
Take These Talents Elsewhere
A Delightful Demotion to the Countryside
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Author: Akamitsu Awamura
Illustrator: Tapioca


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Elysia
The imperial princess and only daughter of the previous emperor. The current emperor is after her life, so it was decided that Zen would pose as her father, sheltering her in the countryside where he was demoted to.
"Please call me Elysia from now on, 'father.'"
Keel
The divine wolf who's Zen's best friend; a young vanargand that possesses the mentality of an adult human.
Therefore, when Zen asked him, **"You're going to come with me, right?"** he resolutely wagged his tail against him as if to say, *Of course I will. You don't even have to ask.*
"Thank you! I'll never be lonely no matter where I go so long as I have you."
Zen Leadon
One of the famed four Leadon siblings, but he was demoted after failing to advance in his career...which made him super happy since he was released from his overload of work!


"That's not what a father and daughter would do!"
"Here you go, father. Say 'aah.'"


"How can you use sorcery?!"
Shiltz
The sorcerer monk of the Vajra Temple who'd been sent by the current emperor to assassinate Elysia.
"It's obviously because I'm a conjurer too."

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Chapter 1: The Man Who Can’t Get a Promotion

Zen’s colleagues liked to bad-mouth him behind his back, saying he was “a minor official whose only merit was his personality.” He’d also been told to his face once that “Your three older siblings are incredible, yet it’s like you’re nothing but some spent tea leaves.” The dregs of his family, in other words.

He had actually been born to the noble family of Leadon, which had produced many ministers and capable officials over the generations. Despite that, he’d only just barely managed to pass the Advanced Civil Service Exam at the age of fifteen and had been living life as a government official with no hopes of promotion ever since.

By the time he was twenty-nine years old, he’d been passed around all over the imperial capital’s central government system. To say it negatively, he was treated as a gofer, but even when put nicely, he was a “jack-of-all-trades” at best. He spent his years so perpetually inundated with exhausting tasks, he had no chance to even try climbing the corporate ladder.

He had no time for love either. His colleagues who’d passed the civil service exam at the same time as him were all set on the steady path to becoming elites, even building happy families.

At the drinking party the other day, they ridiculed him, asking, “You got another transfer notice?” and “Are you trying to dip your toes into every government agency?”

***

Today was October 1st, of the year 117 on the Catalan Imperial Calendar.

It was the fall season, with the leaves on the trees all changing colors along the main street. Zen was on his way to present himself at the palace to receive the details of his new transfer, and this time they would even be handed to him personally by the Chancellor of Ceremonial Affairs (the minister in charge of human resources). Wondering what his next particular post would be, Zen steeled his resolve.

When the Goldragan Palace was first completed, the first emperor Julian's sworn friend, a dragon with gold scales, had inadvertently left behind big claw marks the moment it landed on the castle tower's rooftop. However, rather than as an accident, the event was spun as an auspicious blessing, and the palace was thus given its name.

Immediately through the entrance of this historic palace was a front court where the head offices of the six ministries were located, including that of the Chancellor of Ceremonial Affairs. Not even a second after Zen knocked, a youthful yet stern voice said, "Come in."

Zen straightened his posture and entered the room; however, he wasn't tense at all. This was because although the Chancellor of Ceremonial Affairs stood in a position far above him, the man himself was none other than Zen's own older brother.

The two got along favorably, and they'd enjoyed dinner together at their family home just last night. However, he was someone who made a distinction between his work and personal life, so he hadn't told Zen anything about what the notice entailed.

He was Yohia, the eldest of the four Leadon siblings, and to put it shortly, he was a monster of politics. He'd been in office for ten years and had become a minister when he was only twenty-eight years old, making him the youngest ever recorded—even in the famed Leadon family—which was quite exceptional. He was completely different from Zen, who'd never risen beyond the position of a minor government official.

Indeed, the two were different even down to their looks. They shared the same parents and had similar facial features, yet compared to Zen, whose appearance was quite unremarkable, Yohia had genuinely good looks that boasted an aura of competence. No

matter how much time passed, others would snicker at Zen, saying, "Your uniform is wearing *you*," but Yohia wore the extravagant silks of his Chancellor of Ceremonial Affairs uniform like he was "completely dominating" them.

That outstanding older brother of his began speaking in a cool tone of voice. "Given that we're brothers, let's skip the formalities. Allow me to cut to the chase." His attitude reflected that he was currently busy and wanted to get this over with as soon as possible.

If that's how Your Excellency the Chancellor feels, then there was no need to bother calling me here, Zen thought, holding back a wry smile.

In public, his brother had a reputation for being strict to the point of ruthlessness, but Zen knew very well that it was only because his sense of justice regarding work was unparalleled, and that his true nature was that of a compassionate person. Even his words and attitude right now were imbued with a consideration that said, *Because of my position, I'll have to say some harsh things today, so prepare yourself.* Yohia was going out of his way to preface the news so it wouldn't come as too much of a shock. Also, the very fact that it was from his lips directly rather than via a letter was done out of consideration for Zen.

There were four secretaries appointed to the minister's office who worked alongside each other, and partially because they were present, Yohia continued with his businesslike attitude. "It seems that at your current post as well, you've worked hard at your various duties," he said as he flipped through the pages of a document. It was probably a report he'd made Zen's superior write, which no doubt gave a detailed statement of how hard he'd worked at keeping ledgers at the Tax Bureau in the Financial Affairs Agency for the past six months.

"How long do you intend to keep this up?" Yohia asked.

"As long as there's work in front of me," Zen replied. "So...until my mandatory retirement?"

"I don't mean all these odd jobs. I'm asking when you're going to be promoted?"

Zen shrank in on himself. Yohia's words were like a slap to the

face.

You're the top dog of the Human Resources Agency, so you could just promote me, he grumbled internally, but he knew that wasn't the issue. No matter how much authority Yohia held, he'd be criticized for nepotism if he promoted his little brother who lacked any great achievements. Catalan was still very much a meritocracy, even one hundred years after its founding.

Yohia was essentially telling Zen to do something spectacular to distinguish himself, but if that were so easy, no one would ever struggle. His colleagues did their jobs in moderation while also honing their skills, making connections, and drafting proposals to bid on national projects. That was how they were speeding down the highway to become elites.

On the other hand, Zen was the type to put his all into his work. He didn't have the talent to get it done with half the effort either. As a result, although he was technically a central bureaucrat, he was swamped every day with duties that were ridiculed as odd jobs. Then, once he could finally handle the actual work of his assigned bureau, he'd immediately receive a transfer notice to his next post.

In addition, they were all senseless transfers to posts with responsibilities that had little connection to one another, with Zen being shipped from the Construction Agency's Municipal Bureau to the Library Department of the Education Agency, or from the Judicial Bureau to the Mint. He was just being juggled around. Even so, he never voiced his complaints.

"I am working hard in my own way..." Zen mumbled.

"It's a given to be diligent in carrying out your duties. Moreover, you must produce results as a member of the Leadon family."

That hurts, Zen thought glumly to himself. He'd been desperately working hard for the past fourteen years to ensure that he didn't bring shame to the Leadon family name. No—if you considered the hellish yearlong Advanced Civil Service Exam and the hours of study he'd put in to pass it, he'd been working hard every day for as long as he could remember. That was 365 days of the year, every year, with very few breaks.

With just a single sentence, his older brother negated all those

years of Zen's blood, sweat, and tears. "Zen. You don't have to work hard anymore."

For a second, Zen didn't understand what he'd been told.

Giving no space for him to express his bewilderment, Yohia continued. "Today, I will give you your transfer details. Your new post will be at the Todd Village Town Hall located in Nazalf Prefecture in the state of Cylin."

Zen recalled that it was a remote area located at the empire's southernmost point. In a complete turnaround from the central government agencies, which anyone would envy a position in, he was being sent to a town hall in the middle of nowhere. This was, in other words, a demotion. An unusually severe demotion, even for disciplinary measures.

"There's been talk going around that you're a disgrace to the Leadon family," said Yohia. "It is difficult to refute that claim. It is unheard of in our family to be thirty years old and still not have become the head of a department."

"Your Excellency, I've only just turned twenty-nine—"

"Then can you promise me you'll be promoted after one year?"

Under Yohia's grim gaze, Zen fell silent. It wasn't so much that he was overwhelmed by his older brother's intensity; it was against his own principles to make a promise he couldn't keep solely to avoid conflict.

"The problem here is that there are people saying it must've been a mistake that you passed your civil service exam," Yohia said. "There are also those who suspect you of benefiting from our father's influence."

"I'm ashamed."

"You understand, don't you, Zen? This is not a matter that can simply be settled within our family. The empire's Human Resources Agency must be fair and just. Therefore, in order to dispel any doubts, I will send you to a do-nothing job in a remote region. You no longer have a future as a government official, and this is virtually an early retirement."

Zen now understood what he'd meant earlier when he said, *"You don't have to work hard anymore."*

"You have no objections, correct, Zen?" Yohia asked in a tone of voice that allowed him no choice but to agree. However, it was just something Zen couldn't believe. That was why he had to confirm it.

"Um...Yohia," he started, "are you...really going to send me to the countryside?" He desperately tried to keep his voice steady.

Yohia's eyes wavered for just a moment, betraying the real compassion he felt toward his youngest brother. This person, known to be a stern man, was showing his emotions. However, as if putting a stop to that, he closed his eyes. "I will not repeat myself," he said, resolute. "If you must blame someone, then blame me." Then, as if telling Zen to leave already, he gave a dismissive wave.

Zen had no objections. With a single polite bow, he left the office.

He kept a straight face and put in the utmost effort to contain the intense emotion that was welling up inside of him.

He stepped into the corridor, closed the door, and even then, out of consideration for those around him, he shouted only within his heart.

Heeell yeaaah!!! I got a demotiooon!!!

When was the last time he'd felt such innocent jubilance? His childhood? If there hadn't been any officials passing through the ministry hall, he might've danced on the spot. It had been such a desperate struggle to hide the delight that'd threatened to reveal itself in his expression and voice in front of Yohia.

I don't have to work anymore! I don't have to try!

He'd put in so much effort and carried out all the official government duties he didn't want to do only because he'd been born into the Leadon family. He just cared for his family deeply. All he wanted was to at least not bring them shame. That was the reason he'd been working like a dog without complaint. Nothing more, nothing less. He'd long since lost interest in success.

Therefore, although his older brother might've had to steel himself to give him these orders, being sent to the countryside was a stroke of good luck to Zen.

I've always been so jealous of those useless employees who don't do any work, indulging in nothing but books. It'd be nice if I could pick up some new hobbies. How about fishing? The place will be out

in the sticks, so it's probably full of nature. Oh man, I'm so excited!

To give a rough overview of the empire's geography, the west faced the ocean, plains stretched out across the north, mountains populated the east, and the south was covered in forest. Zen would be heading to the south. As he imagined himself dangling a fishing line by a peaceful lakeside, he totally began to feel like picking up that hobby.

He left the palace in high spirits. There were no clouds in the sky, and it was like even the sun was celebrating his transfer to the countryside.

Here's to an early retirement!

***

However, Yohia had no idea what his younger brother was truly feeling.

Even if it's for the sake of the empire, the fact that I must force my precious little brother to suffer... he thought to himself. *No, no matter what, I have no right to ask for forgiveness.*

After Zen left the office, Yohia let out a sigh—subtly, so as not to arouse suspicion from his four secretaries. The youngest (although still twenty-nine) secretary in particular was staring at him as if she had something to say. Once Yohia told them all to take a break, he gave her the opening to speak her thoughts.

"If I remember correctly, you hold my brother in high regard," he said.

"Indeed, Your Excellency," she replied. "I thought that if my plans to become a chancellor by the age of forty ever failed, it'd be because my superior, Zen, had outdone me."

This proud woman was a member of another noble family of bureaucrats, as well as a genius who'd topped the Advanced Civil Service Exam one term after Zen took it.

"None of my colleagues are my rivals," she continued. "That goes without saying for my juniors as well. If there is someone worthy enough to contest me, it'd only be Zen."

"I do think you're thinking too highly of him, though," said Yohia.

"The reality is that he's never once received a promotion, unlike you, and now he's reached the end of his career as a government official before thirty."

"With all due respect, Your Excellency, do you really think so? I wouldn't be surprised if Zen learned a thing or two and came back to the imperial capital a new man," she said. She spoke her mind without an ounce of cowardice, even to Yohia, who was a minister. In fact, she didn't hide her accusing gaze that said, *Don't you think demoting Zen was too rash?*

Yohia's subordinate's bluntness prompted him to think, *While there are those who gossip that Zen's nothing more than some spent tea leaves, there are others who see him for who he is.*

Instead of taking offense, his mouth twitched up into a smile. It was only natural; there was no way he wouldn't be happy hearing someone praise his precious little brother. And this woman wasn't the only one who appreciated him.

Yohia turned his attention to the document he'd been leafing through earlier and flipped through it once again. It was the written report he'd made Zen's superior at the Tax Bureau turn in—the bureau that Zen had been working at until just yesterday.

The Tax Bureau monitored and controlled the immense amount of taxes collected every year in the great country of Catalan, and numerous government officials who were particularly skilled at calculations worked there. Among them were even geniuses at mental arithmetics. This report detailed how Zen just couldn't keep up and even struggled with some of the easiest, most mundane jobs.

Nevertheless, his superior had given him high praise. He'd adapted to his responsibilities in only half a year, and since then, he'd grown just enough to be considered a capable worker. Above all else, Zen's cheerful personality lightened the mood in the workplace.

That last remark was just like how you'd praise a child, but it absolutely could not be dismissed. That was because every year, there were many workers who'd have nervous breakdowns or collapse from overwork at the Tax Bureau, which was swamped with managing a dizzying amount of numbers. The atmosphere of that

department was always tense. It was an everyday sight to see staff members muttering to themselves with hollow eyes while clinging to their desks. Nobody spoke to their colleagues, nor did they even meet each other's eyes.

However, Zen breathed new life into that environment. He actively talked to his colleagues, took them out for lunch, and organized drinking parties to commemorate them for their efforts. At first, he'd been shunned for getting in the way of their work, but everyone soon opened up to him. That was all because of Zen's personality.

He's always been well-liked, Yohia thought to himself. It was written in the report that friendly conversation now often livened up that workplace, where an oppressive silence used to be the norm. It didn't really affect their duties negatively; nobody clung to their desks anymore, and indeed, they *did* work fewer hours, but everyone had regained their energy thanks to this kind, human environment, and the efficiency of their labor had improved dramatically. In the past half a year, the job turnover and suicide rates that chronically plagued the bureau had been significantly lowered.

But Zen can't be given endless praise. It must be remembered that he'd just barely sufficed as a finance official. To the Human Resources Agency, anything unrelated to the actual business affairs of the workplace wasn't in a category that could be evaluated.

However, the written report concluded with this: "All in all, I'd like Zen to continue working at the Tax Bureau for a long time."

There were probably no greater words of praise that a superior could give.

Nonetheless, Yohia had decided to send Zen to the countryside. Of course there was a reason. The same went for how he'd handed him off from one post to the next. He'd done that knowing it'd hinder his ability to get a promotion. Yohia, who dealt with human resources, was behind it all. He could never reveal that fact to another family, though, nor could he tell his little brother himself.

I'm sorry, Zen, but this is all for the sake of this country's future.

That was why, as the empire's strict chancellor, he had to throw

away his feelings for his own flesh and blood. He remained undaunted under the gaze of his subordinate that criticized Zen's demotion.

Then he crushed the report from the Tax Bureau and threw that away as well.

***

If you traced back the Leadon family lineage, you would find they'd been a family of bureaucrats since the founding of the empire, where they'd served as the first emperor's private secretaries. Since then, they'd produced ministers for four consecutive generations.

Catalan had no aristocrats and was a centralized state where the emperor was the sole authoritarian ruler. As such, although the Leadons were a distinguished, powerful family equivalent to the leading aristocrats of other countries, they maintained their social standing on their own merit rather than inheritance.

Of course, the family held immense fortune, and their main residence had been constructed in a rich neighborhood near the palace. Moreover, the magnificent mansion and grounds were so spacious that they overwhelmed even the other luxurious houses around them.

There were also three separate, detached buildings on the estate grounds, and the servants lived together in the biggest one. A steward who'd served the family for generations lived with their child in the middle house, and Zen currently resided in the smallest one.

Zen hadn't been chased out of the main building because he was a failure. If anything, his family adored him for it, true to the idea that a person was cuter the less capable they were. There was a respectable reason he'd gone out of his way to clean out that former storeroom and begun living there.

Returning home, he called out to his roommate, who he considered family. "I'm back, Keel. It's a little early, but let's have lunch."

When he did so, Keel, who'd been curled up on the floor in the

middle of the room, immediately raised his head. To describe what he looked like in plain terms, he was a wolf big enough to carry a person on his back. His coat was pure white, and because Zen and the servants meticulously brushed his fur every day, it was shiny, silky, and fluffy. Of course, there was not a single flea on him either.

Sleeping was like a hobby to him, and even now, he let out a big yawn as if to tell Zen that he didn't need lunch yet and to let him sleep a little longer.

However, Zen didn't hold back and sat down next to him, stroking his back and speaking as he gently combed his fingers through his fur. "About what Yohia called me over for—I'm being demoted. I didn't expect to get so lucky. I'm going to be sent to a do-nothing job in the countryside."

Keel opened his eyes wide like his drowsiness had been blown away. Then, to celebrate Zen's good fortune, he nuzzled against him.

Keel was much smarter than the average human, and he completely understood not just Zen's words and personality, but also his position, circumstances, and situation.

Therefore, when Zen asked him, "You're going to come with me, right?" he resolutely wagged his tail against him as if to say, *Of course I will. You don't even have to ask.*

"Thank you! I'll never be lonely no matter where I go so long as I have you." Zen smiled ear to ear and threw his arms around Keel's thick neck.

He lived in this house because he wanted to live with his best friend. Indeed, it was forbidden for Keel to go to the main building.

Zen's mother was severely allergic to animal fur. In spite of that, she was a hopeless person who loved dogs and cats so much that once she was near one, she'd continue burying her dripping, snot- and tear-soaked face into their fur, which was why they had to keep Keel separated from her. Keel himself didn't want to get drenched in snot either.

At any rate, Zen and Keel had already been friends for twelve years. Their relationship had started from a certain event.

Back then, Zen had been a member of the Guards Bureau under the Ministry of Justice's Police Agency and had been given a

secondment as a centurion (the commanding officer who directed a hundred guards on the field). It was the job of the guards to make patrols around the clock and take on criminal cases to protect the public order in the imperial capital. Zen had been enthusiastic since it was rewarding work.

However, the veteran guards who'd worked their way up were cold to Zen. At the time, he'd still been a new bureaucrat who'd passed the civil service exam a mere two years prior. Not to mention that he'd spent the previous year at the Ministry of Works' secretariat—a position considered completely in the back offices and totally unrelated to the kind of fieldwork required at the Guards Bureau. It would've been odd if the officers *had* trusted him.

As a result, they often ignored his orders, and their silence pressed him like they were telling him to act as an obedient figurehead only.

At a loss for what to do, Zen chased after unsolved cases every day by himself. Then, one day, his perseverance with his investigations bore fruit. He succeeded at pinning down a crime syndicate's base of operations that dealt in a forbidden slave trade marketed toward the rich in the imperial capital. It was located at a storehouse in Monk, a satellite city of the imperial capital.

The criminals were an endlessly inhumane bunch who'd kept innocent young girls and boys in cages like animals. Zen couldn't help the anger he'd felt while infiltrating the base.

He found Keel at the same time, locked in a cage. Back then, he hadn't been nearly as big as he was now and had looked like an average large-breed dog you'd find anywhere. Zen thought it strange, wondering why a crime syndicate had gone out of their way to capture him.

However, Keel's intellect had already been higher than a normal human's. When his keen nose detected Zen, who'd sneaked inside, he barked and thrashed loudly inside the cage to distract the watchmen.

Zen used that opportunity to investigate the key locations inside the base, which had been disguised as a storehouse, and, after sneaking back out, managed to draw up a rough blueprint.

Finding the hidden entrance to the basement in particular had been a major discovery. Not only was the room of the organization's leader there, but there was also a secret path connected to the outside. Without that knowledge, they probably would've failed to catch most of the leaders.

He hurriedly came up with a plan, enlisted the help of the other centurions, and succeeded in raiding the storehouse and destroying the base.

Zen rescued many young boys and girls along with Keel. While the kids were returned to their homes—or other protective facilities—Keel had grown deeply attached to Zen. That was why the Leadon family had brought him in.

All's well that ends well—that was what Zen had thought, anyway, but the glorious achievement of exposing the syndicate's illegal slave trade all ended up being credited to the other centurions who'd helped, with his name being completely left out. It was because at the time of the raid, Zen hadn't brought a single guard under his command with him. After all, he'd known that even if he tried, nobody would've believed that he'd uncovered the underground organization's hideout and he would've been scornfully laughed out of the room.

The only reason those other centurions had been willing to help at all was that they were also government officials. Thus, their decision to assist him was purely political. That was characteristic of how the world of government officials worked. They'd reasoned, "I'll tag along if that's what the son of the Leadon family says," or "He'll probably shoot up the ranks right away, so I suppose I should put him in my debt now." (He didn't get promoted at all after that, though!)

When he'd personally reported the incident to the director of the Guards Bureau, he'd been given some choice words. "You're a government official for this ministry, not someone who works his way up the ranks by going to the field. You're supposed to command those under you. Remember that you must do better to control your subordinates and use them well, not show yourself off the whole time and be satisfied with just that."

And Zen had been *so* grateful for that advice.

As he thought back to that time, he said aloud, "In the end, I'm much more comfortable being the one sweating my tail off, not the one pushing people around like I'm high-and-mighty."

That's why I can't get a promotion as a government official, he thought to himself keenly. He stopped stroking his best friend's fur. Keel suddenly looked at him with a knowing gaze.

That gaze said, *That may be your nature, and you may have been like that so far, but I know you're a man who's capable of leading people when you need to.*

Yes, this smart, mysterious, white wolf sometimes stared at Zen as if speaking to him with his mind. He was particularly eloquent today.

Even on the day you saved me, you probably could've persuaded your subordinates if you'd put your mind to it. However, time was of the essence to you. You worried that while you were busy trying to persuade those stubborn veteran guards, innocent young girls and boys would be sold off, right? That's why you immediately took different measures and decided to rely on your fellow centurions. You knew very well that you'd have to hand over the credit, yet you prioritized saving us instead.

More than simply consoling Zen, he was encouraging him. *Don't be so hard on yourself, my friend.*

However, even while he truly appreciated Keel's kindness, Zen shrugged his shoulders. "You're overestimating me."

To distract from how embarrassed he felt, he smiled mischievously and declared, "Keel, you were still a pup back then, but you've grown up so much now!" He once more tousled the fur on his best friend's back and head.

Keel stopped looking at him with that knowing gaze and playfully nipped his foot to get back at him.

You had to scold ordinary dogs if they bit you, even in play, to ensure that you kept your position as master over them; however, such discipline wasn't necessary for this smart white wolf. There was no hierarchy between Zen and him.

As if they'd become innocent kids again, the two roughhoused for

a while.

Hearing a knock on the door, Zen stopped aggressively ruffling Keel's fur. The senior housemaid had come all the way to this separated building to give Zen a message.

"Madam Sharla calls for you, Sir Zen. Please come to the parlor at once."

"My older sister? Okay." Zen hurriedly stood up, and Keel wagged his tail against his back as if urging him to get going.

Sharla, the second daughter of the four Leadon siblings, was quite an intimidating person. She was a great woman who, like Yohia, was someone Zen could never compare to. But if what made his brother scary came from his strictness, then Sharla's was from aggression. Yohia was way better when it came to arguments since he could actually be reasoned with.

Sharla would go so far as to hit Zen with no hesitation, saying that striking her foolish little brother as a punishment was only natural. In other words, she treated him worse than she treated Keel.

"Why is big sister Sharla in the house in the middle of a weekday?" Zen muttered. He couldn't *not* grumble to himself. Unlike someone like him who'd received a demotion, she should have been hard at work carrying out her duties at the palace.

"Ugh, I have a bad feeling about this." Leaving his house, he looked up as he headed to the main house. The housemaid who led the way was, of course, well aware of the situation and pretended to not hear him.

***

"You must be such a powerful man now if you've made your older sister wait like this, Zen," Sharla greeted him snidely.

But I came as soon as you called for me... Zen dejectedly dropped his shoulders at being glared at first thing upon entering the room. Had she expected him to run at full speed inside the mansion?

"Well, that's fine. I will forgive you. I'm in a good mood today."

She haughtily leaned back on the parlor sofa and crossed her legs. She was a refined, slim-figured woman who wore this brand of snobbish arrogance particularly well. However, Zen knew that under her clothes was a body stacked with muscle.

Since childhood, she had excelled at brawls—superior *military prowess*, they'd called it—and he'd heard that she'd received good scores in fencing, sportsmanship, archery, and horsemanship in the Advanced Civil Service Exam.

Despite that, she was cunning—no, *intelligent*—and had astonished her examiner with her knowledge of military strategy and history, which had made her the talk of the town.

After passing the Advanced Civil Service Exam in one try at the age of fifteen (as the top student no less), her gender was taken into consideration and she'd started a career as security for the inner palace—a place that was reserved for women. She was put on what would be called the fast track to success, where she could get acquainted with royalty. In fact, the current grand empress dowager was quite fond of her. At the young age of twenty, she'd been officially appointed the commanding officer of the inner palace's garrison.

When the Pandelsen Revolt broke out, she'd personally enlisted to fight and headed to war. She'd piled up a hefty stack of military feats while serving on the front lines.

After her triumphant return, she'd become the adviser to the bureau director of the Imperial Guard in the Ministry of Military Affairs while in her twenties. That was to say, she'd climbed up to the level of a lieutenant general in command of eighty thousand men.

For this great woman, even a national emergency had become the fair wind to another promotion. How far she'd come was way beyond what could be considered smooth sailing.

That was Sharla, the second daughter of the four Leadon siblings. She was now thirty-five years old and a mother of two.

"I heard the news, Zen," she said. "It seems you're being sent to the countryside."

"I see your ears are sharp." Zen nodded as he sat on the sofa

facing her. Well, rather than being sharp-eared, he judged by the way she was speaking that she'd surely known about it beforehand.

This bad feeling is getting worse, Zen thought to himself. He would never in a million years voice it in front of his scary older sister, though.

Meanwhile, Sharla lamented, "Truly such a cruel notice Yohia gave you. As your kind, older sister, my heart hurts." Her words dripped with insincerity. "I bet you'll be lonely being transferred away from your family."

"Not really, since I have Keel."

She clenched her fist. "You're sad about being separated from your beloved older sister, *right*?"

Intimidated by her threat, he squeaked out an insincere "Yes, very!" He wanted to hurry and run away to the countryside—to somewhere this violent woman wasn't!

"I have a parting present to give to my little brother who cannot bear to part with me," she said shamelessly.

Zen half closed his eyes, bracing himself. "Thank you."

Meanwhile, she turned to the room next door and sharply ordered, "Let her in."

Zen wasn't surprised that someone was there. He'd guessed they had a guest since Sharla had invited him to the parlor instead of her room.

The housemaid from before opened the door and politely led in the guest. Sure enough, it was a woman with a suspicious appearance.

She was obviously a woman by her figure and hair, her long, shiny locks eye-catching and clearly well taken care of. Her face, however, was concealed behind a silk veil. It was like something a woman of nobility would choose to wear in order to travel undercover. Nevertheless, Zen sensed that she was pretty young, probably still only a girl.

"Please come in and have a seat." To Zen's disbelief, Sharla, his haughty older sister, stood to welcome this stranger. He rushed to follow suit.

Who could she be? he wondered, continuing to observe her while

taking care to not look impolite. Soon enough, though, there was no longer any need for that.

Sharla had the guest sit down in the spot where she'd been seated just moments ago and carefully removed her veil.

"Ahh..." A sound escaped Zen's lips at the sight of the guest's face up close. All sense of manners or politeness had completely left him —that was how shocked he was.

Their guest really was a girl. And it was a face he knew well.

Indeed, she was the spitting image of his first love from when they were still teens.





Chapter 2: First Love and the Imperial Court's Affairs

These were memories from fifteen years ago of Zen's impressionable days of boyhood. For the year that Zen had spent challenging the Advanced Civil Service Exam, he'd lived in a student dormitory together with some other examinees. His first love had been among them.

Her name was Aness, and she was a beautiful girl whose bright eyes reflected her strong-minded nature. Her gallant gestures and demeanor, along with her bold, straightforward way of speaking, made menswear suit her especially well. Aness, who was only two years older than Zen, seemed like a very grown-up woman, and he adored her like a big sister almost immediately. His real older sister was a tyrant who was strong but nothing else. Zen, who very much had the personality of a little brother, projected the ideal older sister figure he sought onto Aness, who was both strong *and* kind.

However, she still wasn't actually family, so there were many moments where he'd find himself charmed by her feminine characteristics. Pretty soon after they grew close, those feelings of adoration turned into love.

That was right—out of all one hundred examinees that'd been gathered together from across the empire, Aness was the closest female friend he had.

There were many examinees in their twenties since they were all taking the Advanced Civil Service Exam, which was normal to attempt five or even ten times. It was also normal for people to gain experience as local officials first before taking the exam, so examinees in their thirties weren't uncommon either. If anything, examinees as young as Zen were in the minority, so they often grouped together naturally.

In addition, he had Aness assisting him in his studies every night during the exam. She always teased him, saying things like, "You still haven't finished the assignment? Or are you just addicted to my scoldings?"

Zen had also been young and cheeky back then, so he immediately retorted, "Of course I don't want to get scolded. Why would I get addicted?"

"But don't boys like to be scolded by beautiful women?"

"There might be guys out there who are into that, sure. By the way, it's crazy you can call yourself a beautiful woman with a straight face."

"But you like my face, right?" she said brazenly with a triumphant smile.

That was the kind of person Aness was, and Zen absolutely loved that smile of hers that brimmed with such self-confidence, to the point that it made him speechless.

Of course, her confidence didn't come from nowhere. The examinees attended a lecture at noon every day held by the examiners, and each person tackled the assignment given to them in the evening. These assignments were purely to nourish their abilities. The examiners considered each and every one of the examinees' strengths and weaknesses, and tailored their assignments accordingly. That was why being tutored by someone else or working together like this wasn't prohibited. It was all right if the assignment took a while to solve, and even if you got the wrong answer and had to resubmit, it would have no impact on your final exam grade.

On the other hand, there were other tests of varying lengths called "assessments" held periodically. Those had to be taken by yourself, and the scores you received affected whether you succeeded in the end, so everyone put their all into them. The results were officially announced to the examinees each time.

Aness always beat out the adults on the scoreboard in those assessments and received the top class marks. It was a world of difference from Zen, who was put through the trenches every day just by the assignments alone. There were days he'd scream out

things like, “This one in particular is super hard! I’ve never had to resubmit my answers five times before!”

That evening, he was sitting in the library inside the dorms as the night drew on.

Aness, who’d stayed by Zen’s side, was stifling a laugh at his pathetic state. “The hint is that all examiners are totally evil.” She wouldn’t immediately give him the answer when she was teaching him. She always guided him to solve the assignment himself. As a teacher, she might’ve been even better than the examiners. But that day, the assignment was just such a beast to tackle.

“I still don’t get it even with a hint!” cried Zen. “‘List ten problems of the tuntian system that Marlya established.’ Even when I think about it or look into it, I still don’t know. The examiners will see through me if I try to brute force the answer. I’m done for. I actually thought Marlya’s Tuntian System was a huge success. The only problem might’ve been that it just took time to see any results. No, even so, compared to other military agro-colonial systems...”

Slamming his head down on the desk, Zen couldn’t help whining. He was exposing how weak and incompetent he was in front of his crush—how miserable! “It’s telling me to find ten points of criticism? Isn’t the question itself wrong?!”

He continued to complain, his voice anguished. Then his own words gave him a revelation. Aness smiled broadly.

He asked his “teacher” to confirm what he was thinking. “There was no problem with Marlya’s Tuntian System,” he said. “Is the answer that the question itself is wrong...?”

“That’s right, Zen.”

“There’s gotta be a limit to how evil those examiners are!” he exclaimed.

“However, I do think this was an important assignment for a good-natured person like you,” she said. “Picture yourself as a government official in the future. When your superior gives you incorrect instructions or when the empire is heading down the wrong path, are you going to just obediently keep your head down? You need to question people and the rules more.”

“Ugh...” Zen couldn’t say anything back to Aness’s mature advice.

Man, I can't compete against her, he thought and once more fell upon his desk, his face hot. The night drew on as Zen's sweet mood remained.

The student dormitories were located in one section of the imperial palace and allowed you to indulge in as many candles as you pleased. Zen couldn't help but feel like it was a good excuse to extend his alone time with his crush every night, even if only by one second. At the same time, he felt some guilt.

"I'm sorry for always troubling you, Aness," he said. "I took so long to figure out something this easy. I had you stay with me so late."

"I don't mind. The Leadon family is giving me a nice paycheck. They're helping with my tuition. I couldn't bear to look my parents in the eye after failing the exam a second time," Aness assured him, laughing him off.

Conversely, Zen's heart ached. He'd started living inside the dorms, which was a rule for examinees, and the Leadon family had employed his fellow examinee Aness as a private tutor. Aness's friendship with Zen was the real deal, of course. However, the closest friendships still had their limits. The reason she looked over Zen's studies every night was probably only because it was her job.

Unlike the wealthy Leadon family, Aness had been born into a middle-class family. The Advanced Civil Service Exam took place over the course of a year, so the expenses (shouldered by the examinees themselves) were by no means cheap. Zen had heard that Aness's parents were in debt.

In a self-deprecating manner of speaking, he was using his family's money to buy his sweet alone time with her.

Even so, I just can't stop... I'm such an underhanded person. What part of me is good-natured?

It felt like his heart was going to split in two from these conflicted emotions. In the height of his adolescence, he hadn't understood his own mind, nor just how mad love made a person.

There was one more thing he felt guilty about.

"I can't help but worry you're neglecting your own studies for the time you spend working with me instead," he said. On top of the fact

that geniuses from all over the empire were gathered here, the exam functioned as a high barrier where it was the norm to attempt it several times. You usually didn't have the luxury of helping someone else. Zen was busy enough with himself as it was.

All three of his older siblings, after turning fourteen—the age at which you become a qualified candidate—had challenged the exam and passed as the top student in one try. His family wanted Zen to continue the trend, and the pressure was overwhelming.

Aness was probably in the same boat. Her parents wouldn't stay quiet if she kept failing. Her situation shouldn't differ from his just because she was from an ordinary household. Furthermore, if Zen passed, that would mean he would be stealing one of the limited spots that Aness also desired to be placed in.

Aness was raising a rival and continuing to support him, so to speak. If Zen actually did pass while she just barely failed, he'd be so unbearably sorry.

Despite that, Aness only laughed it off. "Ha ha ha, it's at least five years too early for you to be worrying about me!"

Then, still brimming with confidence, she declared, "I can pass whenever I want. I failed the first two times on purpose."

"What?! This is the first I'm hearing of this!" Zen exclaimed.

"Well, it's because it doesn't sound good for my reputation, and I'll probably get laughed at." Aness smiled sweetly, letting him know that she was telling him because he was Zen.

"Why would you go out of your way to do that...?" Zen couldn't hide his astonishment. It didn't sound like something a person struggling with tuition would say.

However, Aness's response was clear. "Passing the exam is absolutely not the end goal for me. What's important is what's beyond that. Well, I do feel bad for my parents who are scrambling to pay my tuition."

"'Beyond that'...means what exactly?"

"One hundred years after the founding of the Catalan Empire, its economy is still prospering, the troops have unparalleled loyalty and courage, and you could say that its politics are mostly uncorrupted."

"Yeah," Zen agreed. "Those are the results of the hard work and

reign of generations of emperors."

"However, Catalan's golden age was at its founding, and it's been gradually declining ever since. Every bit of data points to that fact." Organizations had to always be developing, continuing to expand production. Just thinking of maintaining the status quo was naive. Beyond stagnation and a decline lay death, and people had a habit of looking away from that obvious fact. But history had grimly proven it true time and time again. Whether it was a nation or a merchant's shop in a town, the only difference was the scale.

