah. Truth be told, it's a bit too easy. I expected slightly harder fights...

"But I am applauding your victories. Good luck going easy on your opponent in the finals!"

"I'll do my best!"

"You're wishing her good luck going easy on her opponent..." Ms. Amin murmured in the background.

Yes, the hardest part is essentially restraining myself.

Alicia, who had also heard her murmur, covered her mouth before bursting into laughter.

Oh, Alicia... Even now, you're laughing this much... I placed my hand on my giggling friend's cheeks. "Doesn't it hurt holding it in?"

I could feel myself tear up while asking that question. I already knew the answer. There was no way she wasn't hurting. She must have wanted to cry. I would have in her place. And yet, she was smiling.

"It hurts. So much so that I cry a lot."

"Oh, I see..." She was still holding back, but at least she had become honest enough to admit that she had been crying. "Have you become a bit more upfront about your feelings?"

"Just a bit," my friend replied with a happy face. "Because you'll get mad at me if I bottle things up too much. I've learned to cry when I feel like it."

"You're still holding back way too much. You should be more selfish. You can say what's on your mind. I'm your rival in love after all."

"You're right. But that's why I want to smile and show restraint in front of you. You're my best friend, Maika."

Tears welled up, messing up my face and voice. "H-How can you be so nice...? You need to stop holding back so much!"

She should say it's unfair or call me a coward, not show such a pretty smile at

the person who’s trying to steal her love away.

“I want to hold back. You’re always crying in my place, so I want to bless you with a smile.” She placed her warm hands on my cheeks, which were drenched in cold tears. “Hey, you’re going to win, right? Hold your head high and smile. I have no doubts that you’ll win the finals without a problem. The real fight will be afterward, so don’t worry about anything else.”

“Y-Yeah...”

“Despite your strength, you’re quite a crybaby...”

Because I’m talking to you, Alicia. I know better than anyone else how much you love Ash. That’s why I... You...

My tears washed away everything I was going to say. It felt like drowning in my own emotions. In my painful distress, her slender arms reached out for me. Alicia’s warm embrace felt very gentle.

“Thank you for caring about me to the point of crying. And congratulations on finding someone you love even more. Don’t worry about me.” My close friend forgave me. “Use that kindness and jump with all your strength at Ash. I’ll make sure to set the stage.”

My friend smiled all the way to the end of our long-awaited reunion.



It felt like the cheering had decreased a bit for the finals. No wonder, considering the terrible semifinal. The duel had dragged on without any highlights. That must have been incredibly boring for the spectators. Since we had talked about risking our own lives, we should have at least fought until someone fainted. It was deplorable that someone like that got to call himself a knight.

Hopefully, the final's going to be an exciting fight... I prayed to myself before looking at the knight opposite me. It was the first time that I had seen someone with lighter armor than me in this tournament. In fact, my opponent wasn't wearing any protective gear at all. It didn't look like he was underestimating me at this late stage, after I had made it all the way to the finals without so much as a scratch. I could tell as much by the nervous look on his face. Moreover, his posture was so stiff that he probably should have taken a deep breath. No, he wasn't dismissing my skills. Thus, it must have been to facilitate his movements.

"Not a bad choice," I complimented my opponent's strategy with a smile.

"Hearing you say that tells me my nervousness is warranted." He reciprocated my smile with a semi-pale face.

He realized that he couldn't beat me by purely relying on his sword skill. It was obvious to him that he would lose under any normal circumstances. Nonetheless, he didn't sulk and give up, but searched for a way out of the darkness—a way to win. The option furthest away from defeat and closest to victory. And his answer was disregarding his defense.

If he had chosen to focus on heavy protection like my opponent in the semifinals, he would not have been able to properly react to my movements. At the very least, he wanted to make sure that he was light enough to face me at full speed. To him, that was the best choice, albeit a dangerous one.

"Just to let you know, I can't guarantee that I'll always stop short of hitting you." I pointed out the dangers of my opponent's choice, but he seemed to be aware of that.

He nodded with his pale face. "Then let me also warn you that I won't have the leeway to go easy on an opponent like you. I'll strike with all my might."