That was why Aness declared, "Catalan needs a wise ruler who can rejuvenate this country. It also needs a powerful organization of bureaucrats who can support that person. I want to be one of them. I want to eventually become a chancellor and stand by their side."

That was some big talk, but Zen couldn't laugh since it was coming from Aness. Additionally, male dominance wasn't as strong in Catalan as in other foreign countries. A woman would be recognized if she had the capabilities, and there actually had been a period of time when empresses and female prime ministers had carried the country's politics.

"And no matter how brilliant I am," continued Aness, "this country isn't small enough that just one person can do it alone. I need comrades. People in my generation who've overcome the hurdle of the civil service exam with me would be even better."

This was another one of Catalan's particular traditions. It was well-known that the successful candidates of the Advanced Civil Service Exam would collectively take on the name of the top student, such as the Yohia generation or the Sharla generation. Their connections with their colleagues would be strong and long-lasting. They were undoubtedly the bonds created by living together in the dorms for a year.

"So that's why the exam is secondary, and you're looking for those comrades?" Zen asked.

"That's right. Until the people I've been looking for appeared, I was intending to wait, no matter how many times I had to retake the exam. I'm thinking this will be the year, though. Zen, you're one of them." Aness's eyes always sparkled as if reflecting her strong-

minded nature, and her eyes were shining more than ever now as she looked at Zen.

"It's an honor, but...I think you're overestimating me," Zen mumbled, but the light in her eyes was so bright, he looked away like he was running from her gaze.

As if saying she wouldn't let him, she tightly grasped his hand on top of his desk. "And *you're* being a little too modest."

"But it's me we're talking about here," he protested. "The one you're always teaching."

"The more I teach you, the more you grow," she replied. "I'm betting on your future prospects. I personally think it's fun to teach you. I'm not such a workaholic that I'd stick by your side until this late just for a paycheck."

"I'm having so much trouble over a simple question, you know?"

"It seems you haven't realized it yourself, but the examiners are making their questions especially difficult for you every time. That's how high their expectations are for you."

"I think you're all being blinded by the Leadon family's influence..."

"If that were the case, I would just go to Sir Yohia or Madam Sharla to persuade them directly. You know how I am, Zen!"

"U-Um..."

"It's true that you're still a kid right now," she said. "I get why you can't feel confident. But I'm talking about the future here. If you're aiming to become a government official too, you need to shift your focus and think about the whole world and the country. That's like Marlya's Tuntian System we just talked about, right? It took ten years to create a self-sufficient environment that was able to support the stationing of fifty thousand troops in Fort Curee. But thanks to that, the different races in that region have never again attacked each other. Just like you said, although it took time, it was a huge success. I'm looking at you through that same perspective and am expecting great things from you."

Persuaded by Aness, Zen was now at a loss for words. His crush was expecting so much of him, even if it was only as a comrade. It'd be a lie to say he didn't feel that this was one of the happiest things

for a man.

Still, beyond that, Zen had a complex about being an average person. He harbored the shame of feeling like, in the end, he really was nothing more than the spent tea leaves left behind after his older siblings.

What am I going to do if, after so many years, I don't meet Aness's expectations? What am I going to do if I disappoint her? Negative thoughts whirled around in his head.

It was the delicate time of his life when he was still just fourteen years old.

With Zen ultimately unable to reply, someone came to interrupt their conversation. A third person had visited the small nighttime library that they'd been alone in.

"Hey, Aness, Zen," said the boy. "Working hard as always." He was a handsome, rosy-cheeked boy with a gentle manner and tone of voice. Despite that, he left behind a dignified, refined air in his wake that he couldn't hide. He was another person Zen had met through the examination. If Aness was the girl that he was the closest to, then Heinri was the closest boy. He was also fourteen like Zen. "I brought a late-night snack since I thought you guys would be hungry. Wanna eat together?"

"You're always so thoughtful, Heinri," Aness said brightly.

"Thanks! You're a lifesaver!" Zen exclaimed. *In more ways than one.*

Zen and Aness welcomed their close friend's presence and gratefully dug into the snacks he'd brought. They were sandwiches with plenty of toasted cheese and white sauce. They were hard to eat without getting their hands messy, but Zen and Aness both had a crude side to them. They stuffed their faces without caring. Only Heinri didn't dirty his hands and lips at all. It was as if to show that even when having a meal, this was what true elegance looked like.

That was hardly a surprise. This here was the empire's crown prince. He was the direct descendant of the emperor, a member of the only lineage that could boast the status of nobility in Catalan, which had no aristocracy.

By his own wishes, Heinri was being thoroughly treated as just a

mere examinee, but by all rights, if Zen and the others acted too casually or failed to address him with the proper title, they could be beheaded for disrespect.

It was a custom in this country for sons of the imperial family to take the exam. It was to cultivate their characters by studying hard with the young minds who'd next lead the country's politics. Heinri was also following in his ancestors' footsteps.

"I actually really struggled with today's assignment too," he admitted. "It took me this long to solve it."

"Huh? How hard could it be to make *you* struggle?" Aness asked.

"About that, Aness. The question is 'List ten problems of the tuntian system that Marlya established.'"

"That's the same as mine!" Zen exclaimed. Although he'd had Aness's hint, he strangely felt relief and a sense of comradery with Heinri after learning they'd been taking about the same amount of time to solve it.

However, Heinri continued. "I understood right away that the answer the examiners were seeking was to say the question itself is flawed."

Zen fell silent.

"But I thought I should reconsider again whether the question is actually incorrect. After having a thorough debate with the examiners, I found out that Marlya's Tuntian System has a few areas it could improve."

"I see. Even I didn't think that far," admired Aness. "Way to go, Heinri. You think so too, right, Zen?"

"...*Yeah*."

Having had the stark difference between his and Heinri's abilities laid out in mere seconds, Zen wanted to fall over his desk again.

So this is the level of those who are the youngest to challenge the exam and *pass in one try as the top students. Just like my older siblings.* He couldn't help viewing Heinri with jealousy and envy. At the same time, he remembered what Aness had just said.

"Until the people I've been looking for appeared, I was intending to wait, no matter how many times I had to retake the exam. I'm thinking this will be the year, though."

She'd said that Zen was one of those people. In other words, she'd found at least a few other examinees who fulfilled that role this year.

Heinri is definitely first on the list. On top of having an even sharper mind than Aness, he was next in line to become emperor. If she could have Heinri become the ruler she desired to revitalize the country, and if she became his like-minded confidant, then there was nothing more she could hope for.

A future like that is rather pragmatic... While Zen sent Heinri envious looks, he was aware of how the other boy's eyes followed Aness's face with a heat behind them. Aness was a beautiful, wise, and good-natured girl who'd even turned her boldness into a point of attraction. She was a kind of idol to the other examinees in their generation. Heinri, also madly in love with her, was no exception.

Zen could imagine that he'd propose eventually, and Aness, not finding the idea entirely unattractive, would take command through direct imperial rule as the empress instead of as a minister. The two would develop the country as a couple... That kind of future was probably not just his delusion.

Does this count as love between different social classes, I wonder... Zen wasn't bold enough to go to war over one woman with the man who was both his close friend and future emperor. If anything, it was in his character to support their romance. That was why he had to forever lock away these feelings for Aness in his heart.

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To Zen, having a secret love wasn't actually a bad thing at all. The year he spent with Aness and Heinri was sometimes sweet, sometimes sad, and the best days of his life. The hellish Advanced Civil Service Exam was the highlight of his youth.

Then that time fantastically filled with both pain and delight came to an abrupt end.

Just when the yearlong exam was reaching its end, the emperor suddenly died. He'd only been on the throne for a mere five years.

Rumors said that not only was he born with a weak constitution, but he'd also been tormented by overwork. Because of that, Heinri didn't have the luxury of completing the exam anymore. He had to succeed his father at once and ascend to the throne.

He took that as an opportunity to propose to Aness and take her to the inner palace. The future Zen had predicted had become a reality. That didn't mean their friendship would die there, however.

Zen stayed behind and continued his exam. After he just barely passed, Aness and Heinri prepared a very private celebration for him.

The couple was swamped with work, yet they'd make time to invite him over for dinner even after he started his career in the Ministry of Works. There were also times when they'd travel incognito to visit him.

They could only meet once or twice a month at most, but for Zen, burdened by his hectic work as a government official, the moment's leisure he spent together with them enriched his heart.

A year passed, and another. He hadn't made any progress toward his goal of a promotion since he was juggled around from post to post. Still, his two friends did not treat him any differently.

"You don't have to rush, Zen," Aness assured him.

"My wife told you to think about the whole world and the country, didn't she?" Heinri chimed in.

They always warmly looked after him.

"We think you'll eventually become our prime minister," Heinri continued.

"Lord Yohia got his place at the Ceremonial Affairs Bureau at the age of twenty-eight, so you'll probably reach prime minister by forty," said Aness. "We just have to work hard together. That's all. It'll happen before you know it."

Zen wanted to do them proud.

However, Aness and Heinri died in an accident. It was an unforgettable day—the year 113, December 20th on the imperial calendar.

The incident happened in the middle of an imperial visit to inspect

the northern border's line of defense and the tuntian system. It turned out that the couple's room during their stay at Fort Curee had been poorly ventilated. Gas poisoning from the lit brazier was the cause of death. That room was specially used only for visits from the emperor, so it was determined that this accident couldn't have been avoided because it hadn't been used in twenty years. Heinri had been twenty-five years old, and Aness twenty-seven.

After that day, Zen completely lost his ambition. In order to not bring shame upon his family, though, he pushed his emotions down and continued to focus on work.

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That was why the girl sitting across from Zen right now couldn't be Aness.

Zen, Sharla, and this mysterious girl were in the parlor of the Leadon family's main residence.

His arrogant older sister had summoned Zen to give him a "goodbye present" for his demotion to the countryside. She was currently acting like the girl's guard, standing behind the sofa.

The twenty-nine-year-old Zen was looking at this young lady whom he could've mistaken for a teenage Aness. They were separated by a low table. This situation was extremely confusing.

He hesitated. "There's no way..." For his first love to show up looking over ten years younger could only be possible with magic, and even *with* magic, reviving the dead was impossible. There was just one possibility he could think of.

"It is exactly as you've guessed, Sir Zen. I am not my mother," said the mysterious girl, placing a hand on her chest. Her voice was like Aness's too, but she was a different person.

"This is Her Highness Elysia—the child left behind by the late former emperor and empress," announced Sharla. She spoke in a high-handed tone of voice appropriate for introducing an imperial princess.

I mean, I knew that they had a daughter... The couple had told him about Aness's pregnancy a while after Zen had started at the

Ministry of Works. When he'd calculated, he stopped thinking once he realized that in the middle of their civil service exam, they'd...

It was a slightly bitter memory.

However, this was of course the first time he was meeting Princess Elysia. Gruntling government officials had no right to be seeking an audience with royalty, who'd been reared with great care deep inside the inner palace. That applied to Zen himself, no matter how close he'd been to the royal couple. The rules were strict.

But it made sense for Sharla to know her. She'd originally worked as security in the inner palace, and she was currently the lieutenant general of the imperial guards. It was within her power to be acquainted with the princess and bring her here.

"My mother and father talked about you often, ever since I was a child," said Princess Elysia, smiling gracefully. "I have looked forward to the day I could make your acquaintance."

She should be fourteen this year... Man, they really raised her to be just like her.

But upon careful observation, her expressions were slightly childlike compared to the sixteen-year-old Aness he'd known. Also, her demeanor was calm and gentle, making her feel somewhat refined. That was probably Heinri's genes at work. It was unlike Aness, who'd been a bit rough and masculine.

"It is an honor to meet you too," Zen replied. "I would most certainly be very pleased if we could spend time reminiscing. I could tell you stories of the late emperor and empress from their examinee days while you share about their lives in the inner palace, but..."

Even a child could deduce that the princess hadn't gone out of her way to come here just for some tea. Sharla explained the circumstances in her place.

"Her Highness's life is currently in danger."

Zen's expression grew more serious. Anger welled up inside of him before his astonishment. Princess or not, Elysia was still a fourteen-year-old girl and the child his best friends had left behind. Who on earth was plotting to murder her? He could never allow that.

"This is not something I should be saying in your presence," he said, "but is the one scheming to end Her Highness's life the current

emperor? Or perhaps Her Majesty the Empress? Or His Excellency the new Prime Minister?”

“All of the above.” Sharla’s shoulders dropped sadly, and Zen gritted his teeth. The current emperor, Jemma II, was Heinri’s brother, six years younger than him. The empress, meanwhile, was still only twenty-one, but she was known to be adept at trickery like her father.

That aforementioned father was a sly government official who’d once been a part of the Imperial Household Agency—an agency that was on a steady, degrading path to corruption—in the Ministry of Rites. This man had no special achievements to speak of, but he’d suddenly risen to the status of prime minister four years ago upon his daughter becoming the empress.

There were rumors that said Heinri’s and Aness’s deaths had not been an accident either—that it had been an assassination planned by these three. Zen didn’t put much stock in such talk, but he also couldn’t disregard it completely. After all, Fort Curee’s commander back then had been a distant relative of this prime minister.

In any case, it was disrespectful to talk about the emperor like that, but still, the rumors couldn’t be fully dismissed. These people were always at the center of some shady business. And this time, it was not conjecture. His older sister was certain they were planning to assassinate Elysia.

“My subordinates have already caught several assassins who’ve tried to kill Elysia under the guise of accidents. They kept their mouths shut till the very end about where their orders came from, but it’s obvious who they belonged to. If a neighboring country were able to employ a spy skilled enough to infiltrate the inner palace, there’d likely be no reason to bother targeting the princess instead of the emperor. It makes more sense to assume that the prime minister made the arrangements, and the emperor and empress guided them inside.”

Zen nodded to everything she said, and Sharla grimly continued her story.

“It will soon be five years since the current emperor’s marriage, but the empress shows no signs of pregnancy. All three of them

have started to become impatient."

Unlike Heinri, the present emperor had an inclination for debauchery. He'd had many concubines in the past, but not a single one had gotten pregnant. Because of that, there were rumors that the problem was congenital on his part. If that was the case, then the chances of having a child with the empress were low.

"This may be discourteous to say too," Zen started, "but that means Lady Elysia, who holds the right to inherit the crown, is a constant reminder of that to the prime minister."

"Precisely." His sister nodded this time. If something happened to Jemma II, then the throne would be Elysia's, and the empress and prime minister would lose their power. No, even if Jemma II remained healthy, sooner or later, his qualifications to be emperor would be called into question if he couldn't sire an heir. The matter of the next successor was of great importance to the country. Also, if Elysia were to find a husband and have a child, Jemma II wouldn't be able to avoid the ensuing pressure from the other royals and influential courtiers who would tell him to graciously abdicate the throne, immediately making Elysia the empress and her child the crown prince or princess.

"The prime minister is also working desperately to establish a party of supporters, but he has many enemies."

The Leadon family could be considered one of those political opponents. The courtiers were able to engage in healthy competition with one another since the government remained relatively free of corruption, so if anything, this man—who'd become prime minister without any achievements under his belt—was a disease gnawing at that healthy tradition. It was natural that he'd be opposed on all sides.

"On the other hand, no one in the royal family aside from Lady Elysia is of any concern to the prime minister's party."

Currently, the second person in line to inherit the throne was the infant cousin of Heinri and the present emperor, and the third was their near elderly uncle. At the very least, Jemma II's position wouldn't be threatened until the second in line grew up and had a child. If Elysia was killed, then the prime minister's party could

comfortably maintain their status for about twenty years.

The group was plotting that, if they could postpone the threat for long enough, they could firmly establish that party they were currently struggling to assemble. They were also hoping that the matter of Jemma II's successor could be resolved with time.

"Therefore, the prime minister's party will certainly continue to plot Her Highness's assassination. The Leadon family, as guards of this empire, can absolutely not let this happen."

"I understand," Zen agreed before turning his attention to Elysia. She'd been smiling silently the whole time they'd been talking. It was very unlikely that she didn't understand how dire her circumstances were; even so, she seemed to pay no mind to the bloody talks that concerned her life. She maintained her unwavering, elegant smile and waited until she was needed.

This means that at this young age, she already understands what it means to be royalty. As expected of Aness and Heinri's daughter. Zen was amazed. Jemma II had already been drowning in an indulgent life of debauchery by the time he was fourteen. It had made the sensible courtiers despair.

While Elysia emitted an aura of dignity and grace that was fitting for a princess, she began to broach the main reason for her visit. "I have therefore come with a request for you, Sir Zen."

Zen had a rough idea of what it would entail. He nervously urged her to continue.

"I have heard that you're being transferred to Cylin, a state that is a great distance from here. I would like to follow you and have you shelter me."

I knew it. That was where he'd figured the conversation was heading. He would've put his head in his hands in distress had he not been in front of the princess.

Of course I really want to help her, but there are way too many things to be worried about here...

Who would be taking care of her daily necessities? If he took her along with a whole gaggle of attendants, they'd surely stand out. It would completely defeat the purpose of sheltering her in the countryside. And that was only the start of his concerns.

He sent Sharla a dubious look. She responded, "Her Highness will be disguised. We'll have her pose as your daughter."

Are you for real?! He hadn't expected to go *that* far to shelter her. Furthermore, he thought it was especially reckless to have her act as his child. For one, it was obviously discourteous to pretend to be the father of a princess, but there was another problem.

"You may not be aware, sister, but I am a man, you know? There's no way I can live under the same roof with a lady of marriageable age!"

"Ha ha ha! As if you'd have the courage to get Her Highness pregnant."

Zen fell speechless. She'd said it so bluntly (and in front of Elysia herself, no less)!

Sharla is hopeless. There's something wrong with her. She'd always been an extreme person.

Instead, he appealed to Elysia. "Oh, Your Highness. Please excuse my sister, but you do not want to pretend to be my daughter, right?"

"Please call me Elysia from now on, 'father.'" The princess beamed at him in response. Zen was once again at a loss for words. He could tell she was teasing him by the way she kept giggling. She might have looked like an innocent girl, but this princess definitely had a mischievous side. She'd gotten that trait from Aness.

After she laughed for a while, her serious face returned. "I have told you that my father and mother talked a lot about you, correct? They said you were a sincere, rational person who was absolutely not the type to engage in lawless conduct. I also believe that, so I am asking this of you."

"But even I might succumb to temptation at some point, you know? Are you not afraid?"

"In that case, I am already prepared to say it was the fault of my lack of judgment."

"We will be under one roof. I have no intention of doing so, but I might accidentally see you while you are changing."

"Hee hee. Oh, father, you're so cute." She once again teased him as she chuckled.

Zen was speechless. But he saw now—contrary to her sweet looks and manners, this princess had guts. It really was Aness's blood flowing in her veins. Protesting any more than this would just result in an endless back-and-forth, with her having a counter for every argument he attempted.

"I understand. If Your Highness is that prepared, then I'll also accept my fate."

"You don't need to speak so formally to your daughter, father." As if they were already kicking off their familial relationship, Elysia's speech became just a bit less formal.

Zen smiled awkwardly. "O-Oh... You're right, Elysia." He tried to act the way a father would to his real daughter. No matter how hard he tried, though, it was awkward!

Not only have I never been a parent before, I've never even been married...

He'd never imagined that he'd face an ordeal like this before even reaching his thirties.

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In order to prepare for the trip, Elysia headed to another room with the housemaid. Sharla and Zen stayed behind in the parlor waiting for her.

"You're mean, sister. I didn't think your farewell gift would be a princess," Zen muttered accusingly, his inner complaints spilling out.

Is that how lonely she thinks I'm going to be? Or did she think I'd be happy to live with the child Aness left behind? Whichever it is, leave me out of it!

Sharla grew offended. "We're planning to grant you plenty of money from our confidential funds for the princess's care, you know?"

"Thank you, sister! That's an amazing farewell gift!"

"Hmph, you certainly changed your tune quickly." She snorted at him for jumping to conclusions, but she didn't get angry beyond that. Granted, that gift was probably not just for Zen's sake. It was likely to make sure the *princess* wouldn't struggle to get by.

"Meanwhile, we will cooperate with our father and Yohia to fix things around the palace so Her Highness can safely return. We will create an encirclement and prevent the prime minister's influence from ruining the imperial court. That being said, it'll probably take more than a few years."

They weren't the only ones who needed time. The same went for the prime minister's party. In the meantime, someone had to keep Elysia safe.

"Zen, we sincerely implore you to take care of Her Highness."

"Okay, I understand," he said. "I'm already a retiree, so I'll live with the princess and take it easy in the countryside."

"Good," Sharla said with a rare, carefree smile. "For a short time in her life, Princess Elysia should also be allowed to leave that cramped palace and let her hair down." This woman seemed to walk around as the personification of violence; however, signs of her fondness for Elysia were peeking through—a fondness that couldn't be explained only by the fact that the girl was a princess.

Soon after that smile, Sharla returned to her previous arrogant expression. "I think you've realized it already, but sheltering Her Highness was the main purpose of sending you to the countryside. I've discussed this matter with Yohia, and we came to the conclusion that this was the best course of action under the circumstances."

Zen *had* been thinking that this demotion was extreme even as a disciplinary measure. So there really was a catch. "I'm not particularly bitter about it. I think it's probably true that there are people openly doubting my competence, so I had to be disciplined in some way. I imagine it's killing two birds with one stone."

"Of course you'd have no reason to be bitter. Deep inside, you were sick and tired of working in the ministries, right? You wanted to go to an easy post if you could. That's why I subtly put the idea in Yohia's mind and granted your wish. So it's killing *three* birds with one stone. I'd like you to show your sister some gratitude for her impeccable strategy."

"Amazing. You see through everything." Zen shrank in on himself, deeply aware of what a formidable person she was. She was smart but also had good intuition. It was better than Yohia's.

"Write some letters every once in a while after you arrive. Our father and mother will likely miss you."

With those final words, Sharla moved to leave the parlor.

"I'll write to everyone, including you, of course," he said to her back, those words infused with various feelings of gratitude.

However, Sharla only shrugged her shoulders and said nothing in return.

She's embarrassed. Zen's intuition wasn't as acute as his sister's, but he could at least imagine what her face looked like right now.

Chapter 3: A Father and Daughter's First Encounter

They left the mansion at dawn, quietly exiting the imperial capital before too many people were awake. They'd be riding a carriage to get to Cylin.

The one-horse carriage was small and merely a cart covered by a curtain—not a passenger car—but Sharla had made sure it was good and solid. There was a reason she'd deliberately picked a simple wagon for the princess to ride in. The empire took pride in how orderly the areas surrounding the highways were, but they still weren't completely free of bandits. Looking rich wouldn't do them any good. Of course, Her Highness had also consented. She wanted to get used to living as a commoner as soon as possible.

Elysia—who'd been designated as Zen's daughter—and Zen's actual best friend, Keel, were loaded into the cart. Packed in along with their luggage and daily necessities they'd be using along the way, they were off, headed straight to the south.

Unfortunately, the sky was cloudy and the sun didn't celebrate their departure, but Zen was in a great mood.

Ezwaz Highway was wide and stretched down all the way through the southern half of the empire. Its stone paving was well maintained, allowing the carriage's wheels to travel smoothly over it, and there were many trees planted on both sides of the road, softening the chilly autumn breeze. It was just what you'd expect from the country's major highway.

Thoroughly maintaining its transportation network was actually Catalan's national characteristic. Roads of all sizes were properly paved with stone and spanned the nation. Like the veins that run through a human body, those roads carried out an incredibly important purpose. The smooth distribution of goods enriches a

country, and a strong nation must be able to quickly mobilize troops.

Journeys were truly easy since there was an inn town about every three to four kilometers—if you weren't picky about the size.

"Is this your first time leaving the imperial capital, Your Highness?" Zen asked while facing forward in the driver's seat.

Behind him, Elysia was playing with Keel. "You're using my title again, 'father.'"

"But no one else is around..."

"If you don't hurry and get used to it, our secret might be blown one day."

Zen hesitated. "You're right." Pretending like he was the princess's father was a lot for his heart to take. He had wanted to keep it to an absolute minimum if possible. It seemed the princess wanted to always keep up appearances, though.

"I-Is this your first time leaving the imperial capital, E-Elysia...?" he corrected himself, although still awkward.

"Hee hee. That's not a question a father would ask his daughter."

"True... Though, I mean, we probably have some special family circumstances?"

"I suppose we could go with that," she said thoughtfully. "That's right. This is my first time leaving the imperial capital."

"Does everything around you look unusual, then?" He was offering to answer any questions she had, urging her not to hold back if she was curious about something.

"Thank you, father. However, Keel is just so cute to me right now." She was busy, preoccupied by the large white wolf who was bigger than her. Indeed, there wasn't much in the passing scenery that was stranger than Keel's existence.

Keel's favorite activity was sleeping, and he held back his yawns as he dutifully indulged her desire to play.

"It seems you already knew how to drive a carriage, father?"

Many bureaucrats enjoyed horseback riding in the imperial capital (the skill was also included in the civil service examinations), but there weren't many who could drive a carriage.

"Well, way back when I was assigned to the Land Transport Bureau, I normally worked in the office but one time they actually

sent me to receive on-site training by a merchant caravan that was traveling to Utanahi. They normally would've taken care of everything while I got to kick back and relax, but..."

"But...?"

"It seems I just didn't look like a government official, so the veterans in the caravan would shout at me for slacking off. They made me do all kinds of chores."

"I wish I could've seen your face back then. Hee hee."

"But you know, I'm not the type who can just sit around and do nothing anyway. I purposefully didn't correct their misunderstanding and just kept working. I learned a whole lot thanks to that. Learning to drive was a good experience from back then."

"I see. That does sound exactly like how my parents described you."

Zen paused. "What did Aness and Heinri say?" As a formality, he should've addressed them by their titles, but he decided not to after a short hesitation.

"They said, 'He quickly gets the short end of the stick since he's too good-natured.'"

"Ha ha ha... I can't deny that."

Even Keel howled in agreement, and Zen smiled wryly.

Meanwhile, as Elysia giggled to herself, she said, "But I like that part about you—"

"Huh?"

"—was what my mother told me."

Zen's surprise soured into a frown. "Teasing an adult... What a bad girl you are."

Still, having companions with you on a trip was nice. It was never boring.

Rapid Express Messengers (rare elites who'd successfully tamed pegasuses) would reach Todd Village in three days. For an ordinary carriage, the distance took about half a month. If Zen had both Keel and Elysia with him, then the journey would probably be full of smiles. A percentage of them might be wry smiles, granted, but that

was fun too in its own way.

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"Let's stay the night there." Zen pointed at the large inn town up ahead to Elysia, who was in the cart.

They were in no rush to arrive at their destination, so to be safe, they'd decided to find a place to stay before evening. Doing so was an inviolable rule he'd learned from the caravan.

There was a knack to choosing lodgings. You had to consider the size of your own carriages, find which places could accommodate them, and then pick the most reasonably priced inn from those options. You wanted something within your means that wasn't too expensive nor too cheap.

His older siblings were of course providing Zen with plenty of funds for Elysia, so if they felt like it, they could stay at a high-class inn fit for a princess. However, that was contrary to Elysia's wish to quickly adapt to commoner life.

Given that, he put his experience at the Land Transport Bureau to good use and selected a suitable inn.

Their room was a double room on the third floor. The sight of a giant white wolf would give the people at the inn a heart attack, so they were going to quietly let him through the window later.

"It's clean," Elysia praised the room. She'd entered first. For a princess born and raised in the palace, this room should have been astonishingly narrow and shabby to her.

It seems she notices the positives instead of grumbling about the negatives... This was an indispensable virtue that couldn't have come from good upbringing alone. Zen was impressed.

He put down the luggage and opened the window's wicket gate. Then he looked behind him and confirmed once again with Elysia, who'd sat down on one side of the bed. "Are you really okay with staying in the same room?"

"Oh, it's much too late for second thoughts." She giggled as if Zen had said something funny. "Keel will be coming later, so I don't think you should be too concerned, father."

"I mean, yeah, but..."

"Are you shy about me seeing you sleep?"

"That's my line!"

"Then that's fine," Elysia declared in a graceful yet confident tone of voice. "I'm used to it."

Indeed, if she was royalty, then there was probably always an attendant keeping watch in her bedroom.

I think it's a different story when they're both women, though...

While Zen was thinking to himself, someone knocked on the door. The two stopped talking.

A servant boy had brought a bucket of hot water and a hand towel. This was a common service at inns of this standard. Instead of a bath, guests could wipe their sweat with the damp towel, and even use the pail to wash dirty things.

The princess was, of course, not familiar with this practice and seemed curious. Upon Zen's explanation, her eyes sparkled. "I see."

Despite the fact that it was almost winter, one did still sweat. A young girl would probably want to wash herself as soon as possible.

She'd have to take off her clothes, so he told her, "I'm going to head downstairs first, so please make yourself comfortable here." He was going to be considerate and leave the room. The first floor was a dining room, and dinner was provided at an extra cost.

"Oh, come now. We're family now, so you don't have to care about modesty."

"Even a normal father and daughter would care when it comes to this." He'd never been a parent before, but he imagined that was probably true.

As if running away, Zen left the room.

What should I do... She might be partially teasing me, but she should be more cautious. Maybe it was because members of the royal family might not be concerned about privacy or other people looking at them. They were all raised while being waited upon by attendants, looked after as a matter of course. Even helping with changing clothes and baths were the attendants' job.

He'd never thought about things like this with Heinri, but that might be because they'd both been men. Or maybe if they'd shared

the same room, Heinri would've hung around naked, not caring in the slightest about being seen.

Am I going to be okay living with the princess? His only consolation was that Elysia was still a fourteen-year-old girl. Had she been an older woman, he probably would've been so flustered that his heart would have given out.

Then again, if that'd been the case, he likely wouldn't have been requested to shelter her by himself in the first place.

All right, I'm a father now, so I'll discipline my daughter. I'm sure that's what every father has to do, even if she thinks he's annoying, he reasoned, chasing away his anxieties. If his sister caught wind of what he was thinking, she'd probably sneer at him, saying, "Why is a fake father like you talking like you know anything?" or "Get a grip!"

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In the meantime, Elysia had been left behind in the room. It was her first time washing herself like this, so she didn't do a good job at wringing out the towel. She scrubbed her body while it was still sopping wet. At least she'd practiced how to change her clothes in advance, so she could take them off by herself.

It was unfortunate that there was no bath, but it felt good just to wash with a towel soaked in hot water. It was a fresh experience.

As she did, her thoughts flew back to Zen.

Hee hee. He probably thinks I'm such an immodest daughter.

Royalty or not, there were things she should be shy about. That was how she'd been disciplined. The borderline suggestive words and actions she repeatedly used toward Zen were definitely not because she wasn't cautious enough. She knew what she was doing.

He reacts to all of my jokes. It makes me wanna tease him.

Of course, she could do this only because she had built this trust early on that it wouldn't make him awaken to any strange inclinations. She was also taking advantage of his generosity as an adult. He would never get furious at her no matter how much she kidded around. In society, a man would normally get deeply upset if a young girl gave him some lip, but Zen didn't have that cheap sort

of pride.

He really is just as mother said. And he's just as I imagined—no, he's beyond what I imagined.

She'd already realized that after having met him just a mere day ago.

That was why she was so happy. She herself was aware of just how over the moon she was.

If Zen hadn't been the one with her, she probably wouldn't have been this happy. Not even if she'd finally escaped the dull human relationships she'd dealt with back in the inner palace.

Oh, Sir Zen... Long have I awaited the day I could finally meet you...

Holding the towel to her chest, she reflected on her eight years of longing.

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Actually, although it'd been from afar, Elysia had caught a glimpse of Zen before. It was back when she was still six years old.

Her mother, Aness, had invited Zen to the inner palace for lunch. It was a common belief that men were prohibited there, but in reality the rules weren't as strict as all that. The inner palace was a private imperial villa where His Majesty and his family lived; if the emperor had a son, he'd naturally live together with them.

Therefore, in order for the emperor to invite personal guests, men could come and go up until the second gate. Male soldiers stood guard as well.

Aness and Zen were having their luncheon under the square gazebo in the front garden, right before the second gate. Elysia could see them from a window in the inner palace's main hall.

"That's Zen Leadon. He's Aness's best friend as well as mine," her father, Heinri, had told her as he watched with her. "He's also the younger brother of Sharla Leadon, whom you've grown fond of."

"That's the man from the rumors..." As she observed him with great interest, he left some strong impressions on Elysia, like how he had a great smile and looked kind.

The inner palace had many ladies who took care of her, but she didn't think they were necessarily kind. If they did smile, it looked fake. It was obligatory or mechanical. The innocent mind of a child could sense the lack of heart behind it.

Right now, her mother had a carefree smile on her face in front of Zen. Back then, her face almost always looked scary or displeased, so Elysia was happy to see her beloved mother's rare smile.

It was "politics" that were troubling her mother, and Elysia had yet to understand what "politics" were. Hence, she couldn't do anything to help. It frustrated Elysia despite her young age.

However, thanks to Zen, she could see that her mother's heart was experiencing a temporary respite.

"I think she likes Sir Zen," Elysia said.

Her father hesitated for a moment. "Yeah. She loves him."

"But you like Sir Zen too, father, don't you? Why don't you eat together with them?"

"That's right. I do like him, but today, I don't want to get between them. I want Aness to smile from the bottom of her heart." As he answered, a pained shadow came over her father's expression, anguished in an indescribable way that she'd never seen before.

"Aness has always loved Zen," he said. "Not me." His face was dreadfully gloomy. He had just happened to let that slip, likely thinking that Elysia was too young to understand. "However, Aness chose politics over love. Even knowing that, I thought it was good enough so long as I could be with her. I stole Aness from Zen. I was born as the crown prince—it was for that reason alone that I could take her away." He told her so much, it was as if he were confessing to his sins. He then gasped and clamped his mouth shut. It was because he saw the look in Elysia's eyes and her expression. He remembered how exceedingly intelligent his young daughter was.

Indeed, although national politics were still difficult to grasp, Elysia could correctly understand the meaning behind her father's words and his complex relationship with her mother and Zen.

"Forget what I just said... Do not tell anyone."

Elysia nodded earnestly at her father's pleas that were edged with a desperation you wouldn't expect to be directed at his daughter.

Although he still felt awkward, he was once more impressed by his smart, beloved daughter. He murmured, "Aness and I had long been thinking that Zen would become our prime minister. However, that might be incorrect. He may become *your* prime minister instead."

"My...prime minister?"

"That's right. It hadn't occurred to me at all until now, but it feels right the more I think about it." As if agreeing with his own words, he nodded repeatedly. And then he announced as though he were making a prediction: "Remember this, Elysia. If you're in trouble one day, I'm sure Zen will help you. I don't know a more trustworthy person than him."

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Elysia had never once forgotten her late father's words. That was why every time her parents brought up Zen after that, which was often, she'd listened to them eagerly. She was way more interested in his stories than before. Zen's presence within Elysia's heart grew by the day.

Each time she remembered his happy smile the first time she'd seen him and compared it to the new stories about the ever-reliable Zen, her feelings toward him grew stronger. Her impression of him was changing ever so slightly.

She believed that she'd meet him properly one day, a day that she'd eagerly awaited.

It was truly like a young girl who'd fallen in love.

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The next morning, Elysia broke out into a fever.

After she'd wiped down her body with a sopping wet towel, put clothes on her half-dried skin, eaten dinner, slept, and then woken

up, she'd completely come down with a cold.

"It's still autumn and all, but it's already really cold in the mornings," Zen comforted her, but Elysia knew that wasn't the problem here. She was an imperial princess whose everyday needs had always been taken care of by the court attendants. She realized now how far she was from being independent. She couldn't even properly wash herself with a cloth, and she was extremely ignorant about how the world worked. She wanted to crawl into a hole. Even Keel was looking at her worriedly.

"I'm sorry, Keel and 'father,'" she raspily entreated them from under the covers. "Don't worry about me. Let's get going."

Zen only shook his head. "No, we aren't in any hurry. Let's stay here until you're all better." He then said, "For every day that we delay our arrival, that's one more day I get to skip out on work. It's great for me." Of course it was a joke to console Elysia so that she didn't feel bad.

He really is such a nice person... Because of her weakened heart, she really could feel the warmth of his character.

In addition, he brought all kinds of things from the dining room, dabbed her forehead with a cool towel, boiled water for her to drink, peeled an apple for her in hopes she could eat it even while lacking an appetite, and nursed her the whole time. However, the apple's wedge-shaped cuts were so misshapen.

"The truth is—although it wasn't to your extent—I was also raised unaware of the ways of the world," he admitted, seemingly ashamed. "I've barely ever cooked before."

She'd completely viewed Zen as a grown-up, but after learning another side of him, she felt an even deeper connection. Also, seeing Zen looking bashful with his misshapen apple slices was a bit cute.

Seeing Keel sink his teeth into a round apple and skillfully leave behind its core restored some of Elysia's appetite. The apple slices didn't taste like much, but in her heart she felt that they'd been delicious.

As noon approached, her high fever worsened. Just as she was feeling uncomfortable from all the sweat, Zen suggested he wipe it

off for her and went to fetch a bucket of water.

Elysia removed her shirt and turned her back to Zen. He thoroughly wrung out a towel and wiped her down.

He was a completely different person from the one he'd been yesterday, who'd panicked from just a bit of teasing. It was only her back and all, but he was completely calm in front of a shirtless young girl. He was acting like a great father.

If anything, it was Elysia who couldn't act like his daughter. Feeling the size of a man's hand rubbing a towel on her back made her heart race. This time, she was the one blushing.

As she wiped her front side by herself, she was very concerned about whether her back was red too. If Zen knew what she was feeling, she'd die from embarrassment.

"Let's change your clothes while we're at it," Zen said. They were in the middle of their journey and had nothing like extra pajamas. Zen took out a change of clothes that'd been meant for their arrival, and Elysia eagerly put them on. She once again stretched out on the bed. She felt refreshed, but her fever persisted.

"How do you feel?"

"A little cold..."

"I see. Keel, can I leave it to you?"

Keel took up his given task and jumped up onto the bed. The bed was suddenly crowded with him lying there, but embracing the white wolf was so nice and warm. Her chills went away.

While she felt relief, Zen got ready to go out. "I think a big town like this should have a pharmacy or two. I'll go looking."

"I keep causing you trouble..."

"Family members shouldn't care about modesty, Elysia," Zen scolded her with a smile. Elysia decided to depend on him.

"Also, I've worked in the Pharmaceutical Bureau before, so I'm familiar with medicines," he continued. "Well, I say that, but I was actually in the General Affairs Office, so I'm nothing compared to the people who actually did the real work."

As he joked around, he went out to buy medicine.

He really is reliable like mother and father said...

Elysia could relax and wait.

That might be why she'd fallen asleep before she knew it. Dazed from her nap and fever, she buried her face in Keel's silky fur.

"Are you still sleeping, Your Highness? We'll save the medicine for later, then..."

Elysia heard Zen's voice while her eyes were closed. It sounded like he'd come back while she was sleeping. She was a little disgruntled that he'd once again referred to her by her title, but she was so addled by the drowsiness and lethargy that came with her fever. Objecting to it was a pain.

"*It looks like she's not deeply asleep. Maybe it'd be better to wake her up and give her the medicine?*" she heard another voice say, her eyes still closed.

Had he brought someone with him? Her interest was piqued, but checking was a pain too.

"No, if she were truly suffering, then she wouldn't be asleep. Let's leave her be."

"*So you're saying that if she's able to sleep at all, then it's better to not disturb her. I understand, then.*"

Both voices were soothing. They conveyed to her that they were very concerned for her. That might be why she once again drifted off into a deep sleep.

Chapter 4: The Start of Their Countryside Life

Even with a few hiccups along the way like Elysia's illness, the three of them safely reached Nazalf Prefecture in Cylin. Considering that this was the princess's first journey ever and she'd only had Zen and Keel with her, it'd actually gone pretty well. Similarly, this was the first time in Zen's life that he'd been so far away from the imperial capital.

They reached the prefecture on October 24th, about three weeks after they'd departed the imperial capital, though there was still a ways to go before they made it to Todd Village itself. Even so, in the world of government officials, it was common practice to go and greet the prefectural governor as soon as possible.

Catalan's administrative districts were defined like this: Settlements with a population below one thousand were called "villages"; those with less than three thousand were "towns"; populations of less than ten thousand were "cities"; and anywhere with a population above that was a "metropolis." Additionally, a "prefecture" encompassed a region that centered around one major city (or metropolis). A local government official (appointed by the emperor) called a "prefectural governor" ruled over the prefecture.

Incidentally, a state was made up of multiple prefectures. The state of Cylin held three prefectures and was located at the empire's southernmost point. Nazalf Prefecture, the place they were moving to, was at the southernmost point of *that*, located way out in the sticks. Still, the prefectural governor surely held tremendous power in that region. There was no telling how Zen would be persecuted if he got on their bad side.

The three of them passed through the north gate of Nazalf City, a city with a population of four thousand six hundred, before noon.

Zen left Keel to watch over the carriage and, with a nervous look on his face, headed off with Elysia to pay the governor a visit.

Nazalf's prefectural governor was named Cummel Houck. He was still young at forty-two years old and was a talented bureaucrat who'd formerly been a member of the Ministry of Military Affairs' head office. He'd caught the eye of Emperor Heinri back when he was still alive, gained experience as the chief of the Supply Bureau's Armory, and been selected for this current position. He hailed from Nazalf, but he still dressed well and moved in a refined manner even as a countryside prefectural governor. That was probably because he'd lived in the imperial capital for a long time. However, his smile made him give off an indescribably friendly aura, and surprisingly, such an influential person like him did his utmost to give Zen a warm welcome. Zen had completely expected to be called into his office, given the standard admonitory warnings, and for that to be it.

For some reason, they were invited to the special guests' room and presented with a lavish lunch spread. They were even offered what was likely a prized thirty-year-old grape wine.

Elysia's true identity was top secret, so it wasn't like Cummel was knowingly trying to flatter the princess.

And I'm a plain government official who was demoted from the capital. There's no reason I should be given such a warm welcome... Although Zen was conflicted, the prefectural governor might feel bad if he acted too modestly. He graciously accepted the food they were being treated to but still declined the alcohol.

"Aha, it seems you're an honest man, Sir Zen." While Cummel was disappointed that they couldn't drink together, Zen was relieved that he didn't persist. However, Cummel was right. Zen had only come here to say his greetings, not deal with any work affairs. Nothing would happen if he drank.

Man, and I'd decided I wouldn't work hard anymore... Old habits die hard, I guess. A self-deprecating smile appeared on Zen's face. He couldn't help coming off as overly serious.

Meanwhile, Cummel seemed to be treating Elysia as Zen's real daughter and was recommending all kinds of dishes to her.

"Nazalf is a nice place," he raved, eagerly showing off his

hometown's attractions. "It's located along the Ezwaz Highway, so it's thriving more than you'd expect from somewhere so remote. It's still very much a rural region compared to the imperial capital, of course, but our nature is abundant and beautiful. Above all else, the food is delicious! Particularly in recent years, grape cultivation and wineries are booming thanks to a policy enacted by His Excellency the State Governor. They keep coming out with famous new wines that prove to be hits even in the imperial capital!"

Indeed, all sorts of delicacies crowded the table. In addition to foods like duck and truffles that were also used often in banquets back home, there were seafoods like flounder and oysters that were rarely seen as far inland as the capital. In fact, Zen only knew about seafood through books. This was his first time actually getting to taste some.

He was deeply moved by how delicious the fried breaded oysters were. As soon as he sunk his teeth into one, the incredibly savory and sweet juices came gushing out. This unfamiliar flavor (otherwise known as the "taste of the ocean") was addictive. It made him crave some ale.

Then there was the flounder. Its taste shone like the top star of the Imperial Capital's Opera Troupe. Compared to freshwater fish, it had a clear taste with no unpleasant smell, so it seemed like it'd be delicious no matter how it was prepared, whether by boiling, grilling, or steaming. The sauce—the supporting role—enhanced it at the same time. Rather than the beef and duck Zen was used to eating at home, he found himself continually reaching for the seafood instead.

Meanwhile, upon learning where these dishes had come from, Elysia tilted her head. "The empire's western region should be the only one that faces the sea," she said. "How did you catch fish this far south?"

"That's what makes Nazalf amazing, young lady," Cummel gladly began explaining. "Around five hundred years ago, this area was still a kingdom called Aal Anett. The king back then ordered the country's wisest sage to go to the western ocean to find the leviathans."

"By 'leviathans,' you mean like the one-horned or six-eyed divine

gods from the legends?" asked Elysia.

"That's right. I'm impressed that you know. You certainly are the daughter of the Leadon family."

The reason she knew was actually that cultural studies were required in the imperial family, but so long as Cummel was unaware of her true identity, it was only natural that he'd misunderstand.

"What happened to that sage?" Elysia asked with keen interest, hungry to know more. There were many beings known as legendary beasts, but there were only five types that could be considered divine in name. For example, dragons like the friend of the first emperor Julian that continued to protect the empire were one type. Leviathans were another. It was said that they lived in the depths of the western ocean and wielded great magics that could bring about natural disasters. The fact that the sage was sent so far out of his way to seek out those godly beasts meant there must have been some extraordinary circumstances at play. Hence why Elysia was very interested.

"It took that sage ten years to successfully make contact with the one-horned divine god, Kishu Laveriga, and another ten years to befriend it. Then he received the magic he'd been seeking and brought it back home to his country. The king was so pleased that he ordered the sage to immediately begin a large magical ritual. In just one night, the sage eradicated the uninhabitable wetlands and created a sea around one hundred kilometers in diameter. That's why Aal Anett and its three surrounding kingdoms have thrived from maritime trade from then on."

"My. What a miraculous bit of history," Elysia marveled. That was why seafood could be caught in Nazalf, a prefecture that was located inland. Elysia was most certainly not uneducated, but there was a limit to how much her studies could encompass the geography and local history of every remote region in the empire. Unless she was going to take the Advanced Civil Service Exam like Zen, that was knowledge that she would rarely need so long as she didn't leave the imperial capital.

"We can see that sea even from Todd Village if we walk a little," Zen said. "I wanted to surprise you, so I didn't say anything, but I

actually planned to take you there."

"Hee hee. I'm looking forward to it, father."

"Yeah, I haven't seen the sea before either, so I'm excited too. I was thinking about taking the opportunity to start fishing."

"Hmm, fishing?" Cummel jumped into their conversation. It seemed he himself fished as a hobby. He mimed casting a rod and launched into a passionate ramble. "It's nice to fish in Nazalf's sea, but the river is fun as well. You're aware this region is located between the Aal and Anett rivers, right? They originate from the same source but strangely enough, the fish living in their waters are different. Each lake's fish also vary from one another. There are so many different places you can fish that you won't ever get bored."

If it weren't discourteous to Cummel, a prefectural governor, Zen might've asked the man to show him the ropes.

In any case, Cummel grew more talkative on the subject of his hobby. After Zen had fun listening to him talk about his various fishing experiences, the two went back to chatting about business. It was the unfortunate destiny of a government official to never be truly free of work.

"Oh, so have you also been to the Armory, Sir Zen?" asked Cummel.

"I was assigned five years ago," Zen replied, "so it wasn't quite the same time as when you were chief, Your Excellency Cummel."

"I see. That was right around when I was transferred to this post. Heh heh. I bet it was difficult. You wouldn't expect a central government agency to have such a militaristic spirit."

"Yes, well...that's right. The minute you mess up, you have to grit your teeth and brace yourself."

Cummel burst into laughter. "Ha ha ha! That really takes me back! There was never a day I went without a fresh bruise."

"I've heard that things like that were prohibited back when you were chief," Zen said. "Yet the moment you were promoted elsewhere, they brought back that militaristic spirit... My seniors at the Armory were always complaining about it."

"Ha ha, I see. I'm happy that they didn't say they were glad to be rid of their loud-mouthed chief."

As two people who'd experienced working at the same post, they grew animated in relaying their tales of hardship to each other.

"However, I was once again transferred in about half a year." Zen sighed. "You, on the other hand, had worked there for years. It's embarrassing to speak as if I've experienced the same suffering as you."

"Oh my. You were transferred in just half a year?"

"Yes. It was right around the time I'd finally gotten the hang of my work. I was so glad I wasn't being hit by my superiors anymore... It's such a shame."

Cummel fell silent.

"Well, I always receive a transfer notice within six months or so. It doesn't matter where I'm stationed. You can say I'm always being given the runaround. It's awful, but it's nothing out of the ordinary for me."

"You...have certainly suffered..."

"I really have!" Zen exclaimed. "Every time I'm transferred, I have to start off as the underling and get everyone else's grunt work. But then I work hard, and when I'm finally able to do a decent job, I'm transferred again. Thanks to that, I've worked nothing but odd jobs for the past fourteen years!"

"That's happened with every post you've been assigned to...?"

"Yes. Just when my work is finally starting to get interesting, I get sent back to square one."

"And that happened at the Tax Bureau department where you'd been working prior to this?"

"Yes," Zen said soberly, "it met the same end. To be honest, I'm tired of the bureaucrat life."

"Hmm..." Cummel folded his arms in thought. Up until now, this elite government official had been chatting with them in such a cheerful and pleasant way, so his sudden silence felt especially strong.

Zen hesitated. "Your Excellency?"

"Oh, no, Sir Zen," Cummel assured him, "I simply couldn't help but take a second to admire you."

"Oh..." Zen responded vaguely. He didn't understand what exactly

he'd found admirable.

"No matter what post you were assigned to or what work you had to do, you would adapt in just a mere half a year," Cummel explained. "You're no average Joe."

"No, no, no..." Zen protested. "I might be making it sound more impressive than it actually is. I'd just go from the level of an odd-jobber to finally doing ordinary-level stuff. And I'd get stuck doing that again and again. There's no government official out there with a more pathetic track record than me."

"But no one else could have a career as unique as yours."

Zen was bewildered. Even if that were something to compliment, Cummel was flattering him a bit too much. However, Cummel remained stubbornly earnest.

The topic soon turned back to work again. Elysia had been left out of the conversation for a while, but the prefectural governor recognized that she'd been smiling and listening politely—perfect etiquette that came from being a princess—so he paused to explain their work in a way she'd understand. "The Armory is an especially important section of the Supply Bureau. It's full of government officials who are shouldering the empire's great hopes for the future. Of course, the level of responsibility is also high, and it took me five whole years to become fully capable there."

Cummel's attention shifted back to Zen. "I must tip my hat to you, Sir Zen. You learned how to manage it in a mere half a year. You say it is no big deal, but you're leagues above me." He then added jokingly, "It was five years before I stopped being struck by my superiors, after all."

Elysia's eyes sparkled immediately, and she looked at Zen as if saying, *Father, you're amazing!*

Zen went from being a little embarrassed to feeling uncomfortable. He had to panickedly correct her so she wouldn't think Cummel's words were true. "Hey, Elysia, the actual amazing person you should be admiring is someone who can keep climbing the ranks like His Excellency here. There are so many elites in the Armory, yet he still stood out among them."

However, Elysia kept her sparkling gaze on him as if to say, *You're*

both *amazing!*

In the end, even Cummel smiled wryly in a way that said, *It seems you're too humble, Sir Zen.*

Zen didn't know what to do. A small-time government official like him could've never anticipated being put in the same category as Cummel, who'd earned the title of prefectural governor—the top position among local officials.

I mean, things will go smoother if we mutually respect one another, Zen thought. *It's way better than the other way around.* Although he understood that, it was becoming gradually more difficult to swallow the food and drink in front of him.

He was almost full. Elysia had already finished her meal and was helping herself to some sweets made from grapes.

Cummel seemed to think it was about time for another change in topic. "The Tax Bureau is incredibly important to the empire. The number of elites in the Armory is practically nothing compared to those in the Tax Bureau. I think it's such a waste to transfer someone like you to a village all the way out here. To be honest, I didn't believe my ears at first."

Well, yeah, even for a demotion, this is a pretty rare thing to happen.

"However," he continued, "after hearing about it from you directly, I understand now. I'm sure there was a reason. I bet the same goes for how you were given the runaround. Was it the idea of your older brother, the Chancellor of Ceremonial Affairs?"

He's sharp. It was true that sheltering the princess was one of the reasons behind his demotion. Although he felt like he had to correct Cummel on something.

"There's no deep explanation for why I was always getting passed around," Zen said. "I'm just incompetent."

"You think? Can you not say that working at so many places means you were able to gain a lot of practical experience?"

Well, that's true... There might not be any job I don't know how to do in any of the six ministries. Even if the work had been mostly miscellaneous tasks, they'd featured the basics—or more to the point, the essence of each post's responsibilities. On top of that, he

didn’t take on his daily work blindly. He would approach it determined that he’d at least learn something. That was why, no matter what post he was assigned to, he could rise to handle the normal duties within half a year.

“But does that mean anything?” Zen asked. “Wouldn’t you just call that a jack-of-all-trades?” Couldn’t a government official grow more by concentrating their career in one specific ministry instead of learning about how all six of them worked? That was why it was common practice in Catalan to pick the biggest experts in each one to become the ministers.

Cummel didn’t reply to the question. Instead, he said, “If it’s all right with you, Sir Zen, I’d like to prepare a post at the prefectural governor’s office that would suit you. Or if that’s not enough, I could write you a letter of recommendation to the state governor.”

He was really putting a lot of stock in Zen—not as a jack-of-all-trades but as a talented individual who was hard to come by. That was surely the main reason he’d treated them today.

Honestly, though, this doesn’t make me happy! Normally, this should be an incredible proposal.

“This is embarrassing to admit, but...I’m tired of working so hard.” Zen sighed. He’d briefly mentioned it before, but he emphasized it more this second time. He’d been shown such amazing hospitality; it felt wrong to give half-hearted responses.

“I...see. I suppose there’s nothing I can do, then.” Cummel closed his eyes briefly, his expression exceedingly disappointed. Then, as if shutting down those regretful feelings, he once again gave them a friendly smile.

Upon their farewells, he said, “If you ever need anything, please let me know. That goes for private matters as well, of course. Also, there may be times I’ll need your wisdom too. I will be counting on you then.”

***

Zen had been told they’d reach Todd Village from Nazalf City before evening. As they were jostled by the carriage, Elysia fed Keel

some bites of a meat dish she'd had wrapped back at Cummel's. She giggled as she did so. "Hee hee. Lord Cummel gave you a very royal welcome, father." She sounded proud, as if she were truly his daughter.

Zen kept his gaze forward in the driver's seat and slumped his shoulders. "Well, I think he's seriously overestimating me. Although I think he's taking good care of me mostly because I'm a Leadon." He laughed it off, explaining that the only thing truly amazing here was his family's influence.

"You think so...?" Elysia couldn't fully agree. It was true that Cummel had praised *her* as a daughter of the Leadon family, but did he ever use such phrasing toward Zen? In her eyes, Cummel had been paying respect to Zen himself without regarding his family background at all.

However, Zen was insistent. "It's true," he said. "It's not strictly required, but I went to greet him. Similarly, he can't simply ignore the Leadon family name. Even though as a nation, the empire is known to be impartial in many ways, you can't fully avoid such things when people are involved. Personal feelings get embedded in there somewhere. That's why you can't ignore those kinds of sentimental human customs. In the world of government officials, this is what they call the separation between what you want to do versus what you're supposed to do." He had a (probably) self-satisfied look on his face as he reasoned with Elysia, although she couldn't see for herself.

Well... she thought, *I don't understand an official's common sense!* She was still studying for her role as an imperial princess, but she was a fourteen-year-old girl who'd never participated in government affairs before. She couldn't win if he used that line of reasoning. After all, he was a man who'd had a career as old as she was, changing from job to job in the empire's various ministries.

"If that's what you say, father, then I'll leave it at that." She pouted, childishly puffing out her cheeks. She'd probably be furiously scolded for bad manners if this were the inner palace, but it was fine now since she was acting as a commoner. *Whatever.*

Keel licked her face as if saying, *I feel the same way.*

***

Todd Village was small, with a population of only five hundred, and located deep in the forest. As one might expect of such a remote region, Cylin's population had been progressively decreasing until recently. That was when the governor, who'd taken up office twenty years ago, promoted a regional development policy—the most notable aspect being the grape and wine industries that Cummel had spoken of. Thanks to that, the population had made a strong recovery.

Once practically a ghost town for lack of people, Todd Village had been newly rebuilt about a decade ago to receive that increased population. There were other similarly government-initiated reconstructed villages throughout the state.

The villagers primarily made a living by clearing trees, farming the land, making charcoal, and raising livestock. There were hunters too.

Through the state's initiative, their main crop was potatoes. Cylin was warmer than other states, so the crops were planted in the winter and harvested in the spring. Then, from summer to fall, the people went to large vineyards in the neighboring villages and worked away from home. It was a positive cycle, and new houses stood in Todd Village as a result. All of them were rather fine-looking too. Tax dollars had been invested into the village's reconstruction to bring back young people.

In most small villages, houses typically consisted of only a single dirt-floor room. This fact wasn't limited to just Catalan. There was no separation between the kitchen and sleeping areas, so you'd have to live cramped together with your family around a sunken hearth.

The new houses in Todd Village had proper wooden floors, and it was common to have two or even three rooms. There were even some two-story houses. Nothing could beat this level of comfort.

Zen and Elysia would live in a two-story house that was considered big even among all those nice houses. It featured two

bedrooms, each equipped with a fireplace, and there was a third, extra room that could be used as a study. The windows were also luxuriously made of glass.

The former chief of the town hall had been living here with their family, but that person had recently been promoted. They had moved to Nazalf City where the prefectural government office was located, so Zen's newly arriving family was given the best house in the village.

"You're sure a lucky duck!" exclaimed the sturdy-looking older lady next door. Zen was in the middle of greeting all of their new neighbors after dropping Elysia and Keel off at home.

Someone like Yohia probably pulled some strings for us. That was surely an act of consideration for the princess from the Leadon family. They wouldn't allow her to feel too impoverished no matter how much Elysia was determined to disguise herself.

If it were just Zen living by himself, then a simple house would have been no problem. But he wanted to give Elysia the best life possible—as her future subject, as her father, and above all else, as someone who'd been entrusted with Aness and Heinri's child.

Meanwhile, the older lady firmly thumped her chest. "The name's Donna. Give me a holler anytime if you ever need help. You'll be busy enough with your official work as it is, and raising a daughter as a lone man in the countryside is probably real rough," she told him. It was clear that she liked taking care of people.

He gratefully accepted the sentiment and bowed his head. "I will."

They had arrived in the village before evening, so the sun was beginning to set by the time Zen finished greeting everyone.

"Elysia, Keel, I'm back. Let's have dinner."

Immediately upon entering the house was the living room, which was the most spacious room in the home. Zen had opened the door with a smile, but when he looked inside, that smile stiffened.

He found kitchenware like pots and knives, clothes and the laundry bucket, quill pens and ink pots. Aside from those were scissors, towels, brooms, firewood, and so on. He'd brought these basic necessities that he figured they'd need immediately upon

arrival from his parents' house, but everything that should've been loaded on the carriage was scattered across the living room floor.

"Ah, did a tornado blow through here, or..."

"I'm sorry, father," Elysia mumbled, her voice trembling. She'd sunk to the living room floor with a dumbfounded look on her face. "I thought I shouldn't just stand around and do nothing while you were greeting everyone. I tried unloading the cart, but..."

"Hmm... That's commendable, Elysia. You're very thoughtful."

"However, I had no idea where to put anything away after I did that..." Elysia continued.

"Yeah, this is your first time living in a civilian house after all."

"I got ahead of myself and didn't know what to do..."

"Mmm... It's the thought that counts, and that makes me happy. Really happy." Zen was also puzzled by the sight of all the items scattered across the room. This was because he'd also been raised in a large mansion since childhood. Even now, most of his daily necessities had been taken care of by his servants. His life skills were arguably not much better than Elysia's, so he couldn't say anything.

As he envied Keel, who was curled up on the floor (as if it were none of his business!), Zen said, "All right, Elysia. Tomorrow, let's take it easy and discuss where would be the best places to put everything. For now, I'll hurry and light the fireplace."

The southern part of the empire was warm, but Todd Village was surrounded by forest, which meant nights were already cold at this time of year. Donna had warned him about it.

Elysia insisted on helping carry the firewood, and the two of them piled it into the living room fireplace. Zen took on the responsibility of lighting it. He was going to use the flint and tinder that he'd brought from his family's house, but he found it pretty hard work when trying it himself. He struck the flint many times before the first piece of wood caught on fire. Thinking back to it, this had been a difficult task for the servants too.

In any case, once the fireplace had one good flame going, it filled the living room with a steady warmth. That wasn't so welcome right now for Zen, though, who'd broken a sweat while igniting it.

However, seeing Elysia clapping her hands with delight somehow made him feel happy himself. He felt like he understood the perks of fatherhood a little better.

"Let's transfer the fire to the kitchen stove and the bedrooms upstairs," he said.

"Okay, father."

After dividing the task of carrying firewood to the other locations, Zen used tongs to transfer the lit logs one by one. If they kept the stove lit, then he wouldn't have to struggle with the flint again.

"We can have a hot meal now," Elysia said brightly.

"I'm really hungry." Zen sighed.

"Hee hee. You ate so much for lunch, though."

Cummel had had them take the entire pot of leftover stew with them. They would heat it on the stove and relax for the night. Zen had brought wooden plates and spoons from home.

They both took a seat at the four-person table in the kitchen and shared a humble meal.

"How did the greetings go, father?" Elysia asked.

"They were all nice people, so that's a relief. Maybe it's because it's a relatively new village." Zen had heard that it was common for strangers to get severely ostracized in old villages. Especially when compared to towns that cycled through people regularly, the tendency was clear as day.

Yohia probably had a hand in this too. He searched for somewhere that would be easy to live for Her Highness. I'm not sure if Sharla would've been so careful in selecting a place like this.

Amazing as usual for the young and sharp Chancellor of Ceremonial Affairs. Although he was his brother, Zen was impressed by his competence anyway.

"Are you going to show up to work at the town hall tomorrow?"

"No," Zen replied. "I was ordered to start my new post by November 1st. That's one week away, so until then, I'm thinking I'll take my time and get the house in order." He'd already set his mind on not working hard anymore. If he *had* to work hard, then he wanted it to be for Elysia's sake. That was why he wanted to first lay the foundations for their new life together so the two of them (plus

one big animal) could live comfortable lives.

Traveling must have really exhausted Zen. That evening, he fell asleep like he'd been put into a coma. Honestly, that was also largely because he could finally sleep in a separate bedroom from Elysia in peace.

In these times, a typical bed was made of a wooden frame filled with dried straw. That'd been the case at all of the inn towns they'd encountered along the way. Only the wealthy got to sleep on cotton-stuffed mattresses. The beds in this house were definitely of the latter luxurious variety.

The cotton was damp, unfortunately; it probably hadn't been aired out since the previous owner moved. However, the feeling of comfort was a world of difference from hard straw. It was like going from sleeping on a wood plank to a fluffy cloud. Zen could sleep deeply until morning...

"Or at least I thought I could," he grumbled, a disappointed expression on his face. He'd actually woken up before dawn. Just when he was thinking about how cold it was, he realized the fireplace had gone out while he was asleep. The wood had all burned up.

I guess I'll bring some more fire from the living room...

He slipped out of bed, shivering from the unimaginable cold, and used the moonlight to make his way downstairs. Fearing the darkness would make him lose his footing, he carefully went down one step at a time. The servants back home constantly managed the lights, so something was always lit, whether it was a fireplace or candlesticks. Zen was made keenly aware of how cold a night without a lit fire could be.

He was met with more disappointment when he made it to the living room. The fire there had also burned out.

"Man, I messed up..." Zen dropped his shoulders, resigning himself to his fate. He had to go back to sleep while shivering from the cold. That was when he heard Elysia's puzzled voice.

"Father...?" It'd come from the darkness blanketing the living room.

“Oh,” he said, “you came downstairs too.”

“I was sleeping with Keel around me since the fireplace in my bedroom had gone out.”

Zen strained his eyes in the moonlight. He saw that Elysia truly was lying down wrapped in Keel’s huge body, who was curled up on the floor. She was looking back at Zen, rubbing her eyes. “Would you like to join? Keel is very warm.”

He sputtered. “Huh? What?! I don’t know...” He was confused. What on earth was she saying? That’d basically be the same as sleeping together. They’d shared rooms back at the inns they’d stayed at but had always drawn a line at sleeping in the same bed.

“Hee hee. We’re family. This is normal.”

Zen was glad he couldn’t see the way she was smiling in the darkness. Just imagining it was scary.

“But Your Highness,” he protested, “we’re not just a normal father and daughter.”

“Once again, you’re using my title.”

Zen ignored that. “A-Anyway, we’re not normal.”

“It’ll be difficult to live together in the long run if you start worrying about things like this.”

“Gah...” His objection got stuck in his throat. She did have a point. He finally relented. “Okay. Let’s sleep together tonight, then.”

Accepting his fate, he had Keel wrap him up next to Elysia. He lay on his side and made sure to keep his back to her, though. However, Elysia pressed her back right against his. It wasn’t like she was embracing him or anything, but it gave him a serious start. It set him on edge. This was obviously discourteous to the princess in itself, but if his older siblings were to see this... Although that couldn’t happen, he’d probably be killed.

Elysia giggled. “Hee hee. It’s warmer this way.”

“Teasing an adult... What a bad kid you are.”

He almost wondered how she was smiling at him...





That aside...

"I'm sorry for letting the firewood run out," Zen said. "That was my bad."

"I didn't know that wouldn't be enough either," Elysia replied, defending him by saying that he wasn't the only one to blame.

Although he accepted her kindness, Zen shook his head. "I can easily calculate how quickly a metropolis with a population of ten thousand expends firewood." That was a question you'd find on the civil service exam that was so easy, someone with no experience as a government official could answer it. By dividing the answer by the number of days and the population, you could approximate how much firewood one person went through in a day. You could, of course, get even more precise if you took into account that a person burned more in the winter than the summer.

"But I didn't think about that at all yesterday," Zen continued. "I just went ahead assuming it'd be enough and didn't bother calculating. This is how the brain of a government official works. You can quickly figure it out from behind a desk, but it's like you can't understand it in practice. It really makes me reflect." It made him realize how, although he was such a workaholic, his life skills were desperately lacking.

"So there are things that even you can't do, father. Aside from cooking, that is..."

"How exactly do you think of me?" he asked incredulously. "There are so many things I can't do." His older siblings were the epitome of perfection compared to him. He was the one criticized by his colleagues for being nothing more than the leftover husks of some dried-up tea leaves. People in the past had also asked, with complete sincerity, "There's another sibling in the Leadon family? I thought there were only three."

"I really have to devote myself to getting used to this lifestyle before the end of October," he said aloud. In the beginning, he'd said he wanted to spend time at the house partially because he didn't want to start work early, but he also just hadn't thought it'd be this hard. It was quite possible that they'd run into some unforeseen trouble and encounter some actually life-threatening

situation next. Leisurely immersing himself in hobbies while living in the countryside was like a dream within a dream.

"I'm also going to work hard and learn how to cook and clean," Elysia declared. "That way, Keel and I can watch over the house so you can relax and go to work."

"No!" Zen exclaimed. "I can't have Your Highness do those kinds of petty chores..."

"Oh, you called me 'Your Highness' again."

He sighed. "I just have to get it together. You don't have to work hard."

"You're such a cruel father. You're robbing your daughter of her chance to grow."

"No, that's not it," Zen protested. "You'll be returning to the inner palace one day. As a princess, what you need is an education and courtly etiquette. Not household chores."

"Well, I'm confident that I know etiquette. As for my studies, you can teach me, father. And then I'll work hard at housework on top of that. Won't it be wonderful to have a princess who knows about the commoner life and can understand their perspective?"

"I mean, yeah, but...I don't have what it takes to teach you."

"But you at least passed the Advanced Civil Service Exam, father," she insisted. "Even attempting it as I am now would be ridiculous. At the very least, I think you're capable of teaching me until I can pass it."

Zen hesitated before reluctantly nodding his head. "That's true." He felt like she'd somehow managed to talk her way into a lot of things—like the matter of the housework—but he couldn't argue with her.

I've heard that fathers are pushovers when it comes to their daughters... I might actually be like that too. He closed his eyes with a self-mocking smile.

Thinking of so many things made his brain tired. He also grew sleepy, wrapped up in Keel's and Elysia's warmth.

"Good night, Elysia," he murmured. This time, he was going to fall fast asleep and not wake until morning.

"Good night, Sir Zen." Elysia waited until she could hear his

steady breathing before shifting her body. “We’ll both work hard tomorrow and build a nice family together... Just kidding.”

As she embraced Zen’s wide back, she once again closed her eyes.

Chapter 5: There's a Workaholic Right Here

The next morning, Zen went back to see their neighbor Donna. He was asking where he could get more firewood and if she could lend them some for the time being.

"I'm embarrassed to have to ask for your help so soon... You offered it just yesterday, after all," he murmured, standing ashamedly in front of the entryway.

Donna cheerfully laughed it off. "Ha ha ha! Don't worry about it. I'm the one who said I'd help any time." She told him about the five general stores in Todd Village where you could get most necessities. There were many lumberjacks in the village for firewood. The general stores would buy up their stock, and then the villagers would buy the firewood from those stores. It was an unspoken agreement to not buy directly from the lumberjacks. That agreement also extended to things like agricultural produce and hunting game.

I see, Zen thought. *By passing these goods through the general stores first, money can continue to circulate even in this isolated society. The market price is fixed too. If they didn't do this, then this would become the only village out there that'd revert to a more primitive bartering system.*

Zen instantly understood the deeper reasons for that system. However, he'd still needed it explained to him exactly *how* those villagers were actually living or else he wouldn't have understood it on his own. That was yet another sad demonstration of how a book-smart government official's brain worked.

"Thank you for telling me," he said. "I'll go buy some right away."

"Oh, just wait a second, Mr. Zen," Donna stopped him. "The stores are closed today."

"All five of them?"

"Of course." Donna looked at him, puzzled. It was as if she were silently asking, *Isn't that obvious?*

Zen thought about it a little. "Is firewood the same price no matter which store you buy it from?"

"That goes without saying," she said, once again looking astonished. Zen now understood.

I see. All five stores have a price-fixing agreement. They had to take the same days off. Otherwise, if only a few stores closed, that'd allow the others the opportunity to get ahead. In the end, none of them would be able to take *any* days off in order to stay competitive. If they didn't agree on a fixed market price either, it'd start a war of who could have the cheapest prices, thereby decreasing all of their profits.

With those reasons in mind, this price-fixing agreement might have sounded quite greedy, but Donna didn't seem to have a shred of animosity toward those stores. They were all surely trying to keep their prices reasonable.

Five stores are just enough for a village of this size.

The five stores avoided excessive competition through price-fixing, but they wouldn't think to work together to rip off the villagers. They probably brought in enough profits without having to resort to such wicked tactics. The villagers and general stores both had nothing to lose from this arrangement, and it'd maintain the steady flow of supply and demand in this small village.

Zen and others like him often used the words "public" and "private" when it came to businesses, but although the general stores in Todd Village were considered private, they were functioning in a way that was similar to the way a government agency would ideally work. Of course, the story would change if a new store appeared now. The current five would be forced to fight for survival, and the prices and balance of supply and demand would be thrown into disarray. However, there was no oddball out there who'd go out of their way to wedge themself into the market in such a small countryside village.

To begin with, there weren't many people out there good enough at calculations to operate a store. Literacy rates were still quite low

even now. If commoners wanted an education, they had to pay a high tuition fee and go to a private school in town. The advanced empire of Catalan *did* have the concept of public education, but even then, in order to enter the academic institutions (government-run schools) in each state's capital, you had to first prove you had high intelligence.

Through this mundane conversation with Donna, Zen couldn't help getting lost in analyzing the village's social structure. He'd said he wasn't going to work hard anymore, but he couldn't put down his bureaucrat lenses.

He didn't know how he must've looked to Donna, who was seeing him deep in thought, but...

"Don't zone out thinking they're just mere pieces of firewood, Mr. Zen!" she exclaimed. "You gotta stock up! You're fine without them right now, but you'll be risking your life once it's winter!"

"Oh, yes."

"I'm gonna split what I have with you today, so take them home. Actually, I bet you don't have any food in your kitchen either, right? Then take some from us too."

"I really am sorry for the trouble..."