It was a brave choice to face danger head-on. This guy was serious. He didn't want to lose even if he ended up dying, and he didn't mind winning by killing me. His sharp look gave me goosebumps. For the first time, I was afraid of an opponent whom I would have beat ten times out of ten in any exhibition sword fight. However, this was a real fight with real swords. Even if we were using blades that were partially edgeless, it was a real fight if both contestants were prepared to risk their lives.

Good. This is excellent. At the very end, I was able to put my life on the line. "Let's fight with all our strength," I proclaimed to avoid having any regrets.

"Of course," he replied in a resolute voice.

We assumed our starting positions opposite each other. I could feel my heart racing and took a deep breath. If Ash had been by my side, he would have sensed my tension and tried to ease it with a smile. And while currently I couldn't see his smile, the mere thought of it helped me calm down.

Upon the referee's ready signal, I drew my sword. The duel would start following a clap, but the real fight had already started. I unconsciously gazed at my opponent. With a nervous expression, he stared right back at me. His fingertips had turned white from tightly gripping his sword and holding it above his head. Judging from his thighs and the balance of his slouching hips, he was standing on his toes, ready to jump at me any moment. He was planning to rush at me in a straight line together with the starting signal.

Given the strain on his body, it wouldn't have been difficult to just evade to the side. But wouldn't that be the same as running away from the head-on fight with my life on the line? How seriously could I be taken if I ended up in front of Ash without properly facing my opponent? I readily came to a conclusion.

I assumed a low stance and prepared myself to engage the approaching opponent head-on. *I can do it. It should be easy. He may be heavier than me, but my skill should make up for that difference.* I tried reassuring myself, and yet I broke into a sweat upon seeing my opponent's determination to kill. I unnecessarily strained myself. This was the heavy pressure of a death match. Fear entangled my entire body. I wasn't able to stay calm against an opponent whom I would have definitely beat under normal circumstances.

Nevertheless, I stepped forward upon hearing the start signal, and so did my opponent. His aloft sword came swinging down with full force. Its simplicity made the attack powerful. In fact, it was so strong that it would have finished any opponent that went for a simultaneous sweeping torso attack.

My only option was to parry the full-force downward strike and then finish my opponent with the following counterattack. *I can do it. It's simple. With my skills, I can easily parry the attack.* I had parried much stronger downward strikes during my training sessions with Glen. And no matter how afraid I was in this life-or-death situation, I had the strength to overcome my fear.

I had said that I would risk my life. Ever since the day the red-haired boy had rushed to the help of Suiren and Renge to save Ajole village, I had told myself that I would put my life on the line henceforth. In that case, wasn't my daily life already a life-or-death fight? This wasn't anything special. There was no need to be nervous. I had already grown used to the fear of death. This momentary exchange of blows was just another ordinary event for someone like me, constantly risking their life for their love. Just like waking up and arranging my hair or saying good morning to Ash. Risking my life was the norm. And I could use that experience to overcome my fear.

At full speed, I swung my sword against my opponent to stop his intense downward strike. His attack, which could have easily cut the side off my face, was stopped precisely by the guard on my sword. This resulted in a pleasant metallic sound signaling my successful parry. It was the expected outcome, just like I had trained. Therefore, I wasn't surprised at all and managed to launch my counterattack as quickly as possible. Without needless strain—with flexible movements and a clear mind. In contrast, my opponent reacted too late. His fear had narrowed his field of vision, made his breath unsteady, and strained his entire body, which delayed the rearrangement of his posture. He didn't manage to regain his balance on time. That difference was made clear by the blade held against his neck. My opponent stopped holding his sword aloft.



“That was a scary attack...”

The duel was decided with this single blow. His attack had almost overwhelmed me, but it was nowhere near as scary as my love.

“Regrettably...I have to admit defeat.” The knight was biting his lip. There was a sparkle in the corner of his eyes. No doubt it was the same sparkle that had welled up in my eyes on that moonlit night at the hot spring. Still, I was sure he’d be all right. He could stand up again.

“I claim victory. You will have to come up with another strategy next time.”

“Yeah, that’s the plan.”