"Government officials are smart, but they tend to get stuck in their heads too often. See, my niece works in the town hall too. That girl's always had a good lip on her, but she can't even do the laundry. I reckon you're like that too."

"You got me there..." he admitted solemnly. Sure, he could analyze social structures, but his life skills were so lacking that he couldn't go through a single day without some kind of problem. Every word that came from Donna's mouth crushed him with its truth.

When it came to life skills, though, Her Highness was even worse than Zen...

"Let go of the kitchen knife right now," Zen warned.

"*You* let go of it, father," Elysia insisted. "I can't cut the potatoes like this."

"You need to peel potatoes and remove the eyes before cutting them. Even I know that." It had been written in the survival practice

manual back when he was in the Ministry of Military Affairs.

"What? How are you supposed to peel this? It's so bumpy... Don't tell me I have to do it by hand?"

"That's exactly why you need to give the knife to me right now and go play with Keel."

"You can't cook either, so leave this to me and go take Keel for a walk."

"Your hand is gonna get all cut up if I take my eyes off of you!"

The man who could do work but no chores and the princess who knew absolutely nothing about the outside world continued their absurd conversation.





“Oh, I got it! I can easily prepare it if I cut the skin and eyes together around the potato like this!” Elysia exclaimed. “I see! So you can only eat the core!” The way her eyes innocently sparkled was just so precious, but...

“Only royalty would eat it in such a wasteful way.” Zen couldn’t help a wry smile. He’d completely forgotten to consider that Elysia was an imperial princess when he said it; he was just desperate to stop her. He appreciated her enthusiasm to help out in the kitchen, but he couldn’t stand to watch. Her hold on the knife was too scary.

This had all started from the topic of steaming potatoes for lunch, yet it had managed to turn into an argument.

“This is so fun!” Elysia exclaimed. “It’s our first time working together as a family!”

“I’m exhausted...” He would’ve said it had actually been yesterday that they’d worked together for the first time, when they were carrying the firewood, but he didn’t have it in him to rebut her right now.

After shaking salt over the steamed potatoes and topping them with cheese that had been melted in the pot’s leftover heat, Elysia and Zen had managed to make a simple dish.

Keel, who’d woken up just now, gave them a look that demanded, “So where’s my portion?”

That look made Zen grow bitter. *You have no idea how much I’ve suffered...* He would still feed him, of course.

While it’d be dangerous for a normal dog to have too much potato, cheese, and salt, this large white wolf was perfectly fine eating the same food humans ate.

Zen and Elysia took their seats at the kitchen table. They each took a bite at the same time and had one thing to say.

“It’s kinda hard, father...”

“They weren’t steamed all the way through...”

They had a few more comments after that.

“It’s salty...” Zen mumbled. “I overdid it with the salt.”

“I didn’t get enough, so it tastes like nothing.”

They wound up covering their faces in their hands.

Keel silently lapped everything up from his plate on the floor with

no complaints. His show of kindness deeply touched Zen. *Sorry for getting grumpy with you.*

"This is a problem..." Zen sighed. "I thought we could at least manage a simple dish like this."

"This was very much different from what I was expecting...or I overestimated myself..."

"I had no idea that making food tasty was so difficult..."

"I've once again been reminded of how outstanding the chefs in the imperial palace were..." She crunched on her undercooked potatoes.

"I'll swallow my pride and go see Ms. Donna for help again," Zen said. "I'll ask her to teach us how to cook."

"We may need to be prepared to learn how to do all of the housework from scratch."

Zen paused, hesitating. "You're right. I can't afford to avoid asking her by making the excuse that I'm a grown man."

The two of them nodded to each other. Keel once again went to sleep as if saying, *Well, good luck.*

After eating "the results of a father and daughter's collaborative effort," the two of them went to visit Donna.

The helpful older lady thoroughly undertook the task with a hearty laugh. "Sure thing. You're right around my husband's niece's age, and she's started saying that she wants to learn how to do housework. I'll look after all three of you."

"Thank you so much. By the way, how old is that young lady?" Elysia asked.

"She turned six this year."

The two of them were stunned into silence. They realized they were being treated the same as a six-year-old.

In short, they had nothing to say for themselves.

***

Many things happened after that, and before they knew it, it was the last day of October. Starting tomorrow, Zen had to report to work at the village town hall.

As for the results of their training up to this point... Well, if they could've mastered everything in only a week, they wouldn't have needed help in the first place.

For the time being, Donna had agreed to come help prepare lunch every day, so their food situation had improved. As she assisted with more than half the work, they would make a large batch of food and eat the same thing for dinner.

Elysia and Coco—Donna's six-year-old niece whom she'd bring over—grew totally attached to one another, and Donna's husband Kulzawa (thirty-nine years old) became Zen's drinking partner.

"You wanna give fishing a shot, Mr. Zen?" Kulzawa asked him eagerly. "I'll teach you, then. I'll lend you a fishing rod. The river near here is the perfect place to fish."

With this invitation, Zen decided to try fishing for the first time.

The weather today was clear, and the morning sun shone brightly. It took nearly an hour on foot to go upstream of the Anett River's tributary, which was also the village's source of water. There was a section of the river that was wide and shallow with many rocks, and apparently there were a lot of fish living around here.

"The only issue is, well, a lot of the village's fishermen come here, so the fish have gotten sly," said Kulzawa. "You need quite a bit of skill to lure them in, so you gotta get good!"

"I see. But that makes it fun in its own way," Zen observed.

"Yep! That's the spirit." Kulzawa handed him a fishing rod with bait attached to it. With his heart racing, Zen dangled the fishing line.

Kulzawa supervised him as he moved the rod, using a technique to imitate live bait. Other times, Zen, while still dangling his own fishing line, would watch Kulzawa give him a demonstration from nearby. Even Zen found himself super excited seeing the man snag an absurd number of fish one after another.

All right. I'm gonna catch a ton of fish and bring back plenty for Her Highness and Keel.

Determined that they'd all eat their fill tonight, Zen maneuvered the rod with a newfound enthusiasm.

Well, he didn't catch anything, though. Not a single one.

That was why in the end, he had to trudge home empty-handed.

"It's your first time, after all, Mr. Zen! You'll have better luck next time," Kulzawa comforted him. The gesture deeply touched his dejected heart.

Incidentally, Kulzawa's own basket was filled with plenty of fish like carp, dace, and even eel. He told him, "There won't be any fish left if you overdo it. After you catch enough for a day or two, it's custom to just go home."

He continued. "Half of this is for you. Let Elysia and Keel have their fill."

Zen deeply appreciated his senior fishing master. That being said, as instructor and student, the two of them were completely incompatible.

Zen was the type who went into all situations using logic. That was just his nature and had nothing to do with being a bureaucrat (although it might have made him suitable to becoming one).

On the other hand, Kulzawa was all about intuition and poor at verbal instructions. That was why even with his guidance, Zen would be exasperated as Kulzawa would vaguely tell him where to pull his rod, making him shout, "*There* means *where*?!" When Zen was told that he shouldn't move his rod so daintily and that he should go "*vrrr* and *whoosh*," he'd find himself bewildered again and again, wishing he'd just tell him how many meters and centimeters to move it. After he finally decided to follow Kulzawa's unclear "*vrrr* and *whoosh*" instructions in his own way, he was scolded. The man told him that if he swung it around too roughly, all the fish would run away.

After working so hard all morning, Zen felt like he hadn't improved one bit.

I guess this means I don't have a knack for fishing... If he couldn't rely on intuition, then all he could do was find out everything there was to know about it. Was there a fishing manual out there like *How to Enrich the Country*?

With his shoulders slumped, he said goodbye to Kulzawa in front of the house for now and went home.

Keel was napping in front of the living room fireplace, and Elysia was taking cooking lessons from Donna in the kitchen. Little Coco wasn't here today.

Elysia noticed his return. "Wow! You're amazing, father! You've brought home so many fish!"

"I didn't catch any of them," he reported dejectedly. "Kulzawa gave me all of these."

He must've looked particularly miserable. Donna held her sides with laughter, and Elysia was stifling her own giggles. Then, with traces of laughter still on their faces, the two of them informed him of Elysia's progress.

"I bet you're hungry," Elysia said. "Lunch will be ready soon, so wait just a bit."

"I only watched from the side today," Donna said. "She made it all on her own."

While Zen was grateful, he was also worried about Elysia. "That's really impressive, but I at least want Donna to be the one handling the knife..."

"You're so overprotective! Elysia's gradually getting the hang of using it."

"She has another cut on her hand again, though..."

"You're such a nitpicker, Mr. Zen! She's not a princess. It's normal to get a few scratches when you're doing housework."

Elysia is *a princess. That's why I'm worried.* There was no way he could tell that to Donna, though. *Even I wouldn't be this overprotective if she were my real daughter.*

Probably. He was sure of it. Although he wasn't actually confident about what he'd be like if he did have a daughter.

I need to gather more medicinal herbs again...

While walking around the past few days, he'd discovered a variety of plants and mushrooms that could be used in medicine growing in the forests surrounding Todd Village. It'd be possible to use them for home remedies and first aid.

While he'd been working in the Pharmaceutical Bureau's General Affairs Office, he'd thought it'd be useful to gain knowledge of different medicines, even if he didn't necessarily need it for his office

job. He'd done a lot of research, and that effort was now bearing fruit.

As he was lost in that train of thought at the dining table, Elysia eagerly carried a pot over. When she opened the lid, the smell of chicken stewed in grape wine rose up into the air. There were many potatoes and other chunky vegetables inside, and it looked delicious at a glance.

"You made all of this by yourself, Elysia!" Zen exclaimed.

"I was real surprised at how sheltered she was, but she's quick on the uptake," Donna told him, proudly singing Elysia's praises.

Zen hummed, impressed. Her Highness must've been really happy. Although she acted shy, she couldn't hide her delight.

Kulzawa, who'd gone to put away the fishing equipment, came back to join them, and the four of them sat down at the table to eat. Elysia ladled the stew into wooden bowls, and Zen promptly dug in.

The potatoes were fluffy to the core, the cabbage extremely soft, and the carrots had absorbed plenty of the chicken's flavor, giving them a delicious savory sweetness. Of course, the chicken thighs themselves had been simmered until tender and were pretty incredible too. One of the perks of living in Cylin was that commoners could use as much wine as they wanted in their cooking, so there was no unpleasant smell of blood. For a dish that had only been stewing since the morning, Zen couldn't help but be amazed by its perfection.

"This isn't just decent. It's delicious. It's really good, Elysia!"

"Y-You don't have to praise me so much, father," she stammered. Her face turned red, so she looked the other way.

In all seriousness, Zen was so surprised that she could already complete a dish that was this good. It'd been less than a week since she'd started learning to cook. His own life skills were still way behind hers.

After they finished lunch, the four of them worked together to fillet the fish Kulzawa caught. Kulzawa was, of course, as skilled at that as he was at the fishing itself.

Elysia's hold on her own knife was as stomach-dropping as always, but she cut carefully and deliberately, leaving a beautiful

finished result. Her improvement really was striking.

Zen, on the other hand, was used to knives to some degree, but he was sloppy when it came to cooking. The fillets he prepared were ugly too.

Yikes... At this rate, I don't think I'll be able to maintain my dignity as a father... Zen silently panicked. He couldn't stay calm. The expectation he'd had his heart set on—of forgetting about work to focus completely on fishing, kicking back, and taking it easy in the countryside—might have been a sweet, naive thought.

As sweet as the carrots he'd just eaten.

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It was now November of the year 117 on the imperial calendar.

The Todd Village Town Hall currently had a small staff consisting of only four people. For a long time now, they'd been asking the prefectural governor for one or two new employees, and as of today, someone was finally going to be sent to them. Moreover, it was going to be the son of that well-known Leadon family, whose fame resounded even in this remote region.

"What do you think he's like?"

"My aunt who lives next door to him says he's kinda unreliable."

"But he's a career-driven man from the central government agencies, right? I think he's gonna look down on us."

The subordinates gossiped to their hearts' content as they worked alongside each other.

"Hey, all of you—move your hands, not your mouths," snapped an older man, scolding them. His name was Tomon. He was an overly skinny man whose eyes reflected his nervous disposition, and he was going to be forty-five this year. He held the title of "chief." In other words, he was the one in charge of this town hall.

He'd originally worked in a different town, but he was transferred right after Todd Village's reconstruction and had been working hard here for ten years. His predecessor was promoted two months ago, and simply by nature of the gap needing to be filled, he'd been given his current post. Even though it wasn't necessarily because of his

qualifications, in Tomon's eyes, he'd finally gotten his hands on a top-dog position.

This small village town hall was his castle, and he wanted to cling to that forever. With his abilities, he couldn't count on any more promotions. Instead, he'd devote his life to Todd Village and was prepared to make it his final resting place.

And yet...

I had no idea we were going to be sent a central bureaucrat fallout. I hope His Excellency the Prefectural Governor won't be laying me off to replace me...

Tomon mulled over these thoughts, suspicious. In the empire's gigantic chart of government positions, Tomon's was nearly on the lowest rung, so he'd never imagined that his new employee would be someone sent directly by the Chancellor of Ceremonial Affairs, who sat in a position far above everyone else. He couldn't fathom that anyone would care about the social status of someone like the chief of a village town hall.

That was why he spoke ill of Zen, loudly airing his prejudice. "I've heard that Zen fellow was called 'a disgrace to the Leadon family' back at the imperial capital. He was a bureaucrat of the ministry head offices, but only thanks to his parents. I'm sure he must've made a mistake so egregious that he was demoted all the way out here. It's even possible that he'd had a hand in embezzlement, so the Leadon family used their influence to try and hide that fact while sending him here until the dust settles."

After he prattled on and on, he flashed a dubious smile as he declared to his subordinates, "He'll probably mess up here too. Naturally, when that happens, I will take responsibility and report him to the higher-ups and have him severely punished. If something happens between you and Zen, do not fear the Leadon family name but come and tell me immediately. I promise nothing bad will happen if you do."

This was simply a government official's way of saying, *I want to hurry up and get rid of him, so give me a tip as soon as he messes up!*

All three of his subordinates looked a bit put off, but Tomon

pretended he didn't notice. His position as chief was on the line here!

Then that eyesore came strolling in, reporting for work. "I'm Zen Leadon, and I'll be working here as of today. I hope we all get along," Zen said, giving a brief yet cheerful self-introduction in front of everyone.

Tomon scrutinized him up and down. *He's different from what I was expecting... Although he's fallen from grace, he is still a member of that family of esteemed bureaucrats. I figured he'd be a shrewd man or a detestable scoundrel. He seems extremely plain-looking too. He truly is just an ordinary guy. Is he like the leftover tea leaves of the famed Leadon siblings?*

He was thrown off. Judging by his subordinates' reactions, he knew they felt similarly. Anna was the exception, who had prior knowledge beforehand from her relative that Zen was kind of unextraordinary.

"Er... Where should I start?" Zen asked, hoping for directions. Everyone came back to their senses.

"Y-Yes, I commend you for taking up a new post, Mr. Zen," Tomon said, stepping up to the plate to give him an (insincere) greeting. "I hope we get along as well. I humbly welcome you."

He continued. "That open desk over there is yours. Use it how you like."

"Yes, thank you very much," Zen replied with a smile. He took a seat at the desk on the immediate right-hand side of the chief's own desk, which was positioned at the end of the room. It was none other than the desk Tomon had been using a mere two months ago.

After that, everyone gave a simple introduction. The other three people apart from Tomon were the young, newly wedded Max, the self-deprecating and pessimistic Namnam, and the youngest employee, Anna, who was twenty years old.

"As for your first task... Anna, why don't you get him started?"

"Yes, Chief." The youngest junior among the subordinates stood up from her desk and guided Zen to the bookshelves close to the wall. "There are several businesses run in Todd Village, including the five general stores and the village mayor's tavern."

"Ah, yes. That's what I've heard."

"We're currently all dividing the work between us to check each store's ledgers."

"I suppose tax season is busy no matter where you are."

"That's right. We want to hurry up and get this over with so we can have a fresh start to the new year."

"Ah... How nice. I came here hoping for work that was just like this."

"Also, Mr. Zen, you don't need to be so polite with me."

"But you are my senior here..."

"I'm sure you're older than me. Besides, we all talk casually to one another apart from when we're speaking to the chief."

Zen hesitated. "I understand. When in Cylin, I'll do as the Cylineans do."

"Okay. I'm sorry for putting this on you all of a sudden, but can I ask that you go check the Mocos's Store's ledgers? Starting from here are all of January's documents, and this section is Mocos's."

"I understand."

Zen promptly grabbed a volume from the cabinet where Anna was pointing and flipped through to examine it. He was looking at a bookkeeping journal.

The empire had used double-entry bookkeeping since its founding, utilizing a method of accounting created around two hundred and fifty years ago in a maritime nation to the south. It allowed them to keep complete records of transactions and money. Merchants could use it to track their business, and it kept the empire from overlooking taxes that they were owed. However, it was much more complicated compared to single-entry bookkeeping. Moreover, the dataset was huge and diverse, so it was a heavy burden on both the one making the ledgers and the one checking them. That was why countries that used double-entry bookkeeping were still very much in the minority.

In fact, as Zen flipped through the ledgers, he said, "The inconsistencies in these really stand out."

"Exactly! You can tell they were reluctantly made by an old guy living a carefree life in the countryside, right? It's way worse than

just carelessness. And it's not even just Mocos. It's everyone!" Anna rambled off her complaints as she sat back at her desk and rubbed her temples, then went back to scowling at the ledgers she was responsible for.

Tomon still had a hard time with checking double-entry bookkeeping, so he understood how Anna felt. However, for the sake of Catalan's dignity, which was a country of bureaucrats, no government official could escape office work no matter how complicated or difficult. That especially held true for this village town hall.

In bigger places, like in the town halls of actual towns or the prefectural government offices, there were properly defined sections where each government official could engage in work that they were highly specialized in.

On the other hand, all four people (now five starting today) in this village town hall had to take on all of that work. Although the scale of a village was much smaller, so their work was simpler compared to in a city or town, each staff member still had to take on whatever work needed to be done, regardless of what it was.

That was also why everyone here aside from Tomon, the person in charge, was young. It was standard practice for local government officials in the empire to first accumulate all kinds of experience here, and after determining what each of them was suited for, they'd be moved up to a bigger government office.

And then in the Todd Village Town Hall, one heathen had appeared.

It needn't be said that that was Zen Leadon, who'd been demoted from the central government agencies.

I'll see if he's actually going to do his work. Tomon stole glances at Zen, who'd returned to his desk, and assessed the way he worked.

Just like everyone else, Zen spread out three ledgers on his desk and carefully examined them against each other, seeing if the numbers matched up and if there were any inconsistencies in the contents. Either that, or he was simply pretending and was actually slacking off.

In Catalan, the way double-entry bookkeeping was handled in these times required keeping three separate types of books, including journals, ledgers, and a diary as well. In the diary, you had to write down precisely what transaction you did with whom and when. This was a huge pain for the person doing the checking. It took an extremely long time to read through the entries, and it was especially painful to look at if it was written by a merchant who was poor at writing. They'd do things like ramble about details that had nothing to do with the transactions themselves.

The Mocos's Store's diary that Zen was in charge of was exactly of that sort. In other words, the troublesome work that no one else wanted to do had been shoved onto this newcomer.

I won't pity him because of that, though!

Tomon would have him check over one month's worth of ledgers for today. If he couldn't finish, then he'd make him stay overtime.

This was absolutely not bullying. This was the workload expected of government officials of the empire.

Totally.

While Tomon thought about those things, he'd occasionally glance over at Zen as if just checking on him.

Around two hours had passed, and it was about time for lunch. Tomon was just about to clear his throat to signal that to his employees.

It was at that very moment that Zen said, "I've finished checking the ledgers."

There weren't enough people in the room to say that it caused a commotion per se, but the subordinates were taken aback. It took a good second for even Tomon to register what he'd said.

"Ah... Do you mean you've finished checking January's ledgers?" Although he thought there was no way that was possible, he checked to confirm it anyway.

Normally, this work took all day, often bleeding into overtime. There was no way he'd really finished that in a mere two hours. It was his first day, after all. Maybe he'd misunderstood something.

"Oh, no. That's not it."

"I'd figure." So it *was* a misunderstanding.

"I've finished checking the Mocos's Store's ledgers for the entire year."

"Excuse me?!" Tomon shouted hysterically. He could not believe his ears.

There was a clatter of chairs; unconsciously, the subordinates had half risen to their feet too.

"An entire year?! All of them?! Just now?!"

"Yes," Zen replied. "I've finished them all."

"Impossible. Show me!"

"Yes, please check them, Chief."

Zen gathered several months' worth of ledgers and carried them by the armful to Tomon.

I bet most of it's just shoddy work! So he really is a no-good government official. I'll teach him a thing or two about being sloppy in my castle!





Now thoroughly irritated, he inspected the ledgers, scanning them for any flaws.

But there was nothing. No matter which page he opened to, he found not a single mistake. Zen had pointed out all of the inconsistencies in the ledgers, and he'd even used red ink to replace the mistaken calculations with the correct numbers. It was absolutely perfect work. What was more...

"Um, Chief... Those numbers are wrong." At just one glance at the opened ledgers spread out on Tomon's desk, Zen identified the mistakes that Tomon had overlooked. Not only that, but he was considerate enough to whisper it to spare him the shame in front of his subordinates.

Tomon's face turned red upon finding that he himself was the one with flawed work. While he would seriously reflect on that fact, the problem at hand here was Zen.

"Th-Thank you for your hard work, Zen. It's incredible that you finished it so quickly. But aren't you getting a little ahead of yourself since it's your first day? If you push yourself and harm your physical or mental health, It'll be on me as your supervisor. Please don't worry me so much." While Tomon weaved together some insincere praise, he warned Zen to not overdo it.

However, now Zen was the one embarrassed. "I-I apologize. I'd actually been taking it easy. This relaxed environment is just so wonderful that I couldn't help but get caught up in it."

"Huh?!" *This* was taking it easy?! *There are limits to how far you should go with your bluffs. Don't be such a show-off! Is he planning to take over my position after all?!*

His mind in a new state of crisis, he smoothed that panic over with a superficial smile. "I see. It seems you're adept at dealing with tax inquiries."

"I don't think I'm particularly good with them. I just happened to be at the Tax Bureau for the past six months."

"I see, I see. I'm sure you were the top worker there."

"No, not at all," Zen denied. "It was all I could do to not drag down the people around me. It's just that once I finally got used to the work, I was transferred here."

"Then what? Does that mean that there are monst—I mean, such capable government officials like you all over the place at the empire's Tax Bureau?"

"Well, the people who are especially regarded as the elite types can work five times faster and more accurately than me."

Tomon was absolutely astounded. The other subordinates were in the same boat. He wanted to believe that Zen was only exaggerating. He wanted to believe that Zen was haughty, like what a former government official from the ministry head offices would be like. That he looked down on them for being local government workers.

But Zen's tone and attitude were just so natural, with nothing that would offend anyone, that Tomon couldn't imagine he was lying or exaggerating.

If I remember right, the imperial capital has a population of one million... The number of people doing business was probably in the ten thousands. No, the head office Tax Bureau should be managing the revenue of the entire nation. In that case, indeed, if one couldn't process paperwork as fast as Zen had demonstrated, they wouldn't be worth the time of day. All central government officials most certainly had to be monsters. They wouldn't be qualified for their roles otherwise.

Even I, as a child, dreamed of working in the head offices...

Tomon's parents had worked desperately to send him to a private school. He'd studied as hard as he could to live up to their expectations. That might have been why he'd been a cut or two above the other kids in his generation. He'd also been complimented by his teachers.

So when he turned fifteen, he decided he wanted to take the exam to get into the central government agencies. Even if the Advanced Civil Service Exam was impossible, then maybe the intermediate one... No, even the basic civil service exam was fine. He'd pass for now and become a government official in the head offices. However, he was told something when he consulted his teacher.

His teacher had always praised Tomon's hard work, but with a

serious face that Tomon had never seen before, he said, “I’m telling you this for your own good. If you’re going to take an exam, then take the Nazalf Local Government Civil Service Exam. It takes a considerable amount of money to cover travel costs to the imperial capital as well as handle the fees to take the exam. That’ll all come to nothing.”

He’d felt bitter toward that teacher back then, but his judgment had been correct. Tomon was realizing it now for the first time, at nearly forty-five years old. He felt it keenly upon seeing the genuine monster Zen Leadon before his eyes nonchalantly asking, “Chief, can I have my next assignment?”

He just had no words to say for a brief moment.

“E-Excuse me, Mr. Zen! Can you take over my portion?” shouted the eldest subordinate, Max, who was twenty-five years old, suddenly standing up. “My wife is actually in labor, and it looks like she’s going to give birth today.”

“Ah. You should hurry home, then.”

“You can just check over the work I was going to do today—Paplan’s Store’s ledgers for April. I’ll do the rest by myself. Sorry to push this on you.”

“We’re supposed to help each other when we’re in trouble, after all.”

“I’m seriously in your debt. I’ll definitely return the favor!” Max exclaimed, gratitude written all over his face before he happily rushed home.

Still, Zen was just so kindhearted. To see this situation in an uncharitable light, he’d just met his senior, Max, who might’ve simply been a slacker shoving his work onto Zen, yet Zen himself didn’t mind one bit. Humming to himself as he sat at Max’s desk, he took over his job of checking the ledgers.

Of course, he finished that task too in no time at all.

“Do you have more work for me, Chief?” Zen’s casual question, seeking yet another helping of paperwork, actually struck fear into Tomon’s heart.

“A-Ah... No, you’ve worked more than enough. You can go home for today.”

"Really?! It's not even noon yet!" Zen exclaimed, amazed. He made a big deal of it as if to say, *Such a happy thing like this exists in this world?!* and *Can I really?*

While Tomon was overwhelmed by the puzzling aura Zen gave off, he said, "O-Of course. If you finish work early, then you get to go home early. That's a matter of course. It's my job to create a fair working environment."

"Y-Yeees! Thank you! I can have lunch with my daughter!" He showed his doting side even as he went home with the innocent jubilance of a child himself.

Tomon was left dumbfounded as if he'd witnessed a passing storm. However, he then heard his other two subordinates speak up.

"Was it okay to send him home, Chief?" asked Anna.

"If he just does everything, then you don't need us..." mumbled Namnam.

Their voices made him come back to his senses.

"D-Don't be ridiculous! As if we could make Zen do all the work himself while we take it easy! That's unfair. You're still civil servants of the empire. You should be ashamed of yourselves!"

They both took a moment to reflect. "Yes, you're right..." said Anna.

"I was wrong to say that..."

"So long as you understand," Tomon said. "At any rate, Zen will take on the same amount of work as the rest of you. It's all right if he helps you a little, but I won't have you take advantage of him. You hear me?"

"We understand..."

"We'll let Max know too..."

Anna and the pessimistic Namnam were good people. They immediately showed remorse upon hearing Tomon's reasoning.

Tomon nodded on the surface, but inside, he was thinking, *You've got to be kidding! The idea of that monster taking on all of the work... Just try and steal my achievements! If he does that, then I really won't be needed anymore as a chief!*

If he wanted to cling to this post, he absolutely could not pass on all the work to Zen no matter what. Tomon swore this to himself

with everything he had.

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Meanwhile, Zen had returned home.

"How was your first day at work, father?" Elysia asked. The two of them engaged in friendly conversation as they sat at the dining table, eating her home cooking.

"It has a great atmosphere," Zen told her, lighting up. "I'm sure it's thanks to the chief's own personal influence. I'm so lucky to have a good boss. Mr. Tomon worries about his subordinates' health, and he's super fair. I could tell he has a wonderful sense of wisdom. The guys back in the capital tend to look down on local government officials, but I was reminded again just how disgraceful that attitude is."

Zen happily rambled on and on, his words flying out from excitement.

"Most of all, I love the fact that I don't have any work to do! Can you believe that, Elysia? Back at the head offices, you normally couldn't finish everything within the year. But my seniors at my new workplace said they wanted to hurry up and get everything done so they can have a fresh start to the new year. November has just started, and it looks like they already know they can finish everything in time. This is exactly the kind of easy workplace I was hoping for!"

"Hee hee. I'm happy you can come home early too," Elysia giggled. She was happy for him, and Zen nodded eagerly in reply.

Then he looked up at the ceiling. "Ahh... This new job is like a dream come true. It blew all of my expectations out of the water. I can't be too loud about it, but I need to thank Yohia."

With a dreamy expression on his face, he let out a sigh.

***

Unbelievably for the season, the weather had turned nice and warm, even though it had been drizzling that morning.

Even Keel, who was typically by the fireplace, had moved to the garden to bask in the sun.

Elysia was joyfully out drying the laundry. However, her skills were still lacking, so it was a struggle. She hung the clothes easily enough on a line under the eaves, but she was fighting a particularly tough battle with larger items like bedsheets.

"Can you help me, Keel?" she asked, obviously joking. Finding herself amusing, she giggled as she finished up her chore. Then she headed toward Keel, who was curled up on the ground and lying on his side, and plopped down on top of him. "Hah!"

It was easy for him to catch her entire body. The gentlemanly Keel didn't show an inkling of reluctance when she made him a pillow.

Elysia lay next to him to half hug his large abdomen. "You smell like the sun," she sighed, burying her face in his white coat.

Keel's fur felt warmer and cozier than usual, as if it'd absorbed all the winter sunlight. It was much fluffier too.

"I'm getting the hang of doing the laundry even without Mrs. Donna's help now." As she rubbed her cheeks against Keel's coat, she breathed out a proud chuckle. She was still quite slow and took longer than most people, but the fact she could do more than she used to by herself filled her with happiness and a sense of pride.

Keel rubbed his muzzle against her back to praise her. It tickled, but it felt nice.

"I need to prepare lunch before father comes back from work...but let's have a break."

Keel yawned in agreement. Elysia found herself getting drowsy too. It should be a crime how pleasant the sun's warmth and the fluffiness around her felt when she was tuckered out from the laundry. As if she were being dragged down into a murky swamp, she dozed off.

How long had she been asleep?

"I'm back, Elysia. It's about time for lunch."

Hearing Zen's voice, her eyes flew open with a start. She met his gaze where he was stooping down near her, peering into her face. "W-Welcome back, father," she stammered.

“No need to panic. You were fast asleep, so I did think twice about waking you. But if we have lunch too late, we won’t be in the mood for dinner, right?”

“W-Was I sleeping that deeply?”

“Dead to the world,” he teased. Elysia blushed. The fact that her prone sleeping face had been seen in broad daylight made her feel so embarrassed. What made it worse was that he was a man, which, as a girl, she was keenly conscious of.

“I-I’ll hurry and make lunch.”

“Don’t worry. I prepared it today.” Zen held up a basket. He’d probably made it while she napped away, all wrapped up in Keel’s body.

She hadn’t sensed him at all. She blushed yet again when it sunk in how sound asleep she’d been. “I-I’m sorry, father!”

“Huh? What are you sorry for?”

“It’s my job to cook lunch...”

“There’s no set agreement on that in our house. Anyone who’s free to do the chores can do them. Doesn’t that work well enough for us?”

“But you already have your own job to worry about,” she insisted. “I don’t think you should have to do household chores on top of that...”

“No, I told you before, didn’t I? Sure, it’s technically work, but my job’s way too easy.”

“But I just don’t feel right if I don’t do anything...” She pouted. “At least while you’re at work.”

“Hmm...” Zen gave her a conflicted smile. His face clearly reflected his inner thoughts: *I don’t know how I feel about Your Highness doing all that for me.*

Elysia grew huffy and frowned. Then she grabbed Zen’s arm and pulled him down closer with all her might. He dropped to the grass next to her, their backs against Keel as if he were a sofa cushion. In just one move, she’d taken the high ground from him and was now on the offensive. When their shoulders touched from how close they were, Zen flinched.

“Huh? Elysia?!”

"The weather's so nice today," she hummed. "Let's have lunch outside."

That'd been Zen's plan. That was why he'd brought the basket out here. However, he'd had no idea they'd be so close together like this.

"H-Hey, we're outside. You never know who's looking. I don't think it's a good idea for you to be so clingy."

"We're family, you know. Please don't be so flustered."

Indeed, right now, she was Zen's daughter. She wasn't Her Highness the Imperial Princess. She'd emphasized that by making him sit next to her. There was no reason to worry about how they'd look to anyone else either.

On top of that, Keel's large body had curled up even more, wrapping around the two of them so they couldn't escape. The fluffy prison was complete. He'd woken up at some point to assist Elysia.

Nice one, Keel, she thought, seeking eye contact with the wolf for a second. As he gave her a look that said, *Good luck*, he immediately closed his eyes and pretended to sleep.

"I'll help myself, then," she said.

"Y-Yeah. It's just simple stuff, though."

Elysia took the basket Zen handed her. When she opened the lid, she found sandwiches with smoked pork, fried eggs, and pickled vegetables packed tightly inside. The bread and ham had been toasted to the point of scorch marks, so they were still warm.

Elysia picked up a sandwich. "Here you go, father. Say 'aah,'" she teased.

"That's not what a father and daughter would do!" Zen shouted. This was a small village, but they were still in broad daylight. People came and went often enough, and Keel's huge, sleeping body in the yard stood out to passersby. Those strangers looked at Elysia and Zen happily wrapped up together as if thinking things like, *Oh, that's heartwarming*, or, *If only our daughter were that attached to me.*

With her mischievous spark ignited, Elysia pressed her body weight against Zen to get him to squirm uncomfortably. There was little space for that in this fluffy prison, though.

Each time she did so, his face would busily turn different shades

of color from pale to red.

Ahh... I like how he's kind and not pretentious. It's also cute how much more unaccustomed he is to women than I am to men. Even so, he does have his moments when he's reliable... He's truly as mother had said... No, more so...

As Elysia giggled, she took a bite of Zen's homemade sandwich.

By noon, the sun had climbed even higher in the sky, and with Zen's and Keel's warmth right next to her, she felt absolutely amazing. Winters in the empire's south weren't half bad. However...

"Father, I think the eggs would taste better if the yolks were still soft," she said.

"Ah, yeah..."

"I don't mind that the bread and ham are warm, but they're too burnt."

"It seems I can't compete against you anymore when it comes to cooking..."

"It's better if I'm in charge of the food after all, right?"

Zen hesitated. "I have no room to argue..."

That was the way Zen and Elysia spent their days. One month passed in the blink of an eye since they'd come to Todd Village, and their daily life was filled with fun.

I'm getting along with Her Highness—I mean, Elysia—as a father better than I expected. Man, I'm surprised that it's actually to where we're a little too close. Well, I guess that's better than things not going well, Zen thought to himself more than once.

They had good relations with the villagers as well, of course. The couple next door, Donna and Kulzawa, and their family always treated them particularly well.

Everyone at the town hall welcomed Zen warmly every morning, and it was great how he usually finished work by noon. His boss, Tomon, seemed to worry about his newcomer, always telling Zen things like "Don't push yourself. You can take your time" and "Remember, you're not in the head offices anymore."

Back when he'd been hellishly swamped with work at the imperial capital, every minute had felt like hours. A month passed so fast when you were enjoying a happy life. "I'm going to be an old man

before I know it," Zen caught himself saying with glee.

It was now December 3rd.

Zen took advantage of the holidays to take Keel and Elysia to the nearby Giovanni Sea.

It was the one from the legends, which said that five hundred years ago, a certain sage had used an incredibly powerful magic he'd obtained from a leviathan to create this inland sea in one night. It was named Giovanni after the sage.

One theory was that this sea was connected beyond space-time to the one-horned divine god's domain that was located in the western ocean. That was why despite being located inland, fish were abundant in its clear waters.

Now, setting aside whether that was actually true, this was the first time the three of them had seen the sea.

Although they were in the warm southern part of the empire, it was still quite cold near the water in wintertime. Elysia and Zen stuck together and sat down on the sandy beach. The salty breeze still felt chilly even while wrapped up in the warmth of Keel's fluffy coat.

But they forgot about the cold as they took in the grand, unimaginable scenery stretching out before them.

"As a sea..." Elysia started, "this is rather small, isn't it, father?"

"I've only seen what they look like on a map, but you're right. This is like a puddle compared to the western ocean."

"I would like to see it together with you one day."

"I think I'll pass," he said. "If this is just a puddle, then I think I'll be so overwhelmed by the real thing that I'll faint."

"Aw. Indulge your daughter a little bit, will you?"

Even as they talked, neither of them could take their eyes off of the piece of disconnected ocean. They watched the waves flow in and out, and the horizon beyond the waters. Keel might've been the only one bored with it; he looked sleepy.

Zen heard someone coming his way, their footsteps sinking into the sand.

"Would you like to come inside soon? I've prepared some tea. It'll

warm you right up," the man proposed politely. He was none other than the prefectural governor Cummel himself.

He owned a vacation home nearby, and remembering that Zen and Elysia had shown interest in Nazalf's sea, he'd gone out of his way to invite them to stay over.

They walked back with him to his vacation home, and they sat in the salon that had a large fireplace and drank tea that the property's caretakers had prepared. Zen and Cummel had dark tea, Elysia sipped black tea, and Keel had been given some warm milk.

They engaged in lively conversation for a while as they ate expensive sweets that had been made with plenty of sugar and butter. Cummel courteously asked Elysia things like if she was used to her new life or if there was anything giving her trouble. As she was the only young girl among adults, he was attentive in making sure she didn't get bored.

After they'd thoroughly warmed up, they finally went back out to start fishing. Elysia was participating this time, so Keel, who was only interested in sleeping, was left behind alone in the salon.

Thickly armed against the cold, the three of them headed out to the fishing spot. There was a wharf near Cummel's vacation home, and he'd claimed there was no better spot along the whole sea. His love for fishing had actually grown so intense, he'd built this home here specifically for that.

"This whole area is my property," Cummel said, "so no one else is allowed to fish here. I'm often busy, so it's rare that I can visit. At this point, the fish probably think they're mostly safe."

That was why, when he did come occasionally like this, the fish apparently bit every hook with no hesitation.

All right, today's the day. I'm going to catch fish like nobody's business!

Zen eagerly cast his line out into the sea. For the past month whenever Kulzawa would invite him, he'd kept trying to fish at the river to learn from experience. However, he'd actually still never caught a single fish.

"My niece Anna was prattling on about how great you are about your work, but your fishing skills still have a ways to go," Kulzawa

had teased.

So today would be the day Zen would rid himself of that reputation once and for all! He had become faster at latching bait onto the hook, and his form while wielding the rod had improved.

No sooner had he dangled his fishing line into the sea than he already felt a strong tug.

Zen's heart started rapidly thumping in his chest. He felt an unfamiliar vibration coming from his fishing rod.

D-Does this mean something took the bait? When he tentatively pulled on the rod, sure enough, he could feel resistance coming from under the water!

B-But don't get ahead of yourself. C-Calm down and r-reel it in... His face betrayed the fact that he'd absolutely not calmed down as he kept taking in deep breaths that did nothing to quell his excitement.

If you pulled the line in too aggressively, depending on its size and variety, the fish you'd caught could bite off the bait or the line could snap. It was a mistake even a veteran like Kulzawa couldn't avoid completely. It was even harder for a beginner like Zen, who had absolutely no frame of reference by which to gauge the size or strength of the fish on the other end.

That was why, with a shaky hand, he slowly and carefully reeled in his catch. He waited for the fish to tire itself out in the process. Once its resistance weakened...then he pulled it in with all he had!

There it iiis!

The fish he'd snared sprang up in the air. It was a large mackerel, shining with silver scales. It was the first fish Zen had ever caught himself, and he was over the moon with joy. It was like he was a child again.

"Oh, what a fine catch that is," Cummel praised him from where he was dangling his own fishing line next to him.

Dazed, Zen took the mackerel off the hook and put it in his fishing basket. What an energetic fish it was! His hands could still feel how it had fought him through the rod and thrashed as he'd removed the hook from its mouth.

I get why Mr. Kulzawa and His Excellency Cummel are so into

fishing! He'd probably never forget what emotions his catch had made him feel.

I'm going to fish for the rest of my life! Clenching a fist, he looked up at the sky, invigorated. Then, while the excitement had yet to wear off, he swung his fishing pole in hopes for another catch.

That was around the time when the property's caretakers brought out braziers to set up around the three of them for warmth.

Zen, Elysia, and Cummel continued to enjoy fishing together.

Another one?! Zen got a second fish on his line immediately. It was another mackerel. It was much smaller than the previous one, but he wasn't any less excited.

Then he brought up a third mackerel, and a fourth one, and so on. He wound up with a huge haul.

When he looked at his companions standing next to him, he saw that Cummel was bringing in a great number as well. Elysia, who was being taught by the prefectural governor himself, also landed a filefish on her very first try.

"I didn't know that fishing was so fun," she said, amazed. "I understand why you keep doing it." She was enjoying this hobby with an innocence appropriate for a girl her age.

He couldn't tell her that he hadn't been fully sold on it until now.

The three of them indulged in plenty of fishing until the sun began to set, and they returned to the vacation home, satisfied.

Zen's basket was full of mackerel. The biggest catch of the day was a black porgy, naturally caught by Cummel. There were many fat greenlings and belt fish in the governor's basket as well.

Meanwhile, there were plenty of what you'd call high-quality fish in Elysia's basket, like flounder and sea bass, although they were somewhat small.

"Hmm. It seems like you have a knack for fishing, young lady," Cummel mused, impressed by her haul. "I can hardly believe that this was your first time."

While Zen smiled fondly at the shy and adorable Elysia, he thought to himself, *What about me, Your Excellency?*

He went to check his fishing basket one more time. It was filled with mackerel—basically small fry.

What about me?

The caretakers immediately took the fish they'd caught and prepared them for dinner. The flounder, sautéed with butter sauce, was plump, and the freshly caught belt fish's sweetness wasn't overwhelmed by the batter it was fried with. The sea bass had such a rich savoriness, you wouldn't have been able to tell that all they did was grill them over a charcoal fire with salt.

More than anything else, the delicious fattiness of the big catch, the black porgy, paired with the manila clams was sublime. Combined with the soup made with a shellfish stock, it was such an excellent dish that it rivaled what the cooks could make in the imperial palace. Indeed, with just a single bite, Elysia froze with a hand over her mouth from how delicious it was.

After dinner, Elysia went to bed early. She was probably tired. Her Highness was usually so ladylike, but her first experience with fishing today had greatly excited her.

Zen stayed behind in the dining hall with Cummel and partook in sipping some well-aged amber wine.

This was now the time for grown-ups.

"How are you faring after being transferred to Todd Village, Sir Zen?" Cummel asked. He'd talked with Elysia earlier that day about how she was getting along in her new life, but now with Zen, he was asking specifically about work.

"I've been so unbelievably relaxed," he admitted. He felt ashamed to say this in front of the prefectural governor, who was usually busy.

"I'd assume so... But do not worry about it. Now, is there anything you've noticed that can be improved?"

Zen thought for a moment. "Let's see... I am worried about how there isn't a single doctor in the village." Even in this day and age, it was a common issue in more remote regions. He'd heard from Donna that if the villagers were to get sick or injured, they had to either wait for their ailments to heal naturally or take a three-hour trip to Nazalf City to see a doctor.

Zen could make do with that if he were on his own, but he was scared for Her Highness if she were to unexpectedly fall ill.

“Hmm... I understand,” said Cummel. “I’ll do whatever I can to assist with that.”

“No, Your Excellency Cummel. I appreciate your kindness, but I know it’s a difficult task.”

Those of the educated class who were qualified enough to become doctors were exceedingly scarce. After all, compulsory education was still not a widely accepted concept. Therefore, doctors received a warm welcome wherever they went. It was common sense that they’d settle in a convenient city and cater to many of the middle-class and wealthy citizens, making a killing. If a doctor chose to open a practice in a tiny village like Todd, it’d have to be because they either had a deeply kind heart or it was their beloved hometown. Otherwise, it would never happen.

No matter how much influence Cummel wielded as the most powerful person in Nazalf Prefecture, dispatching a doctor to Todd Village was likely unrealistic. (It’d obviously be a different story if he knew Elysia’s identity, though.)

“Fortunately, there are many plants and mushrooms growing nearby that can be used for medicines,” Zen said.

“I see. So you even have medical knowledge.”

“Only in the realm of self-study. Also, many of those plants and mushrooms can be preserved if you dry or bottle them. I think it could help the village if the town hall could manage them.”

If you were seriously sick or injured, you still wouldn’t have any choice but to go to Nazalf City, but you could cure things like colds right away with those plants. Instead of Zen gathering medicinal herbs for Elysia and trying to manage them at home by himself, it’d be safer if the town hall could handle them with all of the staff members pitching in. It’d be more secure and manageable at a large scale.

“I see. That’s a good idea, Sir Zen.”

“The only issue is...the chief turned me down when I consulted with him.”

“That won’t do,” Cummel said with the stern face of a prefectural governor. “It makes me question Sir Tomon’s abilities as the town hall chief.”

Zen hurried to defend Tomon. "Oh, no. This is a matter that concerns people's lives. I think he was being cautious. Although I have some knowledge, I *am* an unlicensed amateur."

As a good-natured person, he didn't even consider that the truth was that Tomon had turned down his useful suggestion to bar him from making any achievements.

"As such," Zen continued, "if it's possible, I wanted to request that you use your power to dispatch a doctor or herbalist every six months to train the staff. I'm sure the chief will be able to relax if it's by your orders, Your Excellency. He's someone who's passionately devoted to his duties, after all."

"Hmm. I understand. That's a simple task for me," Cummel said, taking it on with pleasure. This past month, Zen had heard many times how astute Nazalf's prefectural governor was, so he felt very reassured.

That astute governor suddenly looked disappointed. "Sir Zen, I really do think a gem like you shouldn't be hidden away in a village town hall."

However, Zen slowly shook his head. "You're overestimating me."

Indeed, Zen probably didn't really have the ability to work hard dealing with big jobs. Over the past month, he'd realized what he actually needed—peace. So long as he had peace, then that was enough.

Chapter 6: Slaying a Monster

However, the peace that Zen had desired was suddenly torn to shreds.

It'd been a mere three days since Zen, Elysia, and Keel had gone to the Giovanni Sea. Zen had been working alongside his coworkers since morning, leisurely doing his desk work.

Thinking it was about time that the chief would want some tea, he was about to take the initiative as a newcomer and stand up.

Right when he was about to, though, a villager came to visit. It was a man about fifty years of age with noticeably white hair carrying a well-used bow and arrow. This was Gota, who was said to be the best hunter in Todd Village. It was known that he was stubborn and didn't get along with his son-in-law, who ran a blacksmith's shop.

Even now, he remained silent and grouchy even though he'd come to the town hall of his own volition.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Gota?" Zen said with a smile, paying no mind to that as he headed over.

With a sullen face, Gota spoke lowly. "A monster has appeared."

Zen was startled for a second before the look in his eyes grew serious. His coworkers were stirring, half in disbelief as they murmured, "A monster?" and "You have to be kidding, right?"

Zen was the only one who met Gota face-to-face. "Please have a seat and tell me more." He tried to guide him to the reception room next to the office.

It was a fact that monsters rarely showed up in human settlements. There was honestly a high possibility that Gota had mistaken what he'd seen for something else or gotten the wrong idea. That being said, in the worst-case scenario that a monster really had shown up near the village, there'd be casualties if they didn't act quickly. Zen had barely any work to do anyway, almost to

the point where he could go home before noon, so he had time to listen to Gota's story at least.

"It's a fox monster," Gota said to Zen, refusing to budge. The attitude he was giving off conveyed that he wasn't here for hospitality. Time was of the essence. He was stubborn to be sure, but he was truly a man among men.

"You spotted it while hunting, I assume?" Zen asked.

"That's right."

"How big was it?"

"It was bigger than your dog. By a good amount."

"What other characteristics did it have? Tell me anything you noticed."

"It had two tails."

Zen's eyes opened wide. Then he spoke its name, groaning. "That's a twintail fox..."

It was a sly and ruthless monster, and a magic-wielding nuisance to boot.

"I'm glad that you informed us," Zen said. Snow was rare in the southern part of the empire, and it only got just cold enough to wilt some of the plants. The animals didn't go into hibernation, so that was why the hunters in the village could go into the forests regularly without suspending their activities. Gota could warn them about the monster as a result.

"I'm also glad you're unhurt," Zen added. For hunters, the ability to go undetected by beasts was indispensable, but Gota was especially skilled to have been able to return home safely without being spotted by the twintail fox. If he'd been noticed, it would've been impossible for him to escape such a clever, magic-using monster.

"What should I do?" Gota asked.

"First, we'll assemble a troop," Zen said. "After that, we might require your assistance in searching for the monster."

"Okay. Tell me whatever you need. I'm going to hole myself up in my house for a while." Once Gota had said what he needed to say, he strode quickly home.

He didn't really have a duty to protect the village, but he was a

man with a strong sense of responsibility. Zen smiled a little.

Then he turned to Tomon and his coworkers and rattled off a steady flow of instructions. "You heard, right? I'm going to go and tell the resident troop about this. There should be other hunters in the forests too. I'll work together with the troop to call them back here. In the meantime, I want the chief to request a subjugation party from the prefectural governor. As for everyone else, I want you to go around to the villagers and explain the dangers and what precautions to take."

His coworkers had all been standing there blankly, unable to keep up with this normally impossible situation, but his directions brought them back to their senses. They all began to move frantically.

It was of course the chief's duty to give out orders, not Zen's, so his actions might make it look like he was impudently taking over Tomon's job and outdoing him. However, this was a state of emergency, so Zen hoped he would let it slide.

As expected of the chief, Zen thought to himself when Tomon said nothing about it. *He isn't holding it against me.*

In reality, the severity of this situation far exceeded Tomon's ability to handle it. While he was at a loss for what to do, he'd found it a great help that Zen had quickly given out instructions. He'd actually chosen to keep his head down and obey.

At any rate, Zen flew out of the town hall.

There were only fifteen soldiers stationed in this village who had been dispatched from the prefectural government office. The duty station was behind the town hall, and the chief stood above them all in the chain of command.

Their duties were to patrol the village, protect it during emergencies, and manage crime, but Todd Village was a peaceful place. The most action they usually saw was breaking up an occasional fight between residents. These soldiers were therefore good-natured people who didn't have a single rough edge; however, right now, that good nature of theirs made them seem unreliable. When Zen explained the situation to them, the eight members who weren't out on patrol were clearly terrified.

A-A monster?!

And it uses magic?!

I don't feel like we'd win against it...

The words those soldiers wanted to say were written all over their faces.

Zen understood their feelings and their position. In this village, he himself could easily live a relaxing everyday life as a government official. In a similar vein, you couldn't blame the soldiers for getting too comfortable this far out into the countryside. There was no way they were going to be like the elite imperial guards who protected the capital.

I guess all I can do is count on what Cummel can do.

Zen looked up to distract himself from the anxieties eating away at him, gazing at that oppressive, low ceiling of this small duty station.

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Cummel indeed worked fast. He organized a subjugation party that day, and they arrived in Todd Village before evening.

"Welcome! Thank you so much for coming!" Tomon shook each and every one of the hundred soldiers' hands, giving them a passionately warm welcome. As a timid person, he'd become extremely uneasy in the situation, anxious that the monster would strike the village at any time. He'd wound up falling into a deep rabbit hole of doubt where he drowned in suspicions like *I'm sure His Excellency the Prefectural Governor has abandoned Todd Village.* However, with the arrival of the subjugation party, he was so relieved that he could've cried.

On the other hand, Zen couldn't help looking at the group somberly. *I suppose even His Excellency Cummel can't give what he doesn't have...*

A troop of only one hundred soldiers was much too small. On top of that, Zen could gather that only around seventy percent of them were active-duty soldiers, while the rest had been rounded up from the reserves, who were normally farmers.

Even the active-duty soldiers didn't inspire much confidence.

They were clearly all hesitant about being told to slay a monster. Indeed, there were a mere two or three people who wore the face of a real veteran.

To begin with, Nazalf City had a population of fewer than five thousand. Although it was a city, it was closer in size to a country town. In order to scrape together some immediate fighting power, this was the best Cummel could do. Zen, who was still a government official, could calculate and understand their financial situation.

To add to that, a young female knight who seemed to be in her mid-twenties was the one leading the subjugation party. She seemed honest and certainly looked gallant with her shiny armor, but it didn't look like she'd had much combat experience.

"I am Mina Houck," she said. "I am the commanding officer of the present subjugation party appointed by His Excellency the Prefectural Governor."

Tomon gave a smile that was blatantly flattering and replied, "If you say that your name is Houck, then does that perhaps mean you're the prefectural governor's..."

"Yes, that's right, Chief. Cummel is my uncle."

"My, I hadn't any clue that His Excellency had such a competent niece!" Tomon exclaimed, all smiles. Half of his behavior was because he wanted to flatter the relative of such an influential person. The other half was because, after finding out that Cummel's precious niece had been dispatched, he'd judged that they'd basically won already.

You've got it backward, Chief... Zen held back a sigh.

"Knight" was a common term in the empire, a relic from before the nation's founding that still remained today. The position was officially called a "guard official," and it was one that the prefectural or state governor appointed directly. (It was common for each commanding officer of the regular army to be called a "knight," and if they were from the Imperial Guard, then they'd be called an "imperial knight." Only the fussiest people minded being referred to as such.)

Becoming a prefectural governor meant that you had a lot of political opponents. You would want to appoint reliable people to be

your guard official. That's why prefectural governors often appointed them from their relatives.

Cummel was the same. It was certainly nepotism, but it was within understanding and reason. People were rarely criticized for doing it.

He was also an upright politician. He hadn't sent his niece over to give a family member an opportunity to distinguish herself by vanquishing a monster, nor had it been to help her gain prestige as a military officer.

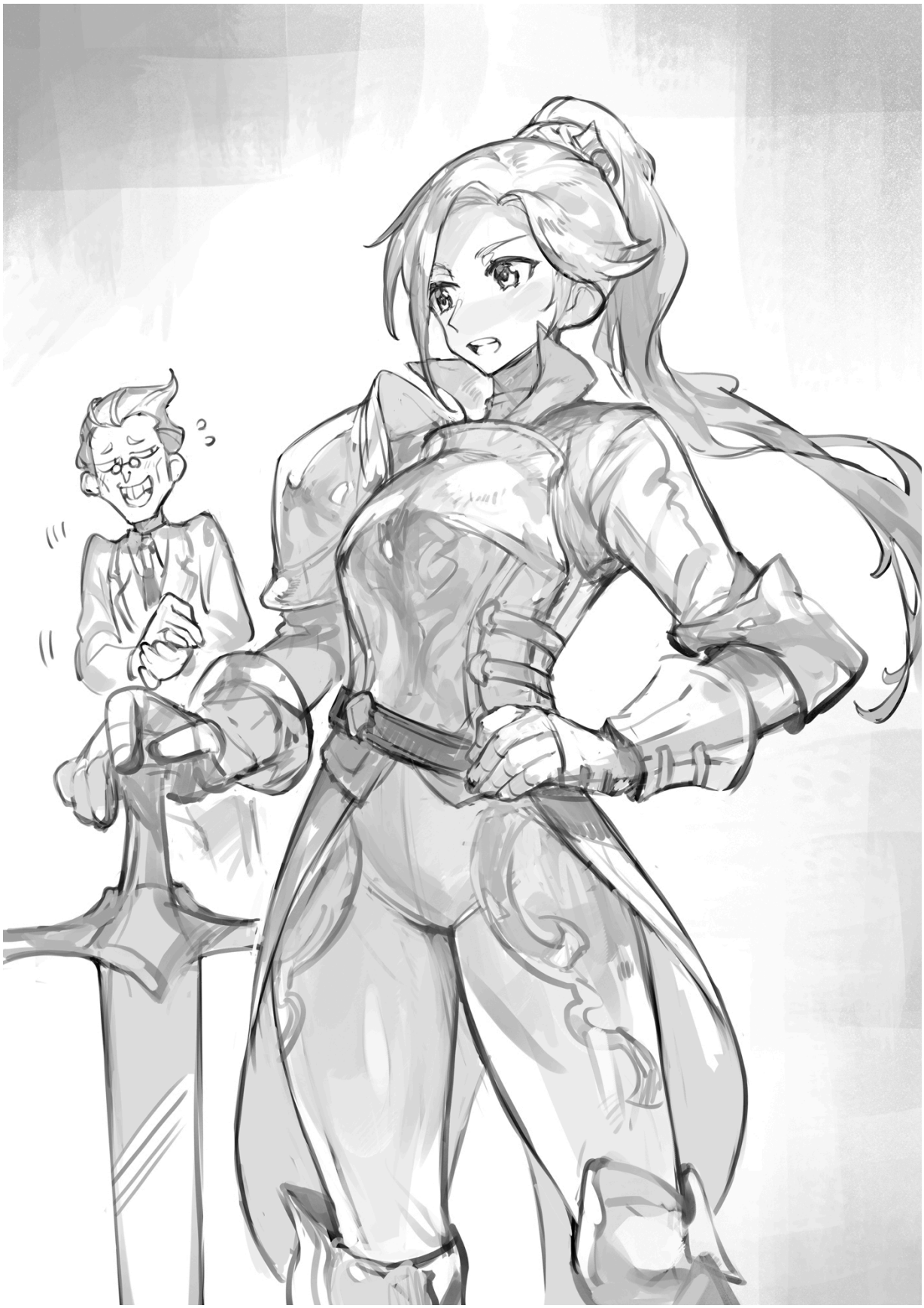
I'm sure His Excellency is well aware of what a formidable monster a twintail fox is.

It was not a foe that you could feel confident facing with just a hundred soldiers from the countryside. They'd definitely defeat it, mind you; Todd Village would be saved. However, Zen could only imagine how many soldiers were going to fall in order to achieve that victory.

In short, it was already decided from the beginning that even if they came out victorious, the commanding officer of this subjugation party would have to take responsibility. That was why Cummel had given such a harsh duty to his relative and not someone else.

"His Excellency has already set off for the state government office on his fastest horse and is requesting reinforcements," Mina explained to Tomon, looking serious. "However, it is likely that it'll take a few days for them to arrive. Until then, we must fight against the monster on our own."

Mina herself was a virtuous knight. She understood that she had such a disadvantageous role, yet she showed no signs of resentment. If anything, she was overflowing with a strong will to protect the village. Even if she was simply putting up a front like a howling puppy, it was still admirable.





"Our party will camp here for the night and commence a search for the monster tomorrow morning."

"Huh? You won't guard the village until reinforcements arrive?" Tomon made a low, displeased sound, hoping it might be some kind of misunderstanding.

This was a natural sentiment coming from the village. Mina understood that and, sounding painfully sorry, she replied, "With this much military power, we cannot relegate these soldiers to protecting Todd Village alone. As I said at the beginning, we are not a garrison. We are a subjugation party. Our sole duty is to search for the monster and slay it."

Nothing we can do about that... Zen thought. What Mina said was true. Cummel had made the right decision when he'd given her those directions. The fact that His Excellency the Prefectural Governor had dispatched all military power currently available to Todd Village meant that everywhere else was short on staff. In these circumstances, it'd be a nightmare if Mina and her party stayed put to protect Todd Village and let the twintail fox run loose, allowing it to move and attack another village. That was why Todd Village's defense would consist solely of the original fifteen resident soldiers.

Still, this was a better strategy than not having anyone protecting the village at all. If the monster came to attack while the subjugation party was out searching for it, these fifteen soldiers could fend it off until Mina and her party came back. Then they could all fight together.

"I hope that you understand, Chief."

Tomon hesitated for a moment before he relented. "I understand." It wasn't necessarily that he agreed with her explanation. He simply approved it because he couldn't oppose the niece of His Excellency.

The subjugation party started preparing to make camp in the plaza, and the most important members were transferred to the town hall's conference room to have a detailed briefing session. From the subjugation party, the squad leaders (commanding officers who led groups of ten) participated along with Mina. From the

village's side, apart from the resident troop's commanding officer and government officials like Tomon there were four volunteer hunters like Gota who were familiar with the forests and would act as guides.

The village had more hunters than this, but these four were valiant people who'd volunteered to slay the monster. They all possessed the strong will to put their lives on the line to protect their families.

Directly opposite to those brave heroes, there was still one coward who remained. That was Tomon.

"I'd like you to come with us during tomorrow's subjugation, Chief," Mina told him, requesting that he take on a dangerous task.

"Me?! Why?!" cried Tomon, forgetting his manners.

The squad leaders took offense at that attitude. While Mina was taken aback, thinking that it was only common sense, she firmly explained, "Sir Gota and the others are working with us, after all. It won't do if not a single person from the town hall comes along. Also, a person who can act as a liaison is indispensable in order to collaborate efficiently. It's a difficult role to undertake, but that's why I'd like it to go to the chief."

She didn't say it outright in front of Gota and the others, but she implied that if the village's hunters died in battle—a likely enough scenario—someone from the village had to take responsibility. To be even more frank about it, depending on the circumstances, if it became necessary for those four to take on a duty where they'd have to brace for death, only someone from the village could make that call. That was precisely how heavy the duty of "taking on the responsibility" was.

"E-Er, b-but I..." Tomon stammered, trying to find some way out of it, but he was so tongue-tied that he couldn't properly form words. That was surely his inherent cowardice coming through.

Mina looked at him with contempt and took advantage of his inability to object. "Then it's been decided," she said, forcing this duty on him. "I'll be counting on you."

Tomon's face was pale from shock. Even after their briefing session was dismissed, he stayed behind, still stunned. Or it might

be more accurate to say that his spirit had left him entirely. He didn't look like he'd even realized the meeting had ended.

Zen couldn't stand to see his superior look like this, so he was the only one who spoke to him. "I'll participate in the subjugation party. Stay behind as chief and work as hard as you can for the sake of the villagers."

"Whuh...?" Tomon gave a miserable, vague response. He probably hadn't considered that there'd be someone willing to take on such a dangerous role. He'd been zoning out for a while, but he must've slowly understood what it was that Zen had just said because tears started rolling down the chief's face. "Are you sure...? Are you sure you're okay taking my place...?"

"I'm a newcomer," Zen said, "and it's the duty of the youth to risk their lives." He smiled wryly at the sight of his chief crying like a forty-five-year-old child. Deep down, he probably had actually been extremely scared.

"I'm sorry. Thank you. I'm indebted to you..." Tomon had taken Zen's hands and repeatedly expressed his sincere gratitude.

"It's no big deal," Zen assured him. "You're the chief, and I'm your subordinate. All you have to do is say the word, and I'll go." That'd been the norm in the central government agencies.

However, Tomon kept his tight grip on Zen's hands. "Still... Thank you so much... I'm sorry for thinking of you as a monster."

"A monster?!" Unable to comprehend Tomon's words, now it was Zen's turn to be confused.

After Tomon repeatedly bowed his head and finally headed home, Zen saw him off before returning home himself.

Now then, this is going to be difficult to explain.

Just as he thought, Elysia got actually mad, which was rare.

Elysia, who'd come to greet him in the living room, stood there and cried, "That's not your responsibility, father! Reconsider this right now. Don't do something so dangerous as trying to fight a monster." She appealed to him, wholeheartedly considering his safety. That made him really happy.

But Zen cared about his daughter equally as much. "Hmm. I do

have a responsibility too. I'm a dad, you know. I want to protect this village—this safe hideout that Yohia went out of his way to find for you. And I don't want to leave that duty to others. I want to do it myself."

When he carefully explained his reasoning, Elysia's breath caught in her throat. "I see... Oh, you know I can't say anything to that..." She was a smart girl, but she was still a child. While she understood his reason, she couldn't help but sulk. It was so adorable how Her Highness pouted her lips. It was an unguarded expression that she would've never shown in the past.

"You're too much of a doting parent, father." She pouted. "You're a love drug dealer."

"What the hell is a love drug dealer?!" he cried.

"Your overdose of love might make me an addict," she said. "You need to take responsibility."

"But I just told you I was going to."

"That's not what I mean. For now, cook me a tasty dinner and make it up to me."

"It's hard for me to make you happy with my cooking," he mumbled with a troubled smile.

She cried, "I don't care, then!" and headed to her bedroom.

Ha ha. This might be the first time I've fought with my daughter. But it doesn't feel as bad as I thought.

With that troubled smile still on his face, he moved toward the living room fireplace.

Keel was curled up in front of the fire. He had been pretending to doze off while keenly tuning in to Zen and Elysia's conversation. For some reason, he gave Zen a look that said, *Even a dog knows to stay out of this*, which was part of a common saying. *You're a wolf, though*, thought Zen.

Zen crouched down next to Keel and stroked his silky fur. "If the worst happens, protect Elysia for me," he said, making this request of him.

As a smart wolf and an unparalleled friend, Keel didn't need a lengthy explanation. *Leave it to me.* Keel nodded.

With this, Zen now wouldn't have any lingering anxieties left.

Tomorrow, he could focus completely on slaying that monster.

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The next day, after Zen got ready, he picked up the long sword that'd been displayed in his bedroom. It was a sharp blade that Sharla had gifted him a long time ago. He'd brought it from his parents' home just in case, though he hadn't thought he'd have to use it anymore. All the same, he never failed to take care of it.

When he took it out of its sheath and examined it, his heart felt like it was becoming as sharpened as its blade.

Today, this is important to me, he thought to himself, and as he held on to these feelings, he resheathed the sword and hung it on his hip.

He met up with Mina's party in the plaza. The group waited for the morning mist to ease up before the one hundred soldiers of the subjugation party departed Todd Village.

Gota went ahead of them to scout for the monster, and the other three hunters spread out not too far away to keep an eye out around them. This forest was their turf. Even the most skilled soldier couldn't hope to compare to them when it came to sensing abnormalities in this area.

Mina repeatedly expressed her gratitude toward them. "It's really reassuring to be able to rely on their expertise," she said as the group all moved along the monster's trail. The veteran squad leader, who was acting as the second-in-command, gave a big nod.

Meanwhile, a different squad leader looked at Zen with a sardonic gaze. "I honestly never thought that cowardly chief would shove his responsibilities onto his subordinate just to get out of them." He insulted Tomon, who was absent.

Zen opened his mouth to defend him by saying he'd taken his place out of his own volition, but...

"Watch your tongue!" Mina promptly rebuked her subordinate. Her action was proof that a gentle-mannered female knight like her could become stern when she needed to.

The squad leader immediately reflected on himself and apologized.

Zen forgave him politely.

Mina spoke again, her words taking a more constructive turn. "You seem accustomed to that sword on your hip. Are you very proficient with it?" With just that, she brought attention to a possibility where, if that were the case, then it was only natural that he'd come instead of Tomon.

"Indeed," Zen said. "I worked briefly in the military drills section of the Ministry of Military Affairs, and I did actual fieldwork for the Guards Bureau."

The look in the eyes of the other soldiers changed. They appeared to have accepted that explanation, and there were signs that they were beginning to feel a sense of comradery with their fellow military officer.

Mina continued. "Additionally, I've heard much from His Excellency the Prefectural Governor about what a wise man you are, Sir Zen. At this time, I'd like to rely on your intellect by all means. If there is anything on your mind, please speak freely."

While Zen felt a bit embarrassed, thinking that calling him wise was an exaggeration, he was thankful for her thoughtfulness.

This had been a strategic performance put on for those around them, and thanks to that, she'd created an atmosphere where Zen could speak his mind freely to the soldiers. Putting aside whether or not he could actually give any good advice, it was better to have an open environment. It was what he'd expect of Cummel's niece. She was an intelligent, astute woman.

Then a soldier who'd been listening in on their conversation—likely a new recruit who you could almost call a boy—felt that now was his chance to ask a question. "According to the squad leaders, the fox monster can use magic. If that's true, then could we not have employed some mages to fight against it?" he asked, obviously anxious and seeking an opinion from no one in particular.

A few of the other soldiers were also in agreement, murmuring, "He's right," and "My thoughts exactly."

By all rights, it was Mina's job as the commander to dispel her

soldiers' doubts. However, it seemed she lacked the knowledge to explain the reasoning in this situation. Her conflicted thought of *But my uncle didn't give me those kinds of instructions...* was written on her face. It was in aspects like this that she showed her youth and inexperience.

None of the veteran squad leaders seemed able to answer the question either, so Zen stepped up to interject. "Any private civilians who claim themselves to be mages, conjurers, or witch doctors are fakes. I won't say they're outright swindlers, necessarily—there are probably many who want to entertain people through magic tricks or do some honest business—but none of them really hold any mysterious powers."

"R-Really?!" Mina blurted out with her eyes wide with amazement. It must've been a huge surprise to her. She showed her true self as a young woman rather than a knight. She was a lady from a good family who'd certainly had a good education, yet this surprised her.

The other soldiers were also taken aback, speechless.

"You need mana to use magic," Zen continued. "That's the energy source that powers it. And as for this so-called mana, humans do not possess it at all."

When he kindly and thoroughly explained the reason, the people around him *wow*'d with amazement.

At the same time, one voice piped up to question him. "Just wait a second, Mr. Government Official. I heard from my granny that the sea here was created magically by a great sage who lived forever ago. Are you gonna say that's a total lie?"

"Oh, no. That is indeed a historical fact."

When Zen affirmed that this local legend was real, confused looks appeared on the soldiers' faces as they wondered, "Wait, how?" and "But I thought humans can't use magic?"

It was a natural reaction, so Zen delved more deeply into the explanation. "Humans don't have mana, but it is possible for them to borrow it. If they do that, then even a human can wield magic."

In this world, there were divine beasts called "The Five Sovereigns."

There were the leviathans that ruled over the great sea, dragons who existed in the wide-open sky, and behemoths that created kingdoms deep in the earth. Then there were the phoenixes that forever reexperienced the cycle of reincarnation, and vanargands that inhabited immortal bodies.

They all held godlike powers and had no rivals in this world (apart from themselves, of course). Therefore, it was no trouble at all for them to lend or bestow a fraction of their power to a human.

"That's why the sage who created the Giovanni Sea was rewarded with great magic from the one-horned divine god, leviathan Kishu Laveriga, and was able to borrow the small portion of mana that he needed at the time."

"Oh. That name might've popped up in the story my granny told me too."

"May I ask a question as well, Sir Zen?" Mina piped up. "It's a famous story how His Majesty the first emperor Julian befriended the golden dragon divine god Catal Catalana. Even after His Majesty died, that well-known dragon king graciously continues to protect the empire to this day."

"Yes, Lady Mina. That's exactly correct."

"In that case, then was His Majesty perhaps a conjurer as well?"

Zen of course knew the answer to that too; however, he studied everyone's expressions before he replied.

The story of the first emperor's friendship with the golden dragon was so famous that even the kids from this remote region knew about it. On the other hand, the historical fact that the emperor had indeed made a contract with the golden dragon divine god, borrowed its mana, and wielded that powerful magic to found the empire was mostly unknown. The empire loathed to publicize that fact, although it wasn't to the point where they actively tried to cover it up.

The emperor needed absolute authority. For the citizens, there were two ways they could interpret the idea that he'd founded the nation with magic: They might either think he was a powerful founder great enough to have made free use of such a mysterious

power, or they could view him as a man who'd had no choice but to rely on some questionable magic.

So Zen, upon seeing that there was no one here who appeared to know this historical fact, evaded the question. "Now I wonder," he said vaguely. "However, as per the dying wishes of the virtuous first emperor, if the imperial household one day falls into corruption and the dragon determines they're unfit to reign over the empire, it'll punish them with magic equally as powerful. It seems that it's upholding his wish to this day." Although it was almost too frightening to even mention that fact, he added it anyway.

"Wow! I didn't know that story was real!"

"Yes. That's why every generation that's come after His Majesty have been intelligent and noble individuals. They try to be strict with themselves and kind to their citizens."

That was why the empire remained sound in most respects to this day. Indeed, authority always falls into corruption. Those at the top normally begin to rot one hundred years after a nation's founding. It was like the head of a fish. Anyone who'd studied history would know that fact, and it was a truth staring them straight in the face. Catalan remained the outlier to that terrible precedent solely because the wise dragon king was watching over—or monitoring—the absolute top position of the empire. Of course, the self-restraint and hard work of the later generations were still worthy of respect.

"What a touching story!" Mina exclaimed in admiration. The other soldiers who lacked education or understanding of culture, or weren't that patriotic, seemed to not really get it. But Mina wasn't so narrow-minded or incapable of understanding other people's sentiments as to criticize them for not sharing in the excitement.