I sheathed my sword while smiling at his answer. He put up a brave fight.

Finally, I had arrived here. *It’s time, Ash.* I directed my attention toward the conspicuously loudest section of the stands. Unmistakably, the sunlike, red-haired boy was standing there. *You’re up next, Ash. After assaulting me with your confession, I ran away under the moonlight. Now, it is my turn to thrust my confession at you. Are you ready?*

The stage for the award ceremony was set by the time the sunlight had started turning red.

“Lady Maika Amanobe Sacula,” my close friend called me—the winner—up on the podium. Apparently, it was the princess’s role to extol the victor of the tournament and award the prize in the name of His Majesty the king.

I stepped onto the podium in a fresh set of clothes. When my eyes met with my friend, the princess, her lips mouthed, “Leave it to me.” Her expression implied that she would make sure Ash couldn’t run away. Of course. As a sworn friend of the Anti-Ash Alliance and my rival in love, I could leave it up to her.

“Yes, Your Highness Princess Alicia,” I politely replied with deep affection in my voice.

For a brief moment, our smiles transported us back into our dorm rooms. It was a brief instant, after which I immediately knelt and resumed a formal attitude. Apart from us two, there was maybe one more person in this place who could have spotted the difference in our expressions.

Then, Alicia initiated a new era for the relationship between us three.

“The swordsmanship that you demonstrated at this tournament was worthy of the term divine. I am happy that a lovely, strong fighter like you lives in our kingdom.”

Alicia had chuckled a little when calling me “lovely.” Admittedly, it was slightly embarrassing, but I was happy. Coming from someone like Alicia, who was even lovelier than me, it felt as if I had just been gifted a beautiful ribbon. There was indeed no better present for a young lady who was about to confess her love.

“As a reward for your skill and victory in the tournament, I will now hear out your wish. Is there anything you desire?”

And thus, Alicia started incanting the spell that would prevent the red-haired boy from running away.

Upon hearing the first words come out of her mouth, I raised my head. “Most humbly, let me state my wish, Your Highness.”

“Whatever you desire, Lady Maika.”

Complete silence befell the arena wrapped in the twilight. *Listen, everyone. This is why I participated in this tournament. This is why I won.*

“I want Sir Ash George Fenix, knight of Sacula, to hear out my feelings for him.”

“Hear out your feelings for him?” Alicia smiled. She understood that this was an excessive demand even for the top swordfighter of the country. She knew this victory was necessary to gain the momentary attention of the red-haired boy who was nonstop chasing after his dreams. She tried conveying that to everyone else with her smile.

And I reciprocated. I wanted everyone else, and especially Ash, to know how much I had put on the line. Therefore, I replied with a big grin on my face. “Yes. I don’t intend to restrict his choice. I just want him to listen to my feelings. Then he can give me his honest answer.”

I wanted them to understand why I had used my reward to make him listen to my feelings rather than demanding his love, wishing for an engagement or his

hand in marriage. I yearned for him precisely because he was such a difficult yet wonderful person.

“I see. You want an opportunity to talk things through with him. That sounds like a humble request for the winner of this tournament.”

“Not at all. Sir Ash George Fenix is such a hard nut to crack that it takes this much to just get him to look at me. At the same time, he’s also so wonderful that I’m willing to go this far just to be with him.” *Surely, you understand how I feel, Alicia.* “Most humbly, I am sure Your Highness would understand if you talked to him.”

“Hm... In fact, I met Sir Fenix the other day at a gathering. He was indeed a charming person.”

Yeah, I heard. Did you enjoy the dance?

He had escorted her so she could escape the crooked Marquis Datara, and even engaged in a duel to protect her. How lovely. It made me a bit jealous. At the same time, it made me just fall in love again with Ash. He was so kind and cool that even the princess had fallen for him. My loved one.

Nevertheless, I couldn’t just go on speaking fondly about Ash. If I had said all this out loud, surely everyone would have understood what kind of person Ash was. For now, I had to focus on setting the stage so that he wouldn’t run away again.