Smiling, Zen was in agreement with Mina's reaction. The story was moving, yet he thought to himself, *There's actually a bad story connected to this too.*

He remained quiet for a bit.

Indeed, there was another existence inseparable from the golden dragon divine god's influence that endured even now. The first emperor wasn't the only one who'd borrowed mana from Catal

Catalana. Deep in the empire's palace, there was a group of conjurers who held a lesser contract with that famous dragon king to this day.

That group consisted of actual mages and was an underground organization under the emperor's direct control. They operated behind the scenes with no other objective but to protect the emperor's authority. They believed in the golden dragon divine god who was the source of their mana, revered the present emperor as god incarnate, and called themselves the "sorcerer monks of the Vajra Temple."

It's best that people don't know about that, Zen thought to himself. Actually, just speaking of it aloud could lead to trouble. He didn't really think fondly of the existence of the Vajra Temple. Or rather, it was a common belief held in powerful families with histories as old as the imperial family that a wise ruler should never rely on things like conjurers.

That was why, according to Sharla, the scrupulous Heinri hadn't utilized them much when he'd been emperor. Aness had been more open-minded, so it was only upon her strong suggestion that he'd used them solely for secret intelligence.

On the other hand, I wonder about the current emperor... Zen couldn't help the thought from crossing his mind. In a complete shift from the noble former emperor Heinri, his younger brother who'd taken the throne was apparently a man who'd seek to assassinate the innocent Elysia. Would he be able to withstand the temptation of abusing that organization's power?

No, I can't be thinking about this. The problem right in front of me now is exterminating that monster. Zen managed to back away just before he'd stepped foot into the labyrinth of his own thoughts.

"I got it, Mr. Government Official. That basically means that a real mage ain't readily available."

Zen immediately responded to the soldier's question. "That's right," he said. "Divine beasts rarely reveal themselves before humans in the first place, and it's next to impossible to form a contract with them."

"In that case, Mr. Government Official, that means we don't got any countermeasures against magic that even we could do?"

"Let's see... There is something, although I can't say for certain it's a viable plan..."

"That's fine. Please share it with us. I also am interested," Mina joined in, pleading with him.

Zen explained, "You need a great amount of concentration in order to use magic. That's why, theoretically, it'd be possible to weaken the effects of the monster's magic or cause it to fail altogether if you can throw off its concentration."

"Oh, I see! Then we should all make noise and taunt it."

"If we're gonna get attacked anyway, then it's worth giving it a try!"

"Yeah, I'm starting to see some hope."

"That Mr. Government Official sure knows everything."

"Indeed," Mina agreed with her subordinates. "That's what I'd expect of someone my uncle—I mean, His Excellency the Prefectural Governor—thinks so highly of."

Zen was embarrassed. It was like he was the one being taunted even before the monster had had its turn. However, it was way better than being laughed off and ignored. (There were occasionally some especially stubborn soldiers.)

He sincerely prayed that this way, they'd be able to save more lives.

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Before the sun had reached its zenith, Mina signaled to her soldiers that it was time for lunch. If they continued to have no luck finding the monster, they planned to head home before sunset. The twintail fox was nocturnal, and it'd be the only one to benefit from the darkness.

Days were already short enough in the winter, so it was a good decision to stop their party's activities a little early. It was unclear whether that was Mina's own decision, what the veteran squad leaders had proposed, or advice that Cummel had given beforehand.

At any rate, the soldiers all sat down where they pleased around their commanding officer Mina. The active-duty soldiers wore lightweight leather armor, but they were heavily armed, each one carrying a spear and shield in their hands, a sword on their hip, and a bow on their back. Thus, they were all relieved when they could finally put them down.

To be honest, while it could not be denied that it was dubious what these rural soldiers were capable of, they did have pretty good equipment. That might have been thanks to Cummel.

On the other hand, since the reserve soldiers only carried spears and shields, they hauled large knapsacks and quivers on their backs. They were usually farmers, so their combat abilities could not compare to the active-duty soldiers', but their strength and endurance from doing farmwork every day was incredible. That was why they'd been entrusted with carrying the supplies, which was a task that couldn't be belittled in the military.

The reserve soldiers unpacked lunch boxes from their knapsacks and passed them out to everyone. It was a light lunch with nothing but some cold boiled potatoes, jerky, and cheese. Since they were in the forest, they'd partake in premade meals that didn't involve starting a fire. The housewives of Todd Village had woken up early to prepare them.

Zen fought with his jerky, which was still hard (even after being put in hot water), while thinking, *Everyone seems so lively*, as he looked out over the subjugation party eating their lunch. They'd also been that way while they were on the move, but it'd be unthinkable to be this chatty in the capital's Imperial Guard.

Mina didn't look like she minded one bit. It must just be what troops in the remote countryside were like. Of course, Zen didn't intend to nitpick. He didn't have any authority to scold them to begin with, after all, and he could tell they were trying to release the anxious energy they felt over fighting their first monster. Also, in reality, they never fully dropped their guard.

There was one man, Gota, who continued his search without eating lunch. When he returned looking like he'd just swallowed a bitter insect, everyone stopped chatting immediately and turned

their attention to him.

"I found the monster," he said.

Hearing this stubborn hunter's all-too-frank report, everyone rose to their feet. Although it was a waste, they left their food behind, took up their arms, and gathered around Mina.

"A-Ah, please lead the way, Sir Gota," Mina squeaked, perhaps from nerves. The soldiers also all had tense faces. However, they ignited their sense of duty and followed after Gota, who moved without a reply.

Zen followed right behind him. He'd taken a position where he'd be able to protect the old man should anything happen.

Gota glanced back once and sent him a look that said, *You're in the way, so back up.* However, seeing Zen's face, he silently turned back around.

Before long, Gota stopped and pointed ahead of him. It was still so far away that Zen had to strain his eyes to see, but there truly was a monster there.

There was no mistaking it: That was the twintail fox. It looked exactly as it had in the guidebooks. It was sleeping, curled up in the shade of a big tree. Eyeballing it while taking distance into consideration, Zen realized it had a huge body roughly five meters long!

Although it was sleeping, it looked as though it was still staying alert to its surroundings. Its two thick tails swayed in the air, threatening all four sides as if they were separate living creatures.

"We'll be found if we get any closer than this. I can get a little closer by myself and get an arrow in before it wakes up," Gota said. That was a pretty long sentence for him. Zen couldn't mistake how important this matter was.

He hurriedly turned back, albeit without panicking, and went to obtain permission from Mina.

"I-I understand," Mina stammered. "Do that." She passed the command down to the subjugation party, who moved to the line that Gota had designated as the closest they could get to the monster without alerting it. They stood by, ready to charge in at a moment's notice.

Gota then went ahead by himself and nocked an arrow. He took aim at the monster. He was a stubborn man, but it also gave him a tenacious spirit. As everyone waited, swallowing nervously, Gota made use of his skilled marksmanship by quietly and surely releasing the arrow.

It flew true, straight toward the monster's forehead. However, despite the fact that it was still sleeping, one of its upright tails struck the arrow down with precision. And then as if to glare at the insolent assailant who had dared disturb it, the monster's eyes slowly opened.

"Ch-Charge!" Mina ordered from where she stood far behind Gota, unable to endure the unbearable fear.

The hundred soldiers jumped in as if they'd been struck by a whip. They shouted battle cries to encourage their legs to move, though they still threatened to freeze as they ran past Gota and leaped at the monster. Zen went with them, of course!

These were the battle cries of one hundred soldiers who ran in with spears and shields in hand. They were a raging stream of steel and people.

But the fox monster didn't seem to care, crying out with a lazy yawn.

Countless fireballs spawned round them all at once, dancing bewitchingly. It was the twintail foxes' magical specialty. Some scholars called it "fen fire." Long before the spear points of any of the charging soldiers made contact with the monster, its fire magic wreaked havoc.

The innumerable fireballs came flying in, sent on mockingly wavering trajectories, and retaliated against the soldiers.

With the shafts of their spears burning, many soldiers dropped their weapons one after another. They were still some of the more fortunate ones. There was one person writhing around with their back on fire, and another shrieking with their right arm up in flames like a torch.

It was exactly like a living picture of hell.

The fox monster made another unpleasant, mocking cry. With just one simultaneous display of fire magic, it'd reaped all of the

soldiers of their courage. They'd lost the strength in their legs to charge in.

All except for Zen.

"Fall back! Everyone, retreat for now!" he screamed. At this rate, total annihilation would be inevitable. The party needed to retreat and regroup. As for Zen, he drew his sword and raced forward. He drew the fox monster's attention solely to himself.

Was this an act of heroism or that of a barbarian? As if the twintail fox itself were asking this question or simply having its fun, it turned to Zen and sent its fen fires rushing toward him. However, just before they came in, he showed the monster his fighting spirit, screaming a battle cry from the depths of his diaphragm.

"HAAAH!"

It was like a shriek. The grinning, taunting monster balked for just a second.

He'd broken its concentration. Its specialty fen fires weakened.





Without missing that opportunity, Zen drove his blade into the shoulder of the monster's large body.

"Oh!" The soldiers all cheered at once. Zen had single-handedly proven that it was possible for humans to beat this monster after all.

"Don't let down your guard!" Zen shouted, encouraging them all. "Breathe and regain your bearings! Everyone who's injured should retreat!" He of course did this while fiercely fighting against the twintail fox.

The monster brandished its sharp claws and tried to snap at him with its giant maw. Its two tails were also troublesome. Those parts alone truly acted like separate creatures from the monster itself. They used magic to sharpen their tips like spears and incessantly thrust at him.

Zen evaded left and right and parried them with his sword, deftly fending them off. Frustratingly, though, he was still on the defensive. He was as busy as he would've been if he'd taken on four or five skilled soldiers. It was so much pressure. He felt like he could die any second.

Even so, Zen was succeeding at buying time by dealing with the twintail fox's rage alone, allowing the other soldiers to either once again stand and take up arms, or move the injured members to a safe distance.

No, Zen wasn't actually alone in this.

With a sound like the wind, an arrow came flying in, accurately aiming for the monster's forehead. It was Gota's on-point support.

The monster obviously couldn't ignore the arrow that'd been sent its way, and it irritably swept it aside with its tails. However, thanks to that, it lost its concentration on its magic. It was flying into a rage from the combined onslaught of Zen and Gota and couldn't summon any more fen fires.

"Thank you, Mr. Gota!" Zen cried. "It's working! Arrows are effective against it!" While Zen continued to fend off the twintail fox, he requested more firepower from Gota, who was working from the rear.

According to one theory, foxes and cats become two-tailed monsters when they live a hundred years, Zen remembered. It was

said that if that were to happen, their lifespans could go over one thousand years. How long had the fox in front of him lived for, then?

It'd probably just recently become a monster. Its too-impressive body was all for show.

In any case, it was inexperienced. The fact that something like this could break its concentration meant it wasn't fully used to magic yet. If the party could carefully pick the right moments to strike, they could make use of this weakness. Still, monsters were monsters. Even if they were newborn, they were still much stronger beings than humans.

"Everyone, use arrows! I'll keep at it from the front!" Zen had assessed the situation and judged that the optimal strategy was to corner it from a safe distance using projectile weapons instead of surrounding it with swords and shields.

What on earth is happening... Mina was frozen in shock. Ever since she'd first given the order to charge in, she hadn't done anything else. She *couldn't* do anything.

She was the commanding officer. It wasn't wrong for her to stay at the back of the battlefield and encourage the other soldiers, but she was only standing around like a statue. Although she knew she had to do something, she didn't know what she should do.

This was her first battle. What was more, the enemy was a monster who wielded flames, a being that existed outside the bounds of common sense. Her mind had gone completely blank. The more she tried to think, the more her vision blurred, and it was difficult to even keep upright.

And then here was Zen carrying out all the responsibilities that Mina should have been handling. This battlefield required you to risk your life—the soldiers had already accepted that as fact and were therefore following his orders.

Who exactly is Sir Zen...? Her astute uncle had given Zen high praise, calling him a wise man. She hadn't doubted that.

However, what was with him being such a skilled swordsman, clashing his sword with a terrifying monster? What about his courage? What about his commanding presence in engaging in

combat, assessing the situation, and giving orders all at the same time?

He'd said he'd spent time in the military drills section of the Ministry of Military Affairs. It was a post where they'd develop training regimens for the nation's troops, make long-term plans, and also act as instructors. For central bureaucrats, was it the standard to have to do all that? No, even so...

Now that I think about it, I've heard that uncle also rose up in the ranks of the Ministry of Military Affairs, and that when he was young, he held a military prowess that put the ordinary knights to shame.

Were his commonalities with Zen just a coincidence?

Regardless, Mina was overwhelmed by Zen's abilities, which had been put on full display during this crisis. She herself was a minor military officer, so she knew that the most reliable heroes on the battlefield were those who could adapt to the unexpected. She was captivated by the sight of this man's back as he fought, this man who'd saved the subjugation party from total destruction. However...

"Commander! Please give us directions, Commander!"

When Mina was called by that loud voice, she finally came back to her senses. It belonged to the eldest squad leader that her uncle had assigned to aid her.

"Commander, the soldiers are hesitating. They're wondering if it's actually a good idea to use bows and arrows as Sir Zen requested. There's a chance that he'll be caught in the cross fire if everyone uses them, Commander! Please make a decision quickly, Commander!"

He called her "commander" an excessive number of times. He was telling her to remember her duty, subtly scolding her in a way that ensured she didn't lose face. He was a tactful man.

"Don't worry about me! Just shoot! It's more dangerous to let this thing use magic!" was what Zen himself had shouted, but was it really okay to use arrows? It'd be a lie to say that Mina herself wasn't at a loss.

But she broke out of that conundrum.

This is my first battle as a commanding officer! My primary duty is to take responsibility! It didn't matter what kind of criticism would

be thrown her way later. She would give defeating the monster the utmost priority.

"Ready your arrows, everyone," she shouted. "Surround the enemy and fire at your discretion!"

At her command, the soldiers threw aside their spears and shields and equipped their bows. Nocking their arrows and taking aim, they set off their arrows one after another. As they surrounded the monster from a distance, they showered it from all directions. It was almost funny how many arrows got stuck in its enormous body.

The reserve soldiers, who weren't adept at using bows, had at least come equipped with plenty of arrows, so there was little worry about running out. However, these bows still required high skill.

The active-duty soldiers honed their skills during their daily practice, but even so, they were far from always being able to hit the bull's-eye. That was even more the case now in the height of this nerve-racking combat.

Because of that, many of the soldiers' arrows flew toward Zen instead of the monster by mistake. Those who'd realized their error turned pale.

"Watch out!" Mina screamed. However, Zen sidestepped them easily. He moved like he had eyes on his back. It wasn't a fluke or coincidence either.

Although the soldiers continued to misfire occasionally, Zen dodged those arrows altogether as well. Of course, he did this while fending off the fox monster's fierce attacks. He was being casual about it, but he was absolutely superhuman. Mina was just floored.

"It's no wonder he said to shoot without worrying about him..." muttered the veteran squad leader, wiping off his cold sweat.

Initially, it had looked like Zen and the twintail fox were two monsters battling in a totally different world. Now it was like a work of trick art, where the monster was the only one getting hit and bleeding in the midst of the onslaught of arrows from all directions.

Meanwhile, Zen felt like the situation had dramatically improved for him as his allies' arrows continued to rain down on them. At any rate, if he didn't have to be cautious of the monster's magic, then

this was just like hunting big game. It was no different from anything his violent older sister had put him through since infancy. He was also thankful for Mina. She was the one who'd judged that the soldiers should use their bows and arrows without hesitation. She'd been frozen solid at first, but in the end, she was doing just fine.

Yeah, this is pretty good for a first battle, Zen thought as he lopped off the monster's tails that had lashed out at him like whips. *I think she'll become a great knight in the future.* Cummel was probably proud.

And the soldiers are all doing well too. When that picture of hell had unfolded at the start of this battle, it wouldn't have been strange if they'd fallen into a panic and all scattered. It was true that they lacked skill and experience, but they were good soldiers who could hold their ground and fight. *Sharla could've taken this monster down just by herself, though...*

Zen had also been saved by the fact that it was still a young monster, meaning it was weaker and easier to handle. He knew that he himself could never be anything more than an ordinary person.

And then the time for the battle's end had come.

The fox monster violently cried. It was forgetting everything—its anger, its irritation, its pain and the arrows that were raining down upon it—and fully honing its senses. It was determined to make sure that Zen alone, the man standing before it, would be burnt to a crisp, and it summoned its innumerable fen fires.

Being exposed to such a repulsive intent to kill, Zen smiled wryly. That smile was because Zen already knew that there was a hunter with him who would absolutely not let this new opening escape as the twintail fox focused its entire concentration on Zen.

Gota's arrow pierced the monster's right eye.

Nice! Zen worked quickly in tandem with him. He rushed to the monster's new blind spot, making use of the footwork his older sister had drilled into him since childhood, his movements slippery and smooth. Then, using the spring in his lower body, he slashed the long sword up.

In an instant, the twintail fox's head flew through the air. He'd cut

its thick throat in a single stroke. However, after he immediately leaped back, he remained alert while repositioning his sword.

Zen knew how dreadful and persistent this creature could be. He could already tell that even as a decapitated head, it was going to use its magic as a last-ditch effort, open its jaw, and throw itself at him.

He cut the monster’s head in half vertically, this time ending it for good.

Chapter 7: Zen’s True Worth

“We did it!”

“We won! We really won!”

“It’s all thanks to Mr. Government Official!”

“You’re really something else!”

Upon seeing the monster fall, the soldiers exploded into cheers of joy. Some happily embraced each other, some ran up to Zen with extreme gratitude, and there were others who couldn’t stop crying after being released from their shackles of fear and tension.

Out of all those many people, Zen was the only one to calmly point out, “We must first tend to the wounded!” There were still many people who’d been injured, burned by the fen fires. Zen had given out instructions to remove them from the heat of the battle, and the reserve soldiers had carried them off to an area a safe distance away.

When Zen ran over to check on their conditions, he found that all of them had been severely wounded. Fortunately, there were no casualties, but it was uncertain if that would remain true if they didn’t get help. Although it was impossible to get genuine medical treatment without first returning to Nazalf City, it was best to apply first aid as soon as possible. The problem here was that the reserve soldiers’ knapsacks only had bandages, but...

“There are many medicinal herbs growing in this forest,” he told the others. “Some are even effective for burns. We should be able to gather enough if we all split up.”

Everyone eagerly nodded.

He’d been taking the reins and outdoing Mina at her own job, but he hoped she’d forgive him since this was a matter of life and death.

Of course, the intelligent woman would never mix up her priorities. As if to prove that, she immediately walked over to ask him what those medicinal herbs looked like.

Zen hurriedly pushed aside the underbrush until he found some milk vetch, which he showed to everyone as an example.

About two-thirds of the party had come out unscathed since Zen had successfully drawn the twintail fox's attention to himself, so they easily gathered enough after fanning out to search.

Zen checked over the herbs to make sure they were the right ones (it'd be a serious issue if they were similar-looking poisonous plants!), and then the group divided the work to grind them all down.

While they were gathering the medicinal herbs, they'd had Gota and the other hunters start a bonfire. They had no pestles or bowls, so they could only make do with stones sterilized with hot water. They hadn't brought anything like pots either, but tearing off strips of tree bark and weaving them together worked well enough as substitutes. Of course, Gota and the other hunters were very knowledgeable about that, as well as the location of the nearest river.

That was how they made this simple burn medicine. Zen smeared it on the injured's afflicted parts and bandaged them up. There were no medics in a small troop like this. All the soldiers could do was watch and learn from Zen.

From there, everyone earnestly set to work. They'd managed to beat the monster, after all. They all shared the same sentiment—they wanted to return home with everyone alive. Zen once again thought about what good soldiers they were.

Mina herself went to nurse the injured and give them encouraging words. He thought about how she was a good commanding officer.

However, with all that considered, he had some honest thoughts.

They'd completely lacked the skill and experience to fight against the twintail fox. And the number of soldiers deployed to kill it was way too few.

This party had virtually been completely annihilated by a simple sweep of the fen fires from the monster's first attack. Zen was by no means omnipotent; he hadn't known what would happen until he'd actually stepped foot on the battlefield. However, once he had, the

results had been far worse than he'd predicted.

If we perhaps got ambushed by some new monsters right now, I'd have to shout at everyone to run... He gloomily considered this serious issue.

The care of the injured was mostly complete, and everyone was getting ready to pull out with relief. Zen grimly watched over them.

However, someone interrupted his thoughts.

"Let me express my gratitude once again, Sir Zen!" Mina cried, rushing up to him. She seemed to have finally dealt with this emergency situation, allowing her to relax and talk more comfortably. "Thanks to your sound judgments and your fervent display of heroism, we were able to win. If you hadn't been here, we would've likely met a bitter end and been totally annihilated."

"No, you all also fought hard in your first fight against a monster. This wasn't only my victory," Zen said, saying these praises from the bottom of his heart.

"Have you perhaps fought a monster before?"

"Yes. This was my first time fighting against a twintail fox, but I have fought a cat with two tails before."

"Oh my! Something so dangerous is part of a central bureaucrat's duties?!"

"That's right. It depends on the post, but if you're in a commanding position for the Imperial Guard or the regular guards, then you cannot avoid it," he replied, giving her a general answer, but he himself was a special case.

Every time monsters agitated the imperial capital, his crazy sister would order him to help her eliminate them, recruiting him to do things completely unrelated to his post. It was a beautiful brother-sister relationship where Zen was always the one who had to be the decoy or was shoved into the firing line while Sharla would give the final blow, taking the credit and fame. Well, Zen would keep his mouth shut about that for the sake of his sister's reputation.

"That surprises me. I didn't know monsters appeared even in such a metropolis as the imperial capital."

"If anything, statistics say that places with high populations are more likely to be attacked by monsters." According to one theory,

when a large amount of people's human emotions accumulated in one place, it could generate ghosts. Or it could attract the highly curious magical beasts out there and stir their mischievous hearts.

"I'm sure you've had many experiences that I couldn't imagine, Sir Zen," she said in awe.

"I was given the runaround for years, unable to be promoted at any post I was put in. At least nobody can beat me when it comes to odd jobs, probably," Zen responded partially in jest. He felt so embarrassed by how Mina was looking directly at him with respect.

"If it's all right with you, can I talk with you again sometime?"

"Yes, if it pleases you." For better or worse, he had mountains of stories to tell of his failures, so he was confident that he could give her a laugh, at least. Mina still had many responsibilities to tend to regarding the aftermath of the subjugation mission, so they were talking about meeting up again sometime once that all settled.

"It's a promise!" Mina emphasized. "It's not just lip service!" With her gaze affixed to him with a longing look that surpassed just plain respect, his embarrassment went on to become bewilderment.

Even after that, she came at him with a barrage of questions until they'd returned to the village. The things she asked were mostly about private matters like how old he was and if he was married...for some reason.

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When Mina made a triumphant return to Nazalf City, she first went to report the full details of the monster subjugation mission to her uncle, Prefectural Governor Cummel. They were in his office on the fourth floor of the official prefectural government building.

"Well done, Mina," he said. "What a wonderful outcome. The fact that there wasn't a single casualty was beyond my expectations."

"No, Your Excellency," she said, "I was nothing more than a figurehead as soon as the battle started. All of the credit should go to Sir Zen."

"That's normal for your first battle. You didn't lose sight of your duty. If anything, I think very highly of how you made the most of

Sir Zen's abilities without getting in his way."

"Even so, that was because you'd given me detailed instructions beforehand," the honest Mina spoke promptly, not holding back.

Cummel nodded many times, satisfied with the report. Further details would be contained in documents that would be submitted later. The empire of Catalan loved written reports, and not only must they be given to His Excellency the Prefectural Governor but also sent out to every higher department, like the Cylin state government office. There were plenty of loose ends Mina still had to deal with after their mission, such as writing those reports and visiting the injured soldiers. She should've been leaving right away to see to those things; however, Mina remained where she was.

"May I ask something, uncle?" Her lack of addressing him with a title signaled that this was a matter outside of official business.

Cummel nodded as if to say, *Of course.* He looked kindly at her as his niece instead of with the eyes of a prefectural governor.

"Uncle, who exactly is Sir Zen?"

"Hmm. What do you mean by that?"

"Sir Zen is a central bureaucrat who was demoted to this remote region." She repeated what she knew of his situation. "That kind of thing normally wouldn't happen unless he'd made some kind of grave mistake. I've also heard plenty of disgraceful rumors about how he's the dregs of the four Leadon siblings, that he only barely passed the Advanced Civil Service Exam, and that he was laughed at by his colleagues for being unable to get a promotion a single time after that. However, you spoke very highly of Sir Zen, so I was cautious not to look at him through a prejudiced lens."

"That's a good attitude to have. Now then, how do you feel after meeting him in person?"

"He was beyond my imagination. I was particularly amazed by his combat skills and his commanding leadership. It's so strange. Sir Zen has been a civil servant for so long. Why does he also possess abilities that'd make him the envy of every military officer?"

Apart from Mina, who was still young, there'd been three veteran squad leaders assigned to her subjugation party, but none of them had been a match for Zen. No, there was such a world of difference

between them that even attempting a comparison was laughable. Mina hesitated to be so nosy and ask the man himself, so she decided to ask her uncle with his encyclopedic knowledge.

It was an understandable question, and her uncle responded, "Mina, you're an earnest person and are working hard at the Guards Bureau. However, you have a lot more to learn about the world." He smiled wryly.

"What do you mean?"

"Let's go down the line in order. We'll start first from the Advanced Civil Service Exam. It acts as a high barrier by which, every year, over three thousand top students brimming with skill and confidence come from all over the nation to compete with each other. They take it in hopes of becoming advanced government officials and future chancellors and generals. However, how many successful candidates do you suppose there actually are?"

Mina thought for a second before answering confidently, "If it's meant to be a high barrier, then perhaps around one hundred." She felt she must be pretty close.

Cummel's smile grew even more wry. "Just five people."

For a second, Mina didn't comprehend what he had said.

To help his niece understand, Cummel continued. "First, because there are so many applicants, an exam is conducted on the very first day, wherein at least two thousand nine hundred people are eliminated. Next, the remaining one hundred people, who were the elites within those elites, spend a year having all their abilities questioned and put to the test. Then, at the very end, five people, who are the geniuses of all those geniuses, become the successful graduates of that year.

"Similarly, I myself was raised as a child prodigy in Nazalf and went to take the Advanced Civil Service Exam, brimming with confidence. When I passed the preliminary elimination test, I thought there was nothing in this world that I couldn't do.

"Well, that was nothing but my ego talking. In one year's time, my final results put me in one hundredth place out of one hundred people," he said, looking frustrated. Mina was sure that even now, he couldn't forget those bitter memories from his youth.

"That's why I challenged it again the next year," he continued. "And the next year. And the year after that. Over the course of ten years, I attempted the exam ten times, every time resulting in failure. I resolved that the next attempt would be my last and desperately tackled the challenge. Even so, I only finally reached eleventh place out of one hundred."

He shrugged his shoulders helplessly, as if to say there was no helping it. "I gave up and switched to aiming for the Intermediate Civil Service Exam the following year. And to be honest, I laughed. It was just way too easy. I passed as the top student and immediately began work in the head office of the Ministry of Military Affairs. I was promoted to the highest level among my colleagues and caught the eye of the previous emperor. Then I was appointed as the prefectural governor in Nazalf City and could return to my hometown in glory."

Mina silently listened to her uncle as he detailed his own personal experiences with the exams. The more she heard, the more she was overwhelmed. She couldn't interject.

"Do you understand, Mina?" he asked. "It doesn't matter that he passed by the skin of his teeth. Just passing the Advanced Civil Service Exam at all is proof that you're a monster. To add to that, he did it in one shot at the mere age of fifteen." Her uncle had given Zen a royal welcome because he intimately knew what it took to succeed at that rigorous exam. It was impossible to view him as a mere petty government official who'd failed to reach his potential.

"Then, uncle, what of the rumors that Sir Zen is the dregs of his older siblings?"

"The older three are great people who've already made their marks on history," he explained. "It doesn't matter who you are. It'd be impossible to avoid being seen as incompetent next to them."

"Even the rumors saying he's laughed at by his colleagues?"

"Those colleagues are the same monsters who overcame that hellish exam. Zen might seem to be lacking something in their minds, but I can't imagine what it is since from my point of view, they're all in a world far above myself."

"And how he hasn't been promoted at all?"

"The Chancellor of Ceremonial Affairs is Sir Zen's own older brother. He sent Sir Zen around the six ministries for a deeper reason, I suspect... No, I'm actually convinced that's the case now."

Aren't you overthinking it, uncle? Mina reflexively thought. However, she immediately reconsidered. She knew how astute a man her uncle was, with his brilliant insight and speculation skills.

On the other hand, with a resigned attitude, her uncle offered another explanation, this time on a level that even a commoner could understand. "I've also met His Excellency the Chancellor of Ceremonial Affairs, and he was always composed, fair, and upright. If he were to promote someone from within his own family, it would have to be after they'd achieved something big enough that no one could doubt their qualifications. That's the kind of person he was."

In other words, although by all rights Zen should've been on the road to success, it was possible that he was having to walk a completely unpaved path of thorns.

"In addition—this is something I thought when I met Sir Zen himself—but he has a disadvantageous nature in which he easily hands over achievements that he should be claiming for himself."

Mina vehemently agreed with that. It was exactly what had happened with the subjugation mission. He'd played such an active role in that, yet he hadn't asked for any reward or medals, and he hadn't even taken credit for any military feats. What would he have done had Mina been a bad person, given her uncle a false report, and claimed all the credit for herself?

He probably wouldn't have done anything, she realized. He probably would've thought, *I'm so glad the village was saved!* and been fine with that. That was the way he'd looked when they'd parted ways.

"I understand that I can't doubt what an outstanding person Sir Zen is. I also understand that the rumors surrounding him, although not entirely false, do not capture the core of his character. However, uncle, I still can't find an explanation for why he also possesses the abilities of a military officer. Sir Zen is a civil servant."

"That could be considered a characteristic of this empire," Cummel said to this countryside girl who was unaware of the ways

of the world. He once again explained things in a simple way. “His Majesty the Emperor takes direct imperial rule of the empire, but beyond that, our state has no aristocracy.”

In most countries, politics and military affairs would be left to the aristocrats, who possessed a certain level of independence as they acted on behalf of the emperor in governing the regions (domain management).

However, in Catalan, all government officials from top to bottom were at the emperor’s beck and call. They sometimes acted as his eyes and brains, and managed politics, military affairs, and regional governance.

In short, Catalan was very much a nation of bureaucrats, which was rarely seen on this continent. For example, in the military, all of those with higher power, including generals and centurions (commanding officers of one hundred people), were, with no exception, all bureaucrats.

“Therefore, bureaucrats of the empire are essentially required to be able to do everything,” Cummel said. “If you can’t use a bow even as a civil servant, then you’re looked down on. If you’re a military officer with no education, then you’ll be scorned as a barbarian.”

The level of government officials lowered the farther from the cities you went, so those from the military in more remote regions like Mina were given a pass.

He continued. “In the empire, if you’re a commander of an army, then you’re expected to be able to discuss strategies on an equal footing at least with your military staff and form logistics plans on your own, or else you’ll not even be worthy of that position. No matter how much of a mighty warrior you are, heroes who are single-mindedly devoted to their military capabilities during wartime will only get a post as a centurion at best in Catalan.”

“So that means as a central bureaucrat, it’s only natural that Sir Zen is trained in both book smarts and the military arts?”

“That’s right. And that’s not to mention what I told you about the Advanced Civil Service Exam testing all of their abilities, right? Of course, swordsmanship and archery are included in that

examination. They're testing for talent as not only a future chancellor but also a general."

So that was why her uncle, who'd challenged the same exam, held a military prowess that'd surpassed the knights' back when he was young.

"However, there are many people in the world who are terribly sharp but don't have the physical skills, right?" she asked. "Are you saying those people can't pass the Advanced Civil Service Exam?"

"Unless they can prove that they're a rare genius beyond comparison in some field, it'll probably be difficult," he replied. From another angle, he continued. "The fact that Sir Zen just barely passed means that he probably didn't have a talent that particularly stuck out. However, I'm sure that, on the other hand, he'd had absolutely no weaknesses. Otherwise, he wouldn't have been able to pass at all.

"Sir Zen previously berated himself for how he'd been given the runaround at every post there is in the head ministries, taking six months to go from doing odd jobs to becoming an actually capable asset, but that's just unfathomable to me!

"We're talking about a level that's desired in the central government agencies. If you're not proficient at something, then you won't be able to do even the odd jobs. And he did that in a mere six months at any duty he was given at any post. Oh dear, I could never have done anything like that."

Mina understood why her uncle talked a little excitedly. In short, Zen was only a "master of none" in that monstrous world he'd come from, but to ordinary people like Mina, he was a straight-up all-rounder.

Of course I wasn't able to fathom it. The scale I was measuring him on was just way too different, Mina thought to herself. She'd been totally fooled by how he wasn't a showy person. No, saying she was fooled wasn't a good way to put it. With how much her astute uncle had touted him as a monster, it was wonderful to see that Zen could still remain such a simple and honest man! She couldn't help feeling even more respect and admiration for him.

"Thank you, uncle. I understand everything that I'd found

puzzling about Sir Zen.” With one bow, she went to exit the room. However, her uncle stopped her this time.

Furthermore, his face returned to that of a stern prefectural governor. “I also have something I want to ask.”

“Yes, Your Excellency. Ask me anything.”

“It seems you’ve had all the soldiers pulled out of Todd Village, including the injured. Did Sir Zen say anything about it?”

“Huh...?” She blinked. “N-No. He saw us off with a polite thanks and a smile.”

“I see...” he murmured. “If that’s fine with Sir Zen, then there likely isn’t any problem...” Cummel looked troubled, as if he were trying to convince himself of something.

Mina tilted her head at his strange behavior.

And this time, Cummel permitted her to leave the room.

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On four paws, the creature was on the prowl across the nighttime forest. It was out for revenge. It followed the humans’ scent, occasionally putting its nose to the ground. There was scarce moonlight tonight. However, the monster saw well in the dark, so with its enhanced sense of smell, that posed no problem. Rather, it would fall asleep every day when the sun was high in the sky and wake up around sunset. For this monster, the night was its time to roam.

Singing, dancing, hunting down its prey and consuming them... It’d lived that way for one hundred years. It’d done so with its irreplaceable other half too!

As the monster thought back on those bygone days, it currently moved alone. Without singing, without dancing, without even searching for prey to satisfy its hunger. It simply moved to massacre those humans.

Its two tails trembled with rage and swayed. The wolves, who were also nocturnal, were frightened by its nearly five-meter-long body and scrambled out of the way. The innumerable fireballs that it’d produced with magic floated around it, acting as its guards.

This was the monster the humans called a twintail fox. It was different from the one that Mina's subjugation party had exterminated earlier that day. However, with resentment in its heart that its brethren—its other half—had been killed, the monster followed the remaining traces of the party's scent and finally reached Todd Village. It was now the time for revenge.

Let's completely annihilate the sleeping humans of this village!

Let's burn down the whole place with magic and transform it into purgatory!

Let's eat them alive as they scream and cry!

The fox monster headed toward the village, its eyes ablaze with a fiery red rage. There was no difference in its mind between the subjugation party's soldiers and the ordinary villagers. That meant women and babies wouldn't be spared.

With each step, its bloodlust climbed higher. With each step, it summoned more fen fires. And then, when it was just one sprint away from the village's entrance, it stopped. That was because, under the dim moonlight, there was someone waiting there along with another large animal.

The person was a man with a sword. The animal was a large, white wolf. It was as if the two were on equal standing rather than one of them working under the other, like two halves of a whole.

The human spoke. "See, they really were a pair, Keel. Staying awake and waiting for the other one to come was the right call, wasn't it?"

The big wolf spoke as well. "*Yes. We can't turn a blind eye, nor can we go easy on it if it'll burn down the village.*"

The fox could keenly sense their fighting spirit that was directed its way.

How foolish! The twintail fox made a mocking, high-pitched cry. To ensure those two knew how far out of their league it was, it manifested enough fireballs as if to cover the night sky.

"Huh. Seems it is true that the female has more mana. Man, those books really are too reliable!"

"*Don't whine, my friend. This is to protect Elysia, yes?*"

As the two of them talked, they assumed fighting stances. The

man unsheathed his blade, and the large wolf lowered its head, ready to pounce. They didn't cower with fear, nor did they run away at the sight of its formidable mana.

To think they wouldn't know the difference between courage and recklessness! The fox was astonished and decided to make them pay for their foolishness. As the two charged in together, it launched all its fen fires at them.

It was the next morning. As Elysia slipped out of bed, she opened the bedroom window and let the fresh air in. The view of Todd Village from the second floor was the very picture of peace.

The weather was clear! The morning sun looked like it was making everything sparkle, from the rooftops of every house in the neighborhood to the couple heading out early in the morning to do farmwork.

Elysia wanted to gaze out the window for a while, but it was an early winter morning and she shivered suddenly from the cold.

She also had to get breakfast started, so she shut the window and headed downstairs.

It's nice weather today. Maybe I'll buy some fresh bread this morning, she thought as she hummed a tune. Humming wasn't normally something Elysia would do; she'd grown up being scolded at the palace, told that humming was too uncouth and reserved for commoners. But today was an exception. That was how good her mood was.

The reason was simple. Zen had safely returned home yesterday with the subjugation party. Her heart was all the lighter because of how deeply she'd been worried about him. That good mood of hers was spilling into today.

I think I will go out to shop. I must feed Sir Zen something delicious! With a great smile, she opened the living room door.

Zen was collapsed in the room, covered in blood.

"Eeeek?!" She let out a piercing shriek and nearly fainted. However, she braced herself in the nick of time and rushed over to Zen.

"Sir Zen?! Sir Zen?! What on earth happened?!" She forgot to call

him “father” as she scrambled to check his condition. But as someone with no understanding of medicine, she was clumsy. She couldn’t find any external wounds. In that case, she had to call for help.

“Oh, how did this happen?” What in the world happened last night? Did a robber break in? With tears rolling down her face, she tried to stand up. That was when she heard a gentle voice.

“*It’s okay, Elysia. Zen is fine.*”

Who said that? Elysia wondered as she looked around the living room. She’d been completely focused on Zen, who was covered in blood, but Keel was curled up in front of the fireplace. There was no one else, though.

Am I so frazzled that I’m hearing things? But so long as Zen was like this, she had to keep herself together. She was panicking.

That was when she heard that voice again. “*All his wounds have healed, and the blood is from the one he’s slain. So be at ease, Elysia.*”

She hadn’t noticed it before, but the strange voice felt as if it were speaking to her directly inside her head. At the same time, Keel, who’d stood up, came over to her and placed his big muzzle on her neck to calm her down.

“It can’t be...” she murmured, her voice trembling. She stared at Keel. It was exactly as she thought.

“*I’m sorry, Elysia. I’m the one who’s speaking to you. It’s Keel. I thought it wouldn’t do to let you panic, but I seem to have frightened you all the more*,” Keel said remorsefully, putting together an apology.

She was so surprised, she shrieked, “You can taaalk?!” It was very unbecoming of a princess.

In spite of her loud voice, Zen didn’t stir even a little. It was great that he’d successfully taken out the second twintail fox with Keel, but he was truly exhausted. Even so, he had a satisfied look on his sleeping face. His sleep talk also sounded proud.

“Dad...I worked really hard...” he mumbled.

Chapter 8: December 20th

The atmosphere in the Todd Village Town Hall was lively. It was because they'd entered the second half of December, and their last business day of the year was on the horizon.

"What are you all going to do for the new year holidays?" Zen asked.

"I go to Aunt Donna's place every year to hang around and eat lots of delicious food," said Anna.

"Th-there's no way I'd have plans," Namnam stuttered. "I'm going to sleep as much as I want."

"We gave my parents a grandchild, so they're traveling all the way to visit us," said Max.

Zen's coworkers were making pleasant conversation in between their tasks, talking about how they'd use their extended leave. Of course, they were able to be so relaxed because they'd safely settled the monster fiasco from before. In addition, the prefectural government office had given all members of the town hall a bonus for successfully maintaining the village's peace, so everyone's faces were especially bright. (Although Zen was the only one who'd really contributed, it was in Cummel's nature to not be stingy in matters like this.)

"I take no issue with you all getting along, but please do your work too. It's almost the end of the year. Let's pull ourselves together and make it to the end without losing steam." Chief Tomon scolded his subordinates for chattering, but he wasn't serious about it like he usually was. He was smiling so brightly that it looked like his gaunt cheeks would fall off. When it came to good moods, Tomon might have been the happiest out of everyone.

There was a reason for that, of course. Tomon was the chief of the town hall—in other words, the top dog at Todd Village. There was technically a traditional village mayor above him, but that

person was purely a figurehead for the people. It wasn't an official civil service position and had absolutely no authority.

Therefore, Tomon was responsible for everything that happened in Todd Village. If a calamity occurred, it was on his head, but also if something favorable happened, he could claim it as an amazing achievement.

The recent monster situation had first seemed like a serious stroke of misfortune—there'd been no way he could take responsibility for something so far above his capabilities. However, when looking back on it, it truly had been settled so quickly. Not to mention that the village had come out of it completely unscathed (apologies to the wounded in the subjugation party).

Tomon was very proud. There was nothing more fortunate than this. For the rest of his life, he could brag that while he was working as the chief of the Todd Village Town Hall, a monster had threatened this village but it'd been taken care of without any grave mistakes.

Having said that, he'd lived in fear for days after it'd been resolved. It was because, in spite of the fact that the party had wanted him to join, he'd made Zen go in his stead. He couldn't explain that decision away either. The subjugation party had clearly seen that he'd done it out of cowardice.

He'd been trembling in fear, certain that he'd be rebuked. He just knew his reputation was completely destroyed in the eyes of the prefectural government office. In the worst-case scenario, he could've even been demoted, and Zen would have taken his position.

He'd only had Zen go in his place because he'd feared for his life, but he'd immediately regretted it as an overly hasty decision.

However, all his fears turned out to be groundless. The prefectural government office hadn't rebuked him at all. In fact, he'd gotten a letter from Cummel himself praising him.

As was protocol, Tomon and Zen had each sent their own written reports regarding the details of the incident. Tomon had said he'd believed in his subordinate's (Zen's) abilities and given him instructions to do as he saw fit since Tomon would take all responsibility no matter what happened. Tomon had written these things acting like it was out of kindness when it'd actually been for

his own benefit. Zen, on the other hand, had (apparently) written that he had been able to do his best thanks to the good discipline his chief gave him. Those reports had greatly satisfied His Excellency.

Because of that, Tomon had gone from fearing the worst-case scenario to living out the best possible one. It was like a dream come true, and he was over the moon about it.

That was why, although his subordinates were lazily doing their work before it was time for their afternoon break, he didn't raise an eyebrow.

"Now then, let's take a break."

If anything, his mood was so good that he ordered a second break that morning. He normally only let them take one in the morning and one in the afternoon.

His subordinates were happy.

"I'll go make some tea," Zen said, taking the initiative and standing up. He understood that there was an unspoken agreement that the most junior of the workplace was responsible for making the tea.

Tomon had once thought Zen's pride might not allow for him to be made to do odd tasks, since he was the oldest among the workers and a former central bureaucrat, but he never looked displeased.

Before Zen came, the youngest and most junior of the town hall members, Anna, had complained every day, muttering, "Why do I always have to do it?" and "It's not like it's one of my official duties."

In contrast, Zen happily went to fetch the kettle from the kitchen every day, hung it from the office fireplace, and waited for the water to boil while humming a tune.

How to put it? It was like he'd completely assimilated into this little town hall in the countryside, not standing out at all. You'd never believe that only two months ago, he'd been a career-focused man at the imperial capital's head offices.

Of course, Tomon already had full confidence in Zen's capabilities. He actually couldn't fully grasp what he was capable of yet. Zen, who'd returned alive with the subjugation party, had won the

passionate respect and trust of the commanding officer Mina and the soldiers. Tomon couldn't help his astonishment. What could a mere government official have done to achieve that?

Really, who is this man? Tomon once again thought. He'd looked at Zen suspiciously at first, wondering what rogue government official had been demoted here, as he'd sat on edge at the thought that this bureaucrat would be after his position as chief.

"Thank you for waiting, Chief," Zen said upon bringing the black tea over. His smile conveyed that he had no ulterior motives. At the very least, Tomon had learned well after working together for just a month that Zen was a good man.

In fact, had Zen really been after his position, he could've easily disparaged his chief, who'd run away from his duty, in his written report, and described how responsibly he'd stepped up to take Tomon's place.

"Thank you, Zen," Tomon said. "It seems you've grown completely used to this place."

"Yes, Chief. It's so wonderful, I want to work here forever."

As they made some easy conversation, Tomon thought, *E-Even I'm not ungrateful to him. I also appreciate how he took my place on the monster subjugation mission and that he made me look good to the prefectural governor.*

It was getting hard to maintain his hostility toward Zen. That was why, although stiff, he made himself smile. "When I eventually retire, I'm sure you'll be the next chief. Ha ha ha."

Just saying this was taking everything he had! He really didn't want to give his position to anyone!

In the event that he managed to cling onto this position until retirement, he'd definitely allow Zen to become the next chief. Yeah, he'd write a letter of recommendation to the prefectural government office and praise him with as many embellishments as he could. This would be the manifestation of Tomon's sincerity! This was how he'd express his gratitude!

"Ha ha ha. Oh, Chief. If we're going in order of seniority, the next chiefs should be Mr. Max and the others."

"O-Oh really? How modest you are. Ha ha ha..."

"No, it's not modesty. It's just logic. Ha ha ha!" Zen must have taken Tomon's words as a joke. He passed the tea to the others with a cheerful laugh.

Well, even if he himself doesn't have that ambition, I don't know what the prefectural government office will decide... Tomon would be careful this time. To make sure Zen wouldn't accomplish anything. That he wouldn't do any work. Tomon decided that in his heart as he brought the cup to his lips.

Still, since Zen had (apparently) contributed to the monster subjugation mission, the prefectural government office had asked if they could grant him a reward of something other than just money.

What Zen wanted was a trifling request as well as a strange one. He'd said that he wanted to be guaranteed a vacation day every year on December 20th.

The prefectural government office had immediately given Tomon an official notice about it. The other subordinates were already aware, and they'd all agreed. Unlike when it was the busy season, a lazy workday like today was given a pass this time of year. They wouldn't really mind if one person was out.

Now, tomorrow was December 20th.

"Exciting plans, Mr. Zen?" Max asked. After Zen, Max was the next oldest among the subordinates and had a wife and kid. He was casually delving into Zen's private life. He had the kind of friendly personality that let him get away with being a little nosy.

He'd asked that question after Zen had finished his work early and Tomon had given him permission to leave at his discretion.

"It's a bit of a special day tomorrow. I want to spend the whole day with my daughter if I can," Zen responded, unbothered, before heading home.

"By special day, does he mean his daughter's birthday?" Max asked.

"He really loves his kid."

The remaining subordinates gossiped among themselves.

Anna placed her hand on her cheek and sighed. "He's good at work and unexpectedly manly at times, but he doesn't act self-important at all and loves his family... If his face was thirty percent

handsomer, he'd pretty much be a perfect marriage partner."

"What? Are you going to go after him?" Max asked incredulously.

"To be honest, I did think about it for a second. But when I looked into him, I found out he has a grown daughter. She's only six years younger than me."

"That sounds like a disaster waiting to happen..." Namnam mumbled.

"You think so too, Namnam? That's why I gave up." She let out a heavy sigh. "Oh, what a shame."

"Ha ha. You can sigh all you want, but it doesn't mean Mr. Zen would've chosen you," Max teased.

"Excuse me? If I get serious about it, I can get any man to fall for me easily."

Tomon looked over his boisterous subordinates with a lukewarm gaze. *If only all my subordinates were airheaded like them, I wouldn't be anxious*, he thought to himself with a sigh.

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The next day was December 20th.

Zen brought Keel and Elysia along and headed out that morning. They went to the biggest pond around Todd Village for a fun day of fishing.

There wasn't a cloud in the sky, and it was the perfect day for it. Still, when they arrived, there was another visitor already at the pond.

He was an old man with pure white eyebrows and a long beard. He had a somewhat otherworldly appearance. The sight of him leisurely dangling his fishing line into the pond was rather picturesque, and his presence fit the scene perfectly.

Zen was vividly reminded of a hermit he'd seen in a picture scroll from the east that he'd read in his youth. He decided to mentally refer to him as the fishing hermit.

Nevertheless, this old man was a friendly person, contrary to his hermit-like appearance. When Zen was preparing to fish in a spot away from him so as not to get in his way (and so they didn't

compete for fish), the man called out to him, “You’ll have better luck over here. Come.”

Zen took his offer and decided to cast his fishing line next to him.

“Ha ha, I see,” the fishing hermit said cheerfully when they got to talking. “I did think this was the first time I’ve seen you. You’ve just moved here from the imperial capital.”

“Yes. I’m Zen Leadon. You look like you’re an expert when it comes to fishing in this area.”

“Indeed. I suppose it must be twenty years for me already. I do know quite a bit.”

“I’m still a beginner, so I’d be happy if you could give me some tips.”

“Ha ha ha. If you’re fine listening to an old man like me talk, then I’m happy to oblige.”

Fishing while having a friendly conversation was also fun. Zen’s fishing line didn’t so much as twitch, though!

“My neighbor likes fishing too,” Zen said. “He told me you can get some especially big catches at this pond.”

“Yes, that’s right, especially when it comes to silverfin and grass carp. They go over two meters sometimes, although you’ll need an extrastrength line to pull them in.”

“Uh-oh. Then does that mean my fishing rod won’t be enough for the big catches?”

“Oh, no. I’m sure even that fishing rod of yours can catch fish over one meter just fine.”

Zen was repeatedly impressed by the fishing hermit’s deep knowledge. Although being taught didn’t actually lead to any catches!

“Maybe that’s why my neighbor didn’t tell me to bring a special fishing rod,” Zen wondered.

“Perhaps. However, the people around here have a lot of opinions regarding fishing.”

“They do. My master is a man named Kulzawa.”

“Oh, if you’re talking Kulzawa from Todd Village, then I’m well acquainted with him.”

While Zen was surprised at how small the world was, he felt like

his circle of fishing friends was expanding. It was a nice feeling.

Although in the time it took the fishing hermit to reel in ten fish, Zen didn't catch a single one!

Meanwhile, as Zen chatted with the hermit, Elysia and Keel were sunbathing in an open field a short distance away. The goal for today was to reel in a big catch, so because Elysia lacked the arm strength to handle that, she decided to just watch without getting in the way.

"Father really does get along with just about anyone," she said in a way that was both proud and a little exasperated.

"*That's probably what people call a person's innate disposition*," Keel responded with a rational tone of voice and a humanlike gesture. "*Zen's always been liked by everyone.*"

Elysia was no longer surprised by the mysterious voice speaking directly into her head. She played as if holding hands with this big wolf, and as she felt the squishiness of his big paw pads to her heart's content, she said eagerly, "Please tell me more about what father was like back then."

Keel gave a wry smile, another humanlike expression. "*I've told you that I don't want to speak much. I wouldn't like it if anyone accidentally heard me.*"

He'd already explained to Elysia that when he spoke, this mysterious voice of his was audible to anyone in the vicinity. He could shrink the hearing range to essentially "whisper"; however, to limit it to a single target like when you're trying to have a private one-on-one conversation, while not impossible, was difficult and very tiresome.

And Keel himself already stood out because of his large size. If people witnessed that he could use human speech too, saying that it would cause a commotion would be an understatement. After all, Elysia herself had screamed.

"But isn't it human nature to want to talk with you once I know I can?"

"*I figured you would. That's why it took so long for me to talk in front of you.*" Keel's smile grew even wryer. Then this kind and clever wolf said, "*I'll tell you just one, then*," and relayed a story about Zen

in the past.

"*When we met*," he started, "*Zen was a centurion who commanded the guards at the imperial capital. However, he wasn't very popular with his subordinates.*"

"Oh my!" Elysia gasped. "It's a little hard to believe that there were people who were unfriendly to him."

"*The guards had had to work from the ground up, and from their perspective, they now had a novice bureaucrat superior who had come here only as a temporary job before he moved up in his career. Of course they found him an eyesore. And Zen is bad at cutting corners, so he couldn't allow himself to obediently act as the figurehead centurion they wanted him to be either.*"

"Hee hee. I can imagine."

"*However, when it was decided that he would be transferred, he got a surprise. One by one, the subordinates who'd slighted him all came to apologize in secret. The actual reason they couldn't give him recognition before then was apparently the old squad leaders. Most of the subordinates had been moved by how Zen would chase after unsolved cases even when he was alone. It was just that no one could express it in front of their scary squad leaders.*"

"Even so, that doesn't change the fact that they'd continued to keep their distance, right?" she pointed out. "I think it's selfish of them to do that and then try and make themselves look good at the end."

"*Indeed. Zen didn't mind at all, but it's not as if I've forgiven them. The point I wanted to make is that when it comes to being too good-natured, Zen's as extreme as they come, but that same characteristic of his allows his sincerity and enthusiasm to be conveyed to those around him.*"

"That's true. It's a story that tells me how Zen has been such a wonderful person for a long time now." Although the memory wasn't her own, she became absorbed as if she were recalling it.

Keel once again smiled, but in the next moment, his expression stiffened and he continued. "*Conversely, no matter how good-natured Zen is, there are people like those stubborn old squad leaders who'll come at him with malice and hostility. Even if the*

numbers are few, you'll definitely find them in this big world. I'm here to protect Zen from their malice. As his friend. As someone he's saved." It was the first impassioned speech of his that he'd delivered in front of Elysia, a stark contrast from his normal lazy, dozing nature. Elysia correctly understood that this was the story he'd most wanted to tell from Zen's past.

"Thank you for the wonderful story." She buried her head in his fluffy fur and hugged him.

True to his promise to tell her only one, Keel went silent, back to pretending he was a large wolf that couldn't talk. But that wolf, who was kind and smart, didn't look displeased by how she clung to him. He let her pet him anywhere she wanted.

That was why even while Zen was absorbed in fishing, Elysia didn't get bored, nor did she sulk.

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In the end, Zen caught nothing that day.

"It seems like I seriously have no fishing sense..." he mumbled.

It seems like Sir Zen is too much of a workaholic to his core... Elysia thought. She didn't know how to console her depressed father.

Meanwhile, the old man with the long eyebrows had reeled in a good haul. One fish he'd caught even measured a meter and twenty centimeters long.

Zen asked if he could have that fish—a grass carp, which was from the same family as the common carp. He of course offered to pay.

However, the old man readily handed it over. "Oh, I don't need money. I'm gifting you this as a sign of our new acquaintanceship."

Zen and Elysia were very grateful, and the old man said, "I had fun today. Let's fish together if we run into each other again." Then he left with a smile. He was truly the definition of a sweet old man. This was also probably the effect of Zen's likable personality.

"It seems we've managed to acquire an offering," Zen noted.

"It's lucky we had a kind old man with us."

As Zen and Elysia talked, they returned to Todd Village with Keel.

They'd be using the grass carp Zen was hauling home only as an offering, not for food. They'd throw it onto a bonfire in their backyard and let it burn to ashes as they prayed.

According to a legend dating back to ancient times from the western part of this continent, after death, human souls went on a great journey to the other world that lay at the end of the west ocean. It was said to be an overwhelming journey, so long that it could take up to two hundred years to complete.

Therefore, on the anniversary of the deceased person's death, the surviving family members would take the biggest fish they could prepare and sacrifice it for them. They'd pray that this fish, which would also become a soul, would give their deceased loved one a ride and deliver them to the other world even if only one day sooner. Around the imperial capital, this was a custom that had existed from before the founding of Catalan.

Today was December 20th, the anniversary of Elysia's and Zen's loved ones' deaths. For Elysia, they'd been her parents. For Zen, they'd been close friends. They were the late Heinri and Aness.

Zen and Elysia carried firewood to the simple, wide pit that Zen had dug shallowly into the earth yesterday. With each piece they piled there, the more somber the atmosphere became, and as they transferred a lit log from the fireplace, they waited quietly for the flame to catch.

Finally, when the sky was dyed a crimson red, Elysia and Zen fell silent. Only Keel was looking regretfully at the grass carp that was waiting to be thrown into the fire. It was as if he were saying, *It'd be tastier to eat it* and *Even if it's tradition, humans do such wasteful things.*

As Elysia stroked the large wolf's coat, she confessed her youthful ignorance. "I thought the same thing a long time ago."

Indeed, she was thinking of when she'd been around four years old, when she first became aware of things. There was a mausoleum in the imperial capital's Goldragan Palace that enshrined the imperial family, which included generations of emperors. On July 8th, the day

of the first emperor Julian's passing, it was part of the current emperor's official duties to perform a grand ritual. And then, as an offering, they had to give the biggest fish that Catalan's ruler could offer, which meant it was an enormous one every year. That year, a three-meter-long baby whale that'd come up the Big Shiwort River had been put up on the altar.

The creature was rare enough as it was, and it was even more rare for a whale that lived in the sea to wander all the way to the imperial capital, so it was a delicacy that even the imperial family seldom had the chance to taste. Elysia back then didn't understand the reason behind worshipping ancestors and praying for those who'd passed away.

At the time, she'd been completely unable to bear how tasty that huge fish looked. It seemed obvious that they'd all share it afterward. However, the court ladies told her that the fish wasn't for them but for the people in the afterlife. It was honestly a shock to learn that no one would eat it.

Elysia watched regretfully from the back of the crowd, mixed in with the other attendees as Heinri, who'd changed into pure white clothes for the ritual, knelt in front of the whale and quietly offered a prayer.

That was when her mother Aness, who was sitting beside her, spoke in a voice only Elysia could hear. "To be honest, I want to eat it too. It really is a waste."

I knew she'd agree with me! The young Elysia enthusiastically nodded her head.

Her mother gently placed a hand on her daughter's head and said, "But you know, Elysia, food is the furthest thing from Heinri's mind right now. This time is precious to him. He's remembering his father and grandfather."

"Father's father and grandfather?" Aness's words had been a little hard to understand for the young Elysia. She had her father and mother, of course, and then there was her grandmother, the empress dowager, who'd give her sweets, and her great-grandmother, the grand empress dowager, who always scolded her. However, she had never met anyone else. At the very least, they

didn’t live in the inner palace. That was why she didn’t intuitively understand her mother’s words.

While Elysia was confused, her mother explained it in simple words. “What would you do if Heinri died?”

“I would hate that.”

“And if the empress dowager died?”

“I would be sad.”

“I’m sure you would be,” she said. “You’d feel unbearably sad. But Heinri’s father and grandfather have passed away and don’t exist in this world anymore.”

The young Elysia fell silent. It was a shocking truth that hadn’t even crossed her mind before. It might have been thanks to her ample imagination, as someone who was already showing a glimpse of her future intelligence, that she could consider what a sad thing it was to her father.

“But Heinri is busy with work, isn’t he? So he usually doesn’t have the free time to reminisce over—to remember his father and grandfather.”

That was true. Elysia knew very well how extremely busy her father was as emperor because he didn’t even really have time to play with her, which made her sad.

“Having said that, even if he did have time, remembering them every single day is painful in itself, isn’t it? He’d be sad every single day.”

That was also true. Elysia nodded her head.

“That’s why, over time, adults stop being able to remember the people who’ve passed away. They think they can just lock them away in their hearts and remember them all at once when they get the chance, but it’s difficult to actually put that into practice.”

Elysia thought in her young mind how that was also sad.

“That’s why you need an occasion that can strongly bring those memories to the surface,” said Elysia. “An opportunity. That huge fish was difficult to obtain even for Heinri. But for as much as he suffered, he can think about how much he really wants to remember those who’ve passed away. Humans are selfish creatures, after all. It’s in their nature to get something out of an investment, which in

this case is a fish. They don't have to prepare a fish necessarily. It can be anything."

But in that case, Elysia thought, *they could just do something like swing a sword one hundred times.* It wouldn't be a waste that way. The people in the past really were troublesome. She wished they'd have thought things through a little more.

Her mother continued to speak frankly. "Now since there's a custom where they have to work, prepare, and take time to remember their loved ones even if it's only once a year, they'll never forget them. Grown-ups are difficult things. They can't properly remember the dead if they don't do that." She slumped her shoulders, wondering if that last bit was difficult to understand.

After Elysia thought and then thought some more, she responded, "So father is finally thinking of those who've died?"

"Yes, that's right. This is a precious time for Heinri that no one should interfere with."

Elysia understood how important that was and stopped looking at her father and the altar with regret. It was a striking event that remained even in her young memory.

As she remembered her now late parents, Elysia stroked Keel's back. Thanks to how he'd looked at the fish, she'd been able to remember something that she normally kept stored in her heart.

I see now. It's important to have an occasion. She placed a hand on her heart that was both sad and warm, deeply feeling how true that was.

Meanwhile, Zen spoke up to have Keel understand. "The memories of those people we held so dear fade little by little. It's painful to remember them every day, so it just happens that you become occupied in keeping busy and avoid thinking about them. That's why, even if it's once a year, it's important to create an occasion like this to really think of the dead. You don't have to actually prepare a fish specifically. It can be anything so long as it's something you put effort into."

"*In other words, you organize something unusual and start from preparing your frame of mind?*" Keel looked dispassionate.

Zen gave a small smile and spoke emotionlessly, his shoulders slumped in front of the bonfire. "Yes. Humans are selfish, after all. They hope to be paid back as much as they've suffered. That way, it becomes natural to actually make time to remember the dead."

Elysia was surprised. "My mother said the same thing..."

"Really? Well, I did talk about this with Aness too. She got into a small fight with Heinri back when we lived in the dorms. She said the big fish he'd prepared was a waste and to let her eat it."

"Mother..." she murmured.

"Well, unlike Heinri, whose father had already passed away, Aness had never experienced the loss of a relative before. She probably just couldn't understand. But she wasn't stupid. She got it after I explained it to her, like I did just now."

"So she was retelling what you told her as if she'd come up with it herself..."

"Ha ha ha. But to be honest, I was doing the same thing. I was only passing down what Yohia had told me," Zen confessed awkwardly. "He'd been close with our grandfather, who died before I was born, so back then, I'd also never felt the loss of someone important to me."

"*Humans love to hitch their carts to other people's horses*," Keel said bluntly.

Zen didn't refute his criticism and threw the grass carp into the simple firepit. He gazed at it as it went up in flames, eventually turned to ashes, and ascended to the heavens. Then he muttered a few words. "But I loved Aness, her cheekiness and all."

As Elysia sat next to him, she followed suit and said softly, "Yes. I loved her."

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A small quarrel broke out that night.

"I want to sleep with you and Keel, like the night we first came to this house," Elysia had said suddenly.

Zen obviously expressed his reluctance, trying to explain just how questionable that was. On the first day they'd moved in, Zen, who

hadn’t had good independence skills, had accidentally allowed the fireplace to go out. In order to avoid freezing while sleeping, they’d slept together wrapped up in Keel’s warmth. That was it. Aside from when it couldn’t be avoided, it was unbelievably discourteous to actually sleep together with Her Highness the Imperial Princess.

She gave him a teary-eyed look. “Please listen to your adorable daughter.”

“I don’t think even normal fathers would sleep together with their fourteen-year-old daughters,” Zen pointed out, looking serious. Elysia had started doing a poor job at pretending to cry.

“If you won’t listen to my pleas,” she sniffed, “then I’ll slip into your bed in the middle of the night.”

“That’s a scary thought...”

After failing to get her way with tears, she’d resorted to an outright threat. Zen surrendered against his will.

If she was going to take such a firm stance, then it’d be better for Keel to be with them so Zen could maintain his dignity.

“Only for tonight,” he said. “Got it?”

“Thank you, father.” In high spirits, Elysia prepared for bed.

After making sure the living room fireplace had plenty of fuel, Zen had Keel sprawl on the floor and curl around the two of them. It felt nice to lie down wrapped up in such a fluffy coat.

It seemed Elysia just couldn’t fall asleep tonight, so she was a chatterbug. Everything she talked about was related to Heinri and Aness from when they’d still been alive. In response, Zen recited stories about their time during their student days.

Many of the things Elysia shared were stories she’d already told before, and Zen was sure he repeated some of his own tales too. However, it wasn’t boring, and it was fine since it was the anniversary of their deaths.

As he looked up at the ceiling with Elysia, he imagined the faces of his close friends who were so far beyond it. How much did they wind up talking about the past? After Elysia’s breaths began to steadily rise and fall after she’d finally tired of talking, the moon was low enough to be seen through the window.

As he studied his daughter’s sleeping face, Zen murmured, “I did

think she was being unusually energetic... She really is still a child after all."

Just for tonight, he gently took her into his arms. His shirt where the girl's face was buried in his chest gradually grew wet with tears.

"I thought she was such a wise, mature girl. Remembering Heinri and Aness... She was probably just trying to act strong."

"*Of course*," Keel said, who was apparently awake. "*She's only fourteen.*"

"I still haven't fully become a father either," Zen said remorsefully.

He was already twenty-nine years old. A full adult. He'd absolutely not forgotten the shock of Aness's and Heinri's deaths, but even so, it had already been four years since it happened. His heart had processed it. He was good at storing it all away, and when he remembered his friends on a day like today, he didn't even shed tears anymore.

But Elysia was different. For her, it'd been *only* four years. That wasn't enough time to heal the heart of this girl, who'd been ten years old back then. Zen hadn't been able to realize it until now.

As he embraced her, she murmured in her sleep. "Father..."

Zen of course knew it wasn't referring to him. However, he held Elysia even closer. "I'll do better as a father for you." He'd treat her preciously, with great care, as the child his late friends had left behind.

"I'll protect you, Elysia," he said on this day like a prayer. Like a promise.

Chapter 9: A Father's Duty

His enemy lurked in the dark night. Even in this spacious mansion, the creature lurked unbelievably deep within it, unseen, simply sneering at the mansion's occupants and the man.

"To think it created an alternate realm with magic," that man calmly evaluated. "This is a monster that must have been around for some time."

"W-Will we be okay?!"

"Please save us!"

"Sir Shiltz!"

The occupants cowered in panic at his feet. They were pressing their palms together as though praying.

"Don't fret. That's why I'm here." The monk named Shiltz stepped forward with incredible calm. Accumulating mana in the point between his brows, he recited a magic spell. "Hidden Deception, reveal all."

It worked like a charm and instantly destroyed that unnatural space the monster had created. The mansion returned to its original state, and the occupants could now see the kitchen as it truly was, lit by the dim moonlight.

And then, although it was the dead of night, they could see the mouse monster's brawny, three-meter-long body, so big that it shouldn't have ever been able to hide it. The creature gripped a large jar, helping itself to the pickled meat that was stored inside. Its magnificent fur, rusty red in color, reflected the faint moonlight.

"Indeed, it isn't an elder. It is an ancient," he noted. Like cats and foxes, mice also gained mana when they grew old, transforming into monsters called elder rats. However, this monster had lived even longer than that, becoming an extremely dangerous existence—an ancient rat.

Shiltz estimated it to be at least three hundred years old. With as

much knowledge as he had, he could clearly tell just by looking at its coat.

The mouse monster, who'd had its true form exposed, flew into a rage. It tossed aside the jar and leaped at them. Its bright red eyes shone viciously in the dark room, leaving behind streaks of light as it bared fangs as big as swords. Its keen agility that you wouldn't expect from such a huge body was proof that it was augmenting its physical ability with magic.

The occupants screamed at its fierce display and scattered in all directions. Only one man, Shiltz, stood without moving a single step.

Calmly, he chanted another spell. "The True Samadhi Fire, annihilate."

In an instant, the monster's large body was engulfed in a raging fire. That fire consisted of mysterious, pure crimson flame that couldn't exist in the natural world and didn't spread to anything but its intended target.

The ancient rat immediately shrieked and writhed in agony. At the same time, its instincts caused it to summon all of its mana to negate these similarly mana-produced flames, but that didn't happen. Instead, as if it'd added fuel to the fire, the flames blazed even more violently.

"No matter how powerful that mana of yours is after so many years, you're only a wretched beast in the end." Until now, Shiltz had worn a stern expression on his face, but for the first time, he showed an emotion. As if returning the monster's ridiculing sneer from before, the corners of his lips twitched up.

His attitude that exuded confidence wasn't just for show. In Shiltz's thirty-seven years of life, he'd exterminated countless magical beasts that possessed much more mana than he did.

This ancient rat was the same. As was reasonable for its age, it probably possessed several times more mana than Shiltz.

However, it was no match for him. After all, he was a real conjurer. He wasn't creating supernatural phenomena by relying solely on mana like the magical beasts did. He was creating mysterious miracles through mana that he harnessed using techniques and principles. This was what was called sorcery.

Humans had created the practice from ancient times, and in Catalan, the mystic monks of the emperor's group of conjurers, the Vajra Temple, continued to pass it down through the generations. It was true that humans couldn't naturally possess mana. However, if they could acquire it through some means, they could use it much more skillfully than those magical beasts who were nothing more than animals in the end.

Humans were weak in body, but like how they could fight against tigers and bears with swords, it wasn't impossible for them to cast deadly curses on monsters through sorcery.

Right now, the fire sorcery that Shiltz had used didn't simply burn its target. It was a crafty thing that converted its target's mana into fuel to intensify the flames. Without an understanding of sorcery, it was impossible to extinguish it.

The ancient rat must have given up. It left his body to burn and, with a staggering tenacity, stood up, baring its fangs at Shiltz with a repulsive hunger.

Cloaked in fierce flames, it once again pounced at him.

"What a lively thing it is," Shiltz mused. "However, that's how monsters ought to be." Without panicking and without moving from his spot, he quietly gathered mana once again between his brows. He thought of what sorcery he'd try next, using this mouse monster as his target.

Shiltz calmly left the mansion after he'd successfully slaughtered the monster. In the end, he'd exterminated it without moving a single step. When he thought back to how strong it had been, he found that, although it'd been an ancient rat, its power had left much to be desired.

Meanwhile, the occupants who had fled earlier now chased after Shiltz, frantic to express their thanks.

"Thank you, Sir Shiltz!"

"You saved our family!"

They were the richest merchant family in this remote countryside, but after an ancient rat had started living in their mansion, essentially taking their home captive, the family had been at a loss

for what to do. However, there wasn't anyone who could fix the issue in this small town. Even after they'd lodged a complaint at the government office, the employees there kept repeating that they were presently discussing the matter with the governor-general and to please wait a little longer.

Shiltz had just happened to be passing by on his journey, so he'd volunteered to exterminate it. It was an especially happy stroke of luck for the merchant family.

"How shall we repay you, Sir Shiltz?"

"Please stay the night with us. We'll have the mansion cleaned right away."

"Yes, stay as long as you'd like!"

"We'll prepare you your favorite food and drinks!"

They passionately welcomed him. However, Shiltz plainly shook his head.

"I didn't exterminate the monster because I wanted a reward." That was what he truly felt from the bottom of his heart.

The occupants now looked at him as if he were some kind of selfless savior, but that impression was also wrong.

"I'm a member of the conjurer group who works directly under the emperor," he said. It wasn't something to be made public, but it wasn't like his true identity as a member of the Vajra Temple was a secret, so he could say this much.

He continued. "We are under His Majesty the Emperor's imperial decree that says to immediately eliminate any monsters wreaking havoc in this world. I'm simply following that order, so I can't accept any special rewards. If you are going to show gratitude, you should show it to the present emperor, His Majesty Julian II, who thinks mercifully of his citizens."

"O-Oh, yes!"

"We shall do what you say!" The occupants prostrated themselves all at once. It seemed they'd been under the impression that Shiltz was a wise, lone mage but were surprised to find that he was related to the imperial family. They appeared a bit flustered, like they didn't really know the proper manners for this situation but were bowing their heads for now anyway.

Regardless, Shiltz was deeply satisfied that His Majesty's influence even reached the countryside. "Be well." Leaving behind that brief phrase, he left the mansion.

He headed out past the outskirts of the town and made camp in the forest. He had plenty of traveling funds for proper lodgings, but he was purposefully doing this as part of his training.

Using sorcery, he put up a barrier that kept out animals and insects and maintained the temperature inside, and trimmed the overgrown grass to create a high-quality bed.