“As a matter of fact, I tried confessing my feelings to him a while ago, but he interrupted me.” I needed to explain why today’s stage was necessary. And above all, make Ash understand that I wouldn’t let him run away again. “He said that he loved me, but didn’t want to listen to what I had to say. That’s why today I want him to hear me out.”

“Lady Maika, I understand your wish.” Alicia nodded. Now that the stage had been set, she addressed Ash down in the crowd with a satisfied look on her face. “Sir Ash George Fenix. In the name of His Majesty the king, I command you to come up on the podium and hear out this lady who bears such strong feelings toward you until the end.”

Under Alicia’s gaze, the red-haired boy stood up. There was slight

embarrassment mixed in with his usual smile. I knew that he didn't like to stand out, so I would have preferred if it hadn't come to this. Regardless, Ash had stuck around despite undoubtedly knowing that something was up. He was always so considerate of my feelings. He had watched all my matches. He had prepared my food. And now he was walking up toward me through a crowd of people whose eyes fixated upon him.

"Sir Ash George Fenix, come over here."

At last, Ash was standing next to me. He knelt in front of Alicia.

Thanks for coming up on stage despite your discomfort. It won't completely make up for this, but I promise I will always do my best for you from here on out.

"Lady Maika, Sir Fenix, there is no need to humble yourselves from here on out. It's time for Lady Maika's reward," Alicia proclaimed before stepping off the podium.

She kept her smile right up to the moment she turned her face away. I swore to never forget her favor.

And with that, it was just the two of us left on stage in the twilight.

"Ash, you can stand up."

Ash gazed at me with a serious look on his face. Eye to eye.

What do you say, Ash? You can't run away anymore. I won't let you get ahead again. I won't forgive you if you just speak your own mind and then run away after making me love you even more. You'll have to defeat me first if you insist on doing so. I'm not going to waste this big stage that Alicia offered me after defeating all those contestants. So, please listen.

"Ash...you confessed your feelings a while ago." My first words burned as peacefully as a newly lit fire. "You said that you loved me, but you couldn't make me happy, so you couldn't respond to my feelings." The flames of my feelings—which I had stowed away up until this moment—started burning brighter. "That made me very happy. I knew that you were completely absorbed in your dreams and didn't have interest in anything else..."

Ash's smile was like a sun that had appeared at night when my life at the

village had become engulfed in darkness. The sun illuminated everything in this world—people, beasts, birds, flowers. It didn't discriminate. The sun was simply too large. As a result, it couldn't just shine specifically for one person alone. It took me a while, but I eventually realized that.

"I was happy to hear that you thought about my happiness." *Do you realize how hot and bright my chest was burning when you told me you loved me back at the hot spring under the moonlight?*

It had felt as blissful as an embrace from the warm morning sun on a cold winter night. It had made me so very happy. It had been like special treatment from the sun. Momentarily, I had hogged it all to myself. I had no doubt been the luckiest girl in the world. At that moment, my life had felt complete... But my love was *bigger* than that.

"But you've got the wrong idea, Ash!" It was natural that the sun didn't discriminate between those it illuminated. I didn't want to force it to just keep shining on me alone. "I don't want *you* to make *me* happy!"

I had realized that if the sun wasn't going to give me any special treatment, I just had to become special myself. A special flower so infinitely large that I could absorb more light than everything else. I would keep growing higher into the sky, extending my foliage far and wide and producing the most gorgeous and extravagant blossoms! Until the solitary sun could no longer ignore me when looking down upon the surface from its summit in the sky. And today that time had come!

Do you know what I'm talking about, Ash? Probably not. So let me tell you. Listen to these words, springing forth from the light you gave me all those years ago.

"*I* want to make *you* happy, Ash!" Fueled by a myriad of emotions, my words had morphed into a large fire that could no longer be extinguished by anything or anyone. Including Ash. "You can do whatever you want, Ash. I will support you. If you want me to help you think about something, I'll be ready by your side with pen and paper. If you want me to fight with you, I'll draw my sword. If you want me to take care of something else, I'll run off to get it done. Even if I have to go to hell, or fight a dragon, I won't back down a single step."

The fire still wasn't hot enough. I needed to fan the flames further with emotional firewood. Without thinking about the consequences. After all, this feeling would never die down. It needed to burn bright for all the world to see.

"You underestimate me too much! I already know that you're an oddball!"

I knew that Ash was weird. He was capable of surprising people with a single word. That was definitely strange. So what? That oddball was the only one to grab my shivering hand in the dead of the night and drag me all the way here.

"But I love you! I love your weirdness! I never once wanted you to be normal!"

I loved him the way he was. That was part of what made him so great. He should just keep soaring across the sky, illuminating the world with his blinding light, surprising people, and making them laugh. He didn't need to stop and worry about anything special. As tall and large as I had grown, I would always snatch myself a special seat to absorb and enjoy his light better than everyone else. If he headed for the northern mountains, I would spread my roots to the northern mountains. If he traveled over the western sea, I would extend my branches to the western sea. I would make sure to always blossom in full glory in his sunshine, so that he could enjoy a pretty view no matter where he looked down upon this earth!

I was out of breath. My breath hadn't been this unsteady in any of my matches. But it made sense. While I had put my life on the line, I had never been driven into a corner. However, right now I was truly risking my life uttering these words. I slowly released my clenched fist. I laboriously extended my shivering fingers and reached out for the sun.

"You can love me in good conscience. I am ready to risk my life for my love just as you are ready to risk yours for your dreams."

I want you to believe in the strength that has brought me this far. No matter how strong his flames were, this flower would not wither. And even if it were burned to the ground, it would just rise again from its ashes! *I'll never ever take your kindness for granted. So, to prove myself, please hand me your burning hot dreams.*

"I don't mind you stealing me away from my happiness. I'll steal you away

from your dreams in return.” I stared into Ash’s eyes.

“Thank you, Maika,” he said, and grabbed my hands. “Then I will take your happiness without any hesitation.”

I handed over my happiness.

“And I’ll take your dreams.”

And in return, I received the sun’s dreams.

It felt so hot. Burning hot. With this fire, I could survive any night no matter how dark and any winter no matter how cold.



Eye to Eye I had always been looking at his face in profile. From the side, I had observed him looking straight ahead. I had yearned for his sun-like smile. My heart had been stolen by his glowing gaze that scattered away any darkness. His soft, warm voice had made me feel at ease like a hearth in the winter. I had constantly looked at his profile, which made me fall in love no matter what he was doing.

That same face was currently looking straight at me. Gazing at me alone. I had dragged him out to this place where he couldn't run away, just to make him listen to my feelings. I was fully indulging myself. It had been worth putting my life on the line for this moment. To finally detain the boy who never stopped walking and only ever faced forward in front of my eyes alone! All the work, studying, sword training, and social gatherings had paid off!

"Uhm, Maika?"

"Yes, Ash?"

I grinned just hearing him call my name, although that always happened. It wasn't like I was happy hearing him say it just because he was now my boyfriend. This was just Ash's addictiveness. *Wait, is he my fiancé now?* I wasn't sure whether we were already officially engaged; there was still some paperwork to do. So, "boyfriend" was probably more accurate.

My boyfriend seemed a little embarrassed. "What should we do now?"

"For the time being, start the engagement procedures. As soon as possible. Right after we leave here."

"No, I mean before that. What are we going to do about this crowd?"

Ash looked left and right. There was clapping and cheering coming from all directions of the arena. Even the other participants were smiling, as if our display of love had sweetened their defeat. My uncle and my grandfather were sobbing in each other's arms, and Alicia was gracefully applauding us.

"Everyone's giving us their blessing!"

“It is a bit overwhelming. How do we calm them down? Will there be a closing ceremony announcement?”

I wonder if we’re inconveniencing the presenters.

Since Alicia had left me this podium as my reward in the name of the king, they couldn’t do anything. It was unclear who was supposed to take the initiative.

“It reminds me of the time we launched the model planes,” I said.

“I also ended up exhausted back then. I am really not suited for ceremonies like this.”

“I think you are.” *Otherwise, you wouldn’t be thinking about calming the crowd down.*

Besides, most people didn’t require as many ceremonies as Ash in the first place. Apparently, my uncle had wanted to give Ash even more decorations, but ultimately refrained after the latter said it was unnecessary.

“Either way, I do not like garnering attention like this...” While he wasn’t particularly nervous, he restlessly looked left and right. “Hm... Considering that you received this spot as a gift in His Majesty the king’s name, I assume it is up to you to declare when it is over.”

“Yeah, you’re right. It took you unusually long to figure that out.” *I guess he really can’t handle situations like these. And yet, he still came here for my sake. Heh heh, that makes me happy.*

“So, should we bring it to an end? I think it will be fine if you just thank Her Highness Alicia for providing you with such a wonderful setting.”

That was a good suggestion. The presenters must have been waiting for an announcement too. I should do it, but...

“No chance!” I grinned with satisfaction. So much so that Ash got all serious.

“Maika?”

“I don’t want it to end. You want me to willingly stop hogging you all to myself?” *I can’t do it! No way! Even if the entire crowd went home, I wouldn’t end it. It would be too gut-wrenching. In fact, I’d rather have my actual gut*

wrenched.

"Please, can you not somehow bring it to an end?"

"What? You really want to end it? Hm...let's see. Well, it depends on your attitude."

"I will do anything."

"Really? You said anything, right?"

Yes, got him! The right to make Ash obey any of my orders was priceless! An extremely rare treasure that even I, as his childhood friend, didn't get to see more than once every ten years. That must have been a slip of the tongue.

Ash was curling his lips. *Don't tell me you're planning on taking it back?* I gave him a warning smile, and he graciously conceded. He was a man of his word, so he wouldn't break a promise.

"Please, go easy on me."

"Heh heh, well then..." We had just become partners. In a few hours' time, we would be engaged. So, there was something I wanted him to do before then.

"Who am I?"

"Hm... Maika?"

Yes, but that's not what I meant.

I wanted to hear something else. Something only he could call me. My ferocious loving smile was thirsting for more affection. Was I greedy? Pushy? Ash seemed a little taken aback. Not that it was any of my concern. This was my love language.

"I want you, my *boyfriend*, to tell me who I am."

I instantly felt my own cheeks turning red. It must have sounded so awkward, calling him my boyfriend. So far, I had only ever called him by his name, so this sounded very new and special. And it seemed like Ash had gotten the hint. His face had beamed upon hearing his childhood friend refer to him like that.

"I have such a cute *g-girlfriend*."

This wasn't the usual Ash. For the first time, he was acting as my boyfriend.

His face had turned red, and he had stuttered. He was smiling, but he didn't seem calm at all... And above all, his voice had sounded hoarse.

Was it difficult to call me that? It was difficult, right? It didn't sound like Ash at all. He was giving me special treatment.

"Are you sure that is your request? You will probably never hear me say 'I will do anything' again."

"Yes! That's exactly what I wanted!" Ash's special treatment was the best!

"Now you are making me blush a little."

A little? Just a little? To me, Ash's face looked bright red. As I gazed at his face, it suddenly turned sideways.

"Well, Maika. Since I fulfilled your request, can you do something about the crowd?"

I grabbed his head with both my hands and turned it back toward me.

"Don't move. Don't look at your surroundings. Just look at me. At least for now, don't look at anything else."

After realizing what I had said, my face flushed. How selfish of me. I may have gone a bit too far. And I did promise that I would do something about the crowd if he called me his girlfriend. But, but... I had only said depending on his attitude. I hadn't promised I'd definitely do it. So, I was in the clear. Well, at least not in the wrong...

"Are you sure you should say that?"

"Why?" I felt like my defeat was imminent.

"I have to make sure to protect you if you say such sly and cute things."

Ash's hands reached out for me. During the tournament, I had evaded countless—okay, that may be a bit exaggerated—swords, but I failed to dodge this. Defense was impossible; escape was futile. Even if I had wanted to evade it, I would have been too nervous to move. His hands touched my back and the reverse side of my knees. *Could it be...?* I momentarily panicked as I anticipated what was happening. As soon as I had come to the realization, he was already princess-carrying me.

“If you are not going to announce the end, I will have to carry you out of the arena.”

“W-Wait...” I was panicking.

I would have never thought in a million years that Ash would resort to such a coercive method! No way I can win this! Being carried so forcefully yet gently, all I could do was look up at Ash with a bright red face. Ash’s smile prevented any further resistance. I felt like a freshwater fish inside a hot pot.

When Ash started walking out, the presenter made an announcement asking the audience to bid farewell to the tournament’s winner. The crowd sent us off with roaring applause.

I-I guess there’s no way back now! Everyone will acknowledge this as our exit. As expected from Ash! He just took the initiative to start the closing ceremony!

“For now, let us just return to the Sacula mansion. Then...”

“Th-Then?” I could feel a scary amount of happiness lurking on my tongue.

“I will gaze only at you, as you requested.”

I might just die of happiness...

“Yes, please!”

A Certain Compiler's Afterword

Thank you very much for taking this book into your hands. For the fifth time now, I was able to deliver a compiled version with the help of many people. I am grateful for each and every one of them.

Now then, this time I'm covering the Sukuna region. Although the region has changed its name, its most popular sightseeing spot is still the long-established Sukuna hot spring village. Just like Itsutsu city, this place stores valuable data and materials regarding Ash—or Sir Fenix, I should say here.

This region, which was known for its intelligence network at the time, also produced paintings as a means to accurately convey the appearances of the people about whom they gathered intelligence. That's right. All depictions relating to the legend of Sir Fenix as we know them today are products of the house of Sukuna's spy activities.

Those precious source materials are currently stored as a relic at the finest traditional inn of the Sukuna hot spring village. It is an establishment that formerly received royalty and nobility, and eventually became the regular inn of Sir Fenix and the Territory Reform Promotion Office. Even today, it is still operated by a descendent of the house of Sukuna.

Without further ado, I got the hostess to show me the precious paintings. I had seen them before on television, but I was still impressed by the inn's art gallery-like facility. It really lived up to its reputation of formerly catering to royalty and nobility. There were a myriad of paintings here ranging from bust-up portraits and profiles depicting facial features to full-body portraits serving as a reference for height measurements and other details. Some paintings even portrayed the exact locations of scars.

However, the center of attention at the gallery was an official painting that hadn't been drawn for the purpose of intelligence gathering. It depicted a boy and a girl walking close together under the bright sunlight. Despite their young age, the two looked like a couple who have been married for years. The painter really captured their excellent chemistry. It wouldn't surprise me if even their breathing was synchronized. The arms of the harmonious couple were so tightly

entwined that it seemed like they never wanted to let go again. Their similar smiles were as bright as the sun, and you could practically hear their laughter, accompanied by congratulatory and teasing voices.

No matter how you look at it, those soulmates were Ash and Maika. The painting captured the two childhood friends, who had fortuitously met in a poor, remote village, happily embracing each other so naturally. A delightful sight to anyone who knows about their story. It almost makes their many hardships appear trivial. As expected from the couple that was considered “an inspiration for all lovers in the kingdom.”

The title of the painting is *Marital Vows of Two Jian Birds on Trees with Entwined Branches.* The Jian are mythological birds that can only fly together as one. The entwined branches represent trees that need each other to stay upright. These images truly represent the relationship between those two.

I also want to congratulate them from the distant future.

—While writing my blessings on paper


Mizuumi Amakawa
Illustrator:
Mai Okuma
Fushi no Kami 5
Rebuilding Civilization Starts with a Village


ASH
MAIKA
“I am sorry.
I love you, but
my heart had already
been stolen before you
appeared in my life.”


“It’s so much
fun being around you,
my Phoenix.”

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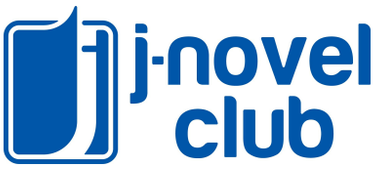
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Fushi no Kami: Rebuilding Civilization Starts With a Village Volume 5

by Mizuumi Amakawa

Translated by Maurice Alesch

Edited by Eric Bravo Górriz

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5
Mizuumi Amakawa
Illustrator:
Mai Okuma