He flopped down, sprawling out unaffected by the evening dew even without a tent in the middle of winter.

"Hee hee. An imperial decree from His Majesty." Thinking back to what he'd told that merchant family, he found it funny.

It was true that there'd previously been an imperial decree like that. Everyone in the Vajra Temple had been told to exterminate monsters whenever they found them (if they weren't in the middle of an incredibly important mission) and to strive toward keeping peace for the citizens. However, that'd been given out by the former emperor, Heinri, not the current one, Julian II.

Unlike his upstanding older brother, the younger brother, Julian II, didn't have an admirable ethos that would want to put his citizens at ease. However, because he hadn't given out a new imperial decree telling the Vajra Temple *not* to defeat monsters anymore, Shiltz interpreted that as meaning it was fine to continue carrying out Heinri's orders.

Exterminating monsters was the perfect opportunity to try out his skills. He was a truth seeker, after all.

He believed that the mana he received from the sovereign golden dragon was given to him because he was meant to master sorcery. He wasn't a materialistic person. He had no interest in money, food, or love. However, if you raised your status and rank in the Vajra, you'd be granted even more mana from the sovereign golden dragon, which in turn gave you the power to learn even more advanced techniques and principles. To achieve this, he was eager to try and do something distinguishing while following the emperor.

Shiltz absolutely did not forget that the conjurer group existed

because of the current emperor's power, and he wouldn't be a truth seeker without the conjurer group.

Currently, the reason he was leaving the Goldragan Palace and going so far south to the state of Tem was by the current emperor's secret order: "By order of the emperor, assassinate the Imperial Princess Elysia."

It wasn't only Shiltz who'd received this order. Every conjurer monk in the Vajra Temple who excelled at dirty work was searching for the missing imperial princess. Carrying out an assassination by sorcery in the inner palace was difficult since it was nearly impossible to cover up all traces of their criminal techniques and identity. It'd be quickly revealed that the emperor was behind it, and he wouldn't be able to excuse it away.

However, outside, they could hide those things as much as they wanted. His Majesty determined that the imperial princess running away had been a blessing. The search itself was extremely difficult, though.

It was impossible for a fourteen-year-old imperial princess to disappear without a trace, running away and hiding on her own. Someone was definitely helping her.

However, they couldn't pinpoint who it was. His Majesty (along with the empress and her father, the prime minister) had countless political opponents.

When it came to influential people who had the power to secretly sneak the imperial princess out of the palace and shelter her, there were at least one hundred people who could come to mind. It could be the Chancellor of the Treasury that held unparalleled power, for example, or the Director General of the Police Agency, who held a passionate devotion to the entire imperial family, or any of the powerful families of the state of Muraib that the empress dowager's family was from.

To make matters worse, Catalan's territories were so vast, trying to find one imperial princess within them was like searching for a single leaf in a forest. His Majesty had taken that fact into account and passed an official notice to accomplish the mission no matter how many years it took.

This was all overwhelming, but Shiltz had a plan. He wasn't taking a trip to the southern reaches of the empire on a whim. It was because right around the time the imperial princess had gone missing, the youngest brother of the Leadon family, who'd been criticized as being nothing more than some spent tea leaves, had been demoted to the remote region of Cylin.

After all, that person was just a basic bureaucrat. The people of the world didn't particularly pay attention to what happened to him. However, Shiltz was one of the few who did.

He had a reason.

A certain event had happened during Emperor Heinri's reign seven years ago, when he'd still been alive. He'd privately given out an imperial decree, counting on Shiltz as a conjurer monk who excelled at stealth to conduct a secret investigation. There were suspicions that the man who'd been chief of the ambassador bureau to the country of Baron in the Foreign Affairs Agency had been leaking confidential information to foreign countries.

The Foreign Affairs Agency was an untouchable post that even the emperor couldn't treat impudently. Although Catalan was such a developed country that it had abolished the aristocracy system, nobility in most countries remained prevalent and held real power.

In general, those obnoxious nobles considered their associations with other nobles important and boasted of their friendly relations that dated back thousands of years. As a result, there were many people in the empire's Foreign Affairs Agency who'd had noble lineages before Catalan's founding, back when the aristocracy was still in place. They behaved haughtily as personnel that couldn't easily be replaced.

That was because no matter how eloquent a high official was, if they went to foreign countries without being from a former noble family themself, all the nobles who held key roles in those countries would never fully drop pretenses, let alone establish foreign relationships and friendships. It was impossible.

Conversely, even if those (former) nobles of Catalan were a little mediocre, they held a lot of influence in the imperial courts of other

countries. Their incredibly old friendships lived on today. To put it positively, some might call that an ability in its own right, but this was why, despite how thoroughly Catalan operated on a meritocracy system, the Foreign Affairs Agency was the only place that was widely based on actual heredity. To mess with a beehive like that would have been painful even for Emperor Heinri.

To add to that, although leaking classified information was a sensitive issue, a little talk here and there was considered acceptable for ambassadors. After all, if it was possible to show your hand just a little and gain a huge amount of trust that would later benefit national interests, you'd naturally do so.

The aforementioned ambassador bureau chief was a cunning man who was good at ascertaining where that line lay. He always seemed to know how far he could push things before he leaked information that was too detrimental to the country and excuse it as being a part of diplomatic talks. That was how he'd continued to leak confidential information over and over again over a dozen or so years. It could be said that it'd taken over ten years to discover this precisely because the information he'd been leaking hadn't been outrageous. What was more, he'd been so skilled that it was amazing the leaks had even been discovered at all.

So who on earth was the first one to have those suspicions? It wasn't Heinri with his keen perception. It was Zen Leadon, who'd been tasked with odd jobs in the Baron Ambassador Bureau's office back then.

He'd been a young man who, in this world, should've been shunned as the spent tea leaves of the Leadon siblings, yet he had found inconsistencies in the written reports that the ambassador bureau's chief wrote about his trips to the country of Baron. That was how Zen began to suspect that the chief was receiving compensation for leaking confidential information.

It could be forgiven if it was under the diplomatic excuse of being for the nation's interests, but if it was to accumulate his own wealth, then he was committing treason and benefiting the enemy. It was deserving of capital punishment.

However, suspicions were only suspicions. They couldn't be

judged if there was no proof, and the Foreign Affairs Agency wasn't a place you could point to on suspicions alone.

With Zen unable to go public with this information, he basically just told Heinri as his friend. This situation left Emperor Heinri with no choice but to rely on the conjurer group that worked directly under him instead of the Police Agency.

Undertaking this important secret order had left Shiltz in extremely high spirits. After all, even among the previous generations of emperors, Heinri was especially honest and did his utmost to avoid relying on the Vajra Temple too often. This was a rare opportunity for Shiltz to make a great accomplishment to distinguish himself.

Of course, he used sorcery in his investigation with the utmost care. There was a big possibility that Zen, who was as mediocre as the rumors said, was only making a huge fuss over smoke where there was no fire. On top of that, if Shiltz's secret investigation was uncovered and if the ambassador bureau's chief turned out to be innocent, that man would fly into a rage about having been investigated, putting Heinri in a really tough position. As such, Shiltz would be found responsible and ordered to commit suicide by the high priest (the conjurer group head).

It was hard work to avoid that fate, but long story short, he successfully found proof. He discovered that the ambassador bureau chief had been stocking up on all kinds of gems and treasures in his lover's house, all of which had unknown sources. Thus, the single traitor was judged.

Shiltz received praise from Emperor Heinri in secret and rose up from rank three to rank five within the Vajra Temple in one go. At the same time, it'd been an opportunity for him to learn that that man named Zen Leadon was neither just some spent tea leaves, nor was he mediocre.

That Zen Leadon? Demoted? Impossible, he thought to himself with conviction.

Shiltz used the grass as a pillow and looked up at the starry sky. He knew that Zen had been given the runaround in the head offices and that he'd never been promoted, but Shiltz already suspected

there'd been a special reason for that. For example, perhaps he'd gotten on a chancellor's bad side?

Still, Zen's older brother was the Chancellor of Ceremonial Affairs, who, although he couldn't show favoritism in his position, should have at least been able to protect Zen from an unfair demotion.

There has to be more to it.

What was the reasoning behind it? Had Chancellor Yohia let the imperial princess escape to have her sheltered in the remote countryside? Only Shiltz, who knew Zen's actual abilities, could have made this connection. This was why he was currently setting out for the south, to Todd Village where Zen had been demoted to.

That's right. In other words, a fearsome conjurer assassin was approaching Todd Village.

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"Well, I expected as much," Donna from next door said, exasperated. Zen and Elysia hung their heads, unable to say a word back.

They were in the living room, standing only a few steps past the front door. The straw and dried potato flowers that were the traces of their hard struggle were scattered across the room.

"This is why I told you to start preparing them a long time ago." Donna said, continuing to throw even more words that showed how unsympathetic she was to their plight. She wasn't scolding or lecturing them. Her words held a nuance that said, *Kids just don't understand when you tell 'em.*

Zen and Elysia trembled with shame. Only Keel was completely uninvolved, letting out a yawn in front of the fireplace.

The new year was approaching, and every household in Todd Village was frantically preparing for the festival. In particular, Nazalf Prefecture had a unique custom where it was a must to decorate your house with wreaths for the first five days of the new year to summon the good luck fairy. If you didn't, your house would be ostracized since it meant a poor fairy would come instead. Because

of this, each household used bundled straw and dried flowers to create handmade wreaths at the end of every year.

They'd been told it was ideal to decorate their house with at least ten wreaths, but for Zen and Elysia, who still hadn't grown accustomed to their daily chores, it was a lot of extra work. On top of that, this was the first time these two people who'd been born in the imperial capital had made a flower wreath. It was just such a pain, they'd kept dragging their feet until today, making excuses like "We can just make it tomorrow," "For real, let's do it tomorrow," and, "If we don't get serious, then we won't make it by the new year," "But once we get serious, we can get it done in one go."

Now today was the last day of December. It was last minute. It'd be the new year in another ten hours or so. They only had two flower wreaths completed.

"I was just talking to my little niece about how you've recently been shaping up, Elysia. I told her how I used to come here every day to guide you through the housework, but now I come only once a week, and you're working hard despite being clumsy. I must've spoken too soon."

"I have nothing to say for myself..." Elysia, who under normal circumstances would have been waited on as the imperial princess of this vast nation, was at a loss for words. She couldn't raise her head in front of Donna.

Donna went for Zen next. "According to Anna, you take on several days' worth of work at the town hall and still make it home before noon, right, Zen? You do something so difficult, yet I find it strange how you can't make some proper flower wreaths."

"For me, my work is much easier..." Zen, who was the son of a famous family of bureaucrats and had been working in the central government until two months ago, was slumping his shoulders and shrinking in on himself in front of Donna.

However, with a sigh, Donna said, "Seems like I've got no choice. I'll help you, so let's finish these before sundown."

Zen and Elysia looked up at her, deeply moved as if she were a merciful god. Now that they'd gained a reinforcement that was more

reliable than eighty thousand imperial guards, their despair had miraculously turned for the better as the two resumed their work with smiles on their faces.

They'd lose heart if they worked in silence, so they mixed in some friendly conversation.

"There's a dance party in the plaza tomorrow, right?" Elysia asked Donna excitedly.

It's probably different than what Elysia is imagining, Zen thought to himself with a wry smile. What the imperial princess imagined upon hearing of a dance party was probably formal stuff that was held in the imperial court like balls and similar soirees. However, events held in this village were naturally more unrefined festivities.

Although the villagers also attended them in boy-girl pairs, there was no fixed formal way to dance. It was common to leap and hop to the music, moving dynamically. You could also sometimes spot couples who clung so close together that it made you think, *Shouldn't that be for the bedroom?* and *They're really getting handsy in public, huh?* Zen had heard all that from his coworkers when he'd asked about it at the town hall.

"Elysia is a good girl and pretty. I think the young boys won't be able to leave her alone. Maybe there'll be swarms of people offering to dance with her, seeing it as a chance to get closer?" Donna answered, her hands moving faster than her mouth.

Elysia giggled. "Hee hee. That might be troublesome."

"As your father, I'm troubled too," Zen admitted. "I'm worried that weird boys are going to approach you." He was very uneasy, seeing his daughter looking excited about it. This was a countryside village where there weren't many pastimes to enjoy, so he understood her eagerness upon hearing that there'd be a festival. However, given that she was an imperial princess, he wanted her to keep things in moderation when it came to boys!

"What's the problem, Mr. Zen?" Donna asked. "You shouldn't be so restrictive over just a little bit of dancing. City folks are just so overprotective."

"It's not because we're city folks..." Zen mumbled. It was frustrating that he couldn't explain their circumstances!

"Listen, Elysia. When it comes to men, it's all about looking at your options." Donna didn't concern herself with Zen and continued her explanation. "Don't let this chance slip you by. You get in contact with different men and look at them with a discerning eye. If you don't really know anything about them and realize you've got a dud on the day you get married, you'll definitely regret it later."

"I see," Elysia said, enlightened. "That's how you found Kulzawa."

"Oh no, I was so inexperienced back then that I made a mistake! I'm a good example of what not to do." Donna joked around, but Zen and Elysia knew very well that Kulzawa was a good husband and the two were close.

That was why Zen really wanted to say, "That's a heartwarming story," and end things there, but he couldn't let that happen.

"I understand, Elysia." He relented. "Donna has a point, so I won't say anything if boys ask you to dance. It's just that there's a chance you could accidentally go too far since it's your first festival. I want you to at least promise to come home before dark." He tried to give her a clear explanation while acting like an understanding father. However, Elysia was a clever girl and saw right through his words immediately.

"Does something happen after the sun goes down?" she asked.

"It's a custom to kiss the person you're dancing with when that happens." Donna just straight-up said what Zen had been trying to avoid.

"Can you not decline?"

"I've never heard of that happening... Well, people would probably talk bad about you behind your back, calling you a rude girl who thinks she's too good for others."

"Oh my, I didn't think my first kiss could be stolen this way." Elysia acted surprised through her face and tone, although she wasn't affected at all.

Nobody in the imperial capital would think Her Highness's first kiss would be stolen by a barbarous custom in the sticks either! Zen thought anxiously. If Elysia kept being influenced by these countryside customs and found a partner here, he didn't know how he'd take responsibility. Sharla would definitely kill him if, after five

years, Elysia officially returned to the palace pregnant.

"Just come back before sunset!" Zen insisted. "Got it?"

"You don't have to listen to your overprotective father, okay, Elysia?"

Stop it, Donnaaa!

"Hee hee. You really want to keep me to yourself, father."

How the hell am I supposed to respond to that, Elysiaaa?! Zen was overwhelmed by their dangerous statements.

Now, in all seriousness, Zen was aware that the reason he didn't want Elysia to have an undesirable lover was not just because she was an imperial princess. Princess or not, he truly felt that he wanted someone good for her.

Am I the weird one here? Do real fathers not think this way? Is every father out there okay with their daughters smooching just any old stranger? If so, he didn't feel confident he could be a parent someday. Zen found himself worrying over a future that wasn't even set in stone.

He didn't notice Elysia's eyes sparkling mischievously, like an expert who knew how to read their opponent's breaths in order to deal them a swift knockout.

She proposed in an innocent tone, "Then wouldn't everything be solved if you danced with me, father?"

"No, no, I think it's questionable for a girl and her father to dance... It'll be in front of other people too, you know?"

"Then I'll have a dance with the village's number one womanizer and kiss him."

"Right! Let's dance together!" Zen agreed mostly out of reflex, partially because he'd been caught off guard. He didn't even consider that Elysia was chuckling to herself, internally glad that her scheme had worked.

"Hee hee. I'm looking forward to tomorrow, father."

"Yeah. The beginning of the year is something to celebrate, and it's a festival." Zen also hadn't realized that they weren't quite on the same page either.

With their promise to dance together, and Elysia, who'd suddenly become excited, Donna looked at them with a lukewarm gaze that

said, *What an odd father-and-daughter bond. Must be a city folk thing.*

Keel lay in front of the fireplace and gave a big yawn as if to say, *Even a dog knows to stay out of this, although I'm a wolf myself.*

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The imperial calendar greeted the year 118, and the festival to celebrate the new year in Todd Village commenced.

In other towns and villages, it was common for government offices to sponsor these events. However, in Todd Village, where there wasn't much to do, the villagers took the initiative to hold the festival, so Zen was completely off duty. The only way the government was involved was the prefectural government office's subsidy that covered the free drinks that the mayor's tavern was treating everyone to.

Zen and Elysia were tuckered out from their final stretch of making those flower wreaths yesterday and indulged in sleeping in until almost noon. Then they leisurely prepared to head out. Only Keel, whose hobby was sleeping, had no interest in festivals and would be left behind.

The weather outside was incredible. As they were heading to the plaza that would be the dance venue, they could already hear the loud bustling and music of the festivities.

Even this small village had people who liked playing instruments, so they were probably taking this festival as the prime time to give a performance. At the same time, the instrument you could hear the most of were drums, which even amateurs could play decently well.

"I've never experienced something so lively before, father!" Elysia exclaimed.

"But the imperial capital has many festivals on a scale that blows this one out of the water, doesn't it?" Zen was worried that it'd be a disappointment to Elysia, who was already very excited.

"Even so, I could never participate since I was locked in the inner palace."

"What about all the banquets, garden parties, and balls at the

palace, though? You were able to go to those, right? Compared to those, I think this festival will be so uncouth, it might throw you off."

"Even when I could go, an imperial princess can only be mere decoration. They were too formal for me to enjoy! That's why I always wished I could go to a normal festival like this. Even mother used to sneak away by herself and have fun while incognito."

"Okay, I understand. Let's have enough fun to make up for all those lost years." Zen decided to pretend he didn't hear her complaint toward Aness and hurried with Elysia to the plaza.

However, they were surprised upon reaching the dance venue. The two of them stood in a predicament as Zen's worries turned a different direction before his eyes.

For instance, when he looked at a certain young woman, he saw she was dancing suggestively, holding the hem of her long skirt up so high that he didn't know where to look. Another boy-girl pair was glued together, absorbed in a dance that had them pressing and wiggling their bodies against each other obscenely.

This is ten times worse than I'd imagined from what town hall told me. To the father of an of-age girl, it was a scene that turned his face pale. He'd read books before that held a wild, overgeneralized opinion that the empire's southern region's people were uninhibited, but now he saw that they might not have been necessarily incorrect.

"F-Father, do we have to dance like that?!" As a person who was actually modest despite her love of teasing, Elysia was panicking. They had no intention of criticizing the way the villagers had fun, but this was difficult for imperial capital folks to get behind.

However, it was true that the majority of the dancers were the village's youth, and they were the ones going over the top. If you looked around more, you could also see some people enjoying more respectable dances here and there.

For example, the middle-aged couple over there moved their bodies calmly, and although they seemed to already be out of breath, you could tell what lovebirds they usually were as they boldly danced in the middle of the plaza. Another elderly pair he saw might have had some experience with ballroom dancing. Their dance was

simple, swaying left and right, but their steps were sure and elegant.

I see. You're free to do what you want. It was the polar opposite of the formal balls that were held in the palace. These dancers didn't follow any set steps or worry about other people's eyes, each person individually doing their own thing. However, everyone in the plaza was enjoying dancing and the festival from the bottom of their hearts.

In that case, then it was Zen and Elysia's loss if they didn't join in the fun and dance.

"May I have this dance, young miss?" Zen faced Elysia and slightly bowed, extending his right hand.

"Yes, gladly." Elysia gently took that hand, and they stepped toward the dance area of the plaza. They found a spot with a little space around them and stepped into a formal dance—a waltz.

They moved with a grace and elegance different from anyone else in the plaza, as if the place where Zen and Elysia danced had become another world, turning into a castle ballroom. The festival music had a completely different tempo from a waltz, but they easily matched their pace to it, each step big and carefree, skillfully avoiding the other dancers around them so they didn't get in their way. That was of course thanks to their training.

As the imperial princess who was naturally experienced, Elysia said, "Hee hee. I'm surprised you're so good at this, father. I thought without a doubt that you would have no interest."

"It's because I was in the Ambassador Bureau in the Foreign Affairs Agency," he said. "I was an office worker, but if I'd gotten promoted, I'd have had to accompany the ambassador and dance in other imperial courts. I desperately learned how to dance while my big sister Sharla kicked me. In the end, instead of being promoted, I was transferred to the Judicial Affairs Agency in half a year, making that all go to waste!"

"It wasn't a waste. It's making me really happy right now."

"Then it was worth getting kicked by Sharla." Remembering his pain, he smiled wryly.

Maybe she was picturing it in her head too, because Elysia stifled a laugh and nodded.

Yeah, she looks like she's having fun, he thought to himself as this young girl spun around with him, dancing with a carefree smile.





But is she really okay having her father as her dance partner? Maybe she actually wants to dance with a boy her own age.

Of course, Elysia had been the one to say she wanted to dance with him, but he wondered anyway.

Now that I look back, Elysia's been attached to me since the beginning. It was to the point that it was a little much. They weren't actually related by blood, after all.

It was the same now. Without paying any mind to how this was the first time having him as a dance partner, she put her body weight on him with full trust, dancing like she wanted to be shown off, never letting her eyes leave Zen's face for a second. The way she stared at him even looked like it held passion.

Assuming that that means she's looking at me as a man and not a father would be jumping to conclusions, I think. After all, she was an imperial princess, and he was a worthless minor government official. On top of that, he was a grown man, a whole fifteen years older than her. As someone with weak household skills who repeatedly showed how pathetic he was at home, he should have had no attractive qualities.

I don't get it... I guess there's no way I could understand the feelings of a maturing girl to begin with. Zen internally grumbled to himself. As they said, it was hard to tell a poor thinker from a sleeping one.

However, there was one thing that was clear as day. He'd learned on the anniversary of Aness's and Heinri's deaths that this young girl's heart still carried the scars from the loss of her parents. That was probably why Elysia was likely starving for affection from someone she was blood related to. From someone she was close to.

In that case, I want to fill her heart with that love as her father... As her family.

For today, he would put his all into being her dance partner. He'd have Elysia enjoy her first festival to the fullest.

That's right. That's the duty of a proper father. He'd no longer waver. And in order for his dance partner to have fun, it was crucial that he have fun too.

"I'm thinking about picking up the pace," he said. "Can you keep

up, miss?”

“Oh? My dance instructor was Lady Leveira, you know.”

“The lady of that famed Chancellor of Rites? That means I might be the one overwhelmed instead...”

“Remember that you brought it up first, father.”

“Ha ha ha... Please go easy on me...”

Elysia easily disregarded his pleas and abruptly quickened their pace, leaving Zen to be the one swung around this time.

This dance venue was so endlessly free and lively.

Elysia and Zen’s waltz did indeed attract attention.

Those who had tired of dancing and were resting on the edges of the venue, as well as people performing some folk tunes, were viewing the two with curiosity. In particular, young people who dreamed of living in the city and girls who dreamed of life in a royal palace were looking at them with envy.

Among them, however, was a man who was gazing at them with a different look in his eyes. It was the conjurer Shiltz, who’d received secret orders to assassinate the imperial princess.

So you were sheltering her here. Your demotion truly was a camouflage, Zen Leadon. He was deeply pleased that he’d correctly judged the situation. Thanks to that, he could outwit his fellow students and take all the credit for himself.

Sorcerer monks knew the faces of every member of the imperial family. It was true that the only person on earth that they served aside from the golden dragon divine god was the present emperor—to the point that so long as the current emperor gave an imperial decree for it, not even previous emperors were safe from assassination by the Vajra Temple.

Meanwhile, if someone was a member of the imperial family, then they had the right to inherit the imperial throne. No matter how low their rank was in the order of succession, a crisis could occur at any time. If the worst-case scenario were to happen, they might become the new emperor as soon as tomorrow. As such, the Vajra Temple couldn’t just be content with making that newly crowned member their absolute lord without really knowing them.

Elysia was currently first in line to inherit the throne. There was no way Shiltz would mistake her for anyone else.

I will take your life. As he held a drawn sword, he headed toward the center of the plaza. Even so, it didn't cause an uproar. No one noticed Shiltz's presence.

That was only natural. It was because he was using sorcery to erase his presence.

If he could get close enough and stab her in the heart, then his duty would be complete. Now that he'd located her whereabouts, it was an incredibly easy thing to do for the rank-five conjurer Shiltz.

If this were the inner palace and someone was suddenly stabbed by an invisible person, it would definitely be identified as the work of sorcery. However, it was unlikely that anyone in this remote region had the eye to accurately identify it.

For an even more perfect finish, he could completely massacre the villagers and make it look like monsters had done it.

Yes, that's a good idea. I should do that. To Shiltz, truth seeking and, by extension, the imperial decrees, were everything. He was entirely unburdened by anything resembling a conscience.

Carrying a short sword, he cheekily approached his target. The song had just about ended when he was coming up behind Zen, who'd stopped dancing with a smile.

Ten more steps. Five more steps.

Shiltz adjusted his grip on the short sword and readied himself.

It was right at that moment that Zen, with his back still to him, said aloud, "Hidden Deception, reveal all."

Shiltz instantly got goose bumps. It was because those words were a phrase that ordinary people definitely wouldn't know. However, to those like him who were veteran monks, they were words they'd recited so many thousands of times that they'd practically become part of their flesh and blood.

It was because it was an essential spell used in sorcery.

It definitely wasn't a bluff either. The effect was immediate. Shiltz, who'd been hiding his presence, had his sorcery canceled out by Zen's, exposing his true form!

In an instant, the dance venue was filled with screams. That was

a natural reaction. After all, a suspicious person had suddenly appeared with a brandished sword.

As the villagers scattered off in all directions, Zen was the only one to bravely turn around to protect the imperial princess from Shiltz.

"I-Impossible..." Shiltz choked out. "How?"

"It seems like you're pretty skilled at sorcery, but you were teeming with bloodlust. It's pointless to try hiding yourself if you can't get that under control," Zen responded calmly.

His perception that was akin to a master martial artist's and his attitude of never letting his guard down even at the height of a festival, remaining combat ready at all times, were both worthy of admiration. However, what Shiltz was surprised by wasn't in the realm of what a commoner could be capable of.

"How can you use sorcery?!"

"It's obviously because I'm a conjurer too," Zen responded shamelessly.

"As if I'll accept such a foolish explanation!" Shiltz shrieked. The only wizards in this empire should have been the sorcerer monks, who'd been selected by the golden dragon divine god and were directly under the emperor's control.

Of course, the Leadon family had a great history, so it was possible that some had belonged to the Vajra Temple in the past. It was possible they'd secretly written down its techniques and principles or passed them down orally to their descendants, although those things were normally not allowed. In that case, Zen might know the spells.

But where had he gotten that mana?! Humans didn't naturally have the power for sorcery. The golden dragon divine god would never sign contracts with those outside the Vajra Temple, and the moment a sorcerer monk left the organization, their supply of mana would also stop. So Zen's "explanation" wasn't enough to explain his mana at all.

"The golden dragon divine god isn't the only one who can lend mana to humans." Zen was beating around the bush. However, someone else immediately appeared to explain in his place.

It was that large white wolf.

Keel had hastened to the plaza with a sword in his maw, and he threw it to Zen with a shake of his burly head. "*I hurried over thinking I'd sensed some mana, but I didn't think I'd find a human conjurer instead of a monster!*" said that mysterious voice that resounded in their heads, spitting out human words.

"Yeah. He's probably a sorcerer monk who was ordered to assassinate Elysia by the emperor."

When Zen hit the nail on the head, Shiltz murmured, "A large white wolf... Oh my, that's a vanargand!" He was convinced of it as the words left his mouth.

Vanargands were a type of divine beast that were members of the Five Sovereigns, white wolves that were said to possess immortal bodies. However, according to the Vajra Temple's books, they should normally be over ten meters long. The one that appeared in front of Shiltz's eyes, although big, was three meters at most.

So it's a young vanargand. As Shiltz thought that to himself, he suddenly remembered something.

It'd happened about ten years ago.

The guards had exposed a criminal syndicate dealing with illegal slave trade in the imperial capital. At that time, there was a situation where, along with the young girls and boys who were trapped as commodities, an extremely rare young vanargand was found.

Although immature, it was still a type of divine beast. Emperor Heinri, who'd been carefully observing the incident, had personally taken it into custody, then returned it to its birthplace. At least, that was what Shiltz had heard. However, it seemed it had been kept in the imperial capital after all. Was that creature what was currently in front of him now?

Shiltz had no idea what had really happened and why that wolf was with Zen. His name hadn't been among the guard's centurions who'd exposed that crime syndicate. It was inconceivable that he'd hand over that achievement to someone else.

At any rate, the mystery of how Zen could use mana was solved.

Although it was young, Zen had made a contract with a divine beast and was borrowing a portion of the vanargand's mana.

"I can't forgive anyone who'd try and hurt Elysia. And, sorry, but I can't let anyone who knows her whereabouts get away." As Zen held his blade, he gathered mana at his brow. Just like how Shiltz and the other sorcerer monks did, he took that portion of mana that he normally hid inside his soul and had it rise like a quiet flame from his entire body. "You don't need to get involved with a human opponent. Got it, Keel?"

"*Of course. I understand.*"

Zen declined the vanargand's support as if he were boasting of his abilities, his intensity so powerful that it couldn't be belittled.

However, Shiltz laughed fearlessly. "Enough prattle. Do you think your skills can hold a candle to me, someone who holds the fifth rank in the Vajra Temple?" It was rare that he had the opportunity to fight against a fellow conjurer. For the truth-seeking Shiltz, this was exactly what he wanted. He'd just been thinking about how unsatisfied he was with only polishing his skills against monsters.

"A-Are you okay, father?" Elysia stammered.

"I am. Your father won't lose."

The imperial princess understood the situation better than Zen did, yet he still wouldn't stop boasting.

He probably has a big head because his miraculous stroke of good fortune has let him form a contract with a divine beast. He feels almighty.

Although they were both conjurers, Shiltz knew what his own capabilities were. That was thanks to the Vajra Temple, where he'd worked hard alongside his fellow students to cultivate their talents under the guidance of powerful leaders. There was a world of difference between him and Zen. Shiltz smirked at this pitiful man.

However, the corners of his lips that had twitched up soon stiffened.

It was because Zen chanted clearly, "Could it be the land of fantasies or the demon's jaw?"

It was an unknown spell that even Shiltz had never heard of. Soon enough, a strange phenomenon occurred around him.

Surrounding the four of them from a distance, the ground rose up so far that you'd have to really look up high in order to see it, turning into a towering circular wall. All the nearby villagers who'd either frozen or fallen to the ground were now beyond the wall, unable to be seen. Even the sky was shut off, the blue and white expanse swallowed by darkness like the night.

"Now you won't be able to escape, and even the villagers can't help you," Zen said coolly. The only ones left inside were Zen, Shiltz, the imperial princess, and the vanargand.

Indeed, in spite of the fact that there wasn't a sliver of light, they could clearly see one another. What on earth was this?

"Don't tell me you created another realm? Even though you're a human? Is such sorcery even possible?" Shiltz spoke to himself in a quivering voice. In the Vajra Temple, only the highest ranking monks or those who were priests (leaders of the conjurer group) could potentially achieve such a thing. Did that mean Zen's abilities as a conjurer exceeded Shiltz's?

No! Absolutely not! As if I, who has devoted a majority of my life to the pursuit of sorcery, would lose to this young bureaucrat wannabe! Shiltz decided to put his pride—no, his everything on the line to kill Zen.

"The True Samadhi Fire, annihilate." Quickly reciting a spell, he tried to swallow Zen's group in fire sorcery.

Rather than respond with his own sorcery, Zen swiftly picked up a large stone that'd fallen in the plaza, infused mana into it, and threw it at the oncoming flames.

Shiltz's flame wrapped around that stone like an animal, and after the force of the flames strengthened for a moment, they dissipated.

"That's a nasty form of sorcery that turns the target's mana into fuel and burns out with them, right?" Zen said. He'd essentially explained his reasoning. If he produced a decoy that held mana, he could easily evade it. To Shiltz, it sounded like Zen was laughing, saying that he wasn't even worth using sorcery on.

Insulted, Shiltz tried to prepare another form of offensive sorcery. However, Zen promptly readied his sword and charged in.

He's a conjurer, yet he's going to rely on a weapon?! Shiltz was

taken aback, but he'd had a small misunderstanding.

"This magic rope ties even the lion." Zen recited a spell at the same time he swung his weapon down. He'd anticipated that Shiltz would jump back to evade his slash attack and so immediately prepared an imprisoning spell to throw out a magical rope with his left hand, entangling Shiltz.

Having put his all into jumping away from Zen's first attack, Shiltz couldn't evade this combination. This magical rope acted like a living creature and tried to bind his entire body.

"No matter what kind of cage it is, it cannot trap a dragon."

However, without a second to spare, he managed to dissolve Zen's rope with sorcery. If he'd been any later, he would've been completely bound and escape would have been impossible. Such was the nature of sorcery that imprisoned its targets.

Zen immediately threw his next hand. "Play with him, amiable earth sprites." He recited the spell as he brandished his sword, next making the earth around Shiltz's feet go soft like mud to try and make him fall.

"Shrink into the earth and teleport." As Shiltz felt his feet get pulled under, he desperately spoke a spell and teleported. Priests were said to be able to teleport several hundred meters, but ten meters was the limit for Shiltz. However, if it allowed him to take a breather in his battle with Zen, then that was enough.

He steadied his ragged breathing. He'd used up a frightening amount of his concentration in order to endure Zen's sword-and-sorcery combo a mere two times. Shiltz, who was rank five in the Vajra Temple, was being overwhelmed.

No, to begin with, the Vajra Temple didn't teach the practice of using martial arts with sorcery. Sorcery required extreme concentration. It was difficult to do something else at the same time.

This man named Zen was an opponent who didn't fit the mold of a conjurer and could not be measured by common sense. At the very least, not by Shiltz and the Vajra Temple. Shiltz had been thrown into disarray precisely because he was walking the straight and rigid path of a sorcerer monk.

"Where did you train? Who taught you sorcery?" he demanded.

After all, sorcery was something humans had created. That meant even if Zen had received his mana from the divine beast vanargand, he couldn't have learned technique from that alone. And with the level of skill he displayed, he absolutely had not learned sorcery on a surface level. Even if Shiltz didn't know who could have taught him these talents, he knew he'd definitely had a teacher.

"A long time ago, I was taught by a fearsome person named Lunashanti. I'd signed a contract with Keel, so Heinri went out of his way to introduce me to a big shot from the Vajra Temple in order to prevent me from wielding my mana carelessly."

That name that had easily left Zen's lips was the name of the previous high priest of the Vajra Temple, who was known as a heathen.

Shiltz's face went pale.

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"Extinguish the merciless balefires."

"All life is born from the sea, and to the sea all things return."

The two conjurers chanted their spells. In an instant, Zen manifested a wall of water to ward off the wave of flames that Shiltz had hurled toward him. For now, Shiltz seemed to be throwing out offensive spells one after another to avoid engaging in close combat with Zen, who could also use his sword.

He said he was rank five? Zen thought to himself. *As expected.* The speed of Shiltz's successive sorcery, which Zen could barely keep up with, along with the techniques and the concentration he used to maintain that pace, were the real deal, making him a sorcerer monk whose skills did not besmirch the Vajra Temple name. He had a dignified air about him.

I'm no specialist compared to him. Using magic along with swords was one thing considering Zen was adept at that, but when it came to fighting purely with sorcery, he didn't know how long he could continue to get by with his comparatively surface-level grasp of it.

I don't have the time to complain, though!

That was because he couldn't ask for Keel's help.

After Zen had rescued Keel from the illegal slave trade organization twelve years ago, Heinri had naturally been going to send Keel back to his birthplace upon discovering he was a young vanargand.

However, Keel felt a debt of gratitude toward Zen for saving him, so he chose not to go home. He was youthful and earnest and wanted to repay him. Before Zen knew it, Keel had already made a contract with him to give him mana.

Emperor Heinri had been at a loss. He was certain the adult vanargands who were Keel's parents would fly into a rage over their child being kidnapped. The only reason they still hadn't come to take him back was likely because they were asleep.

It was said that these divine beasts, who held immortal bodies, grew tired of the eternity of time they had. The longer they lived for, the longer they slept. That was why, once they fell asleep, they would slumber for a long time, even fifty or one hundred years.

So it was scary to think how Keel's parents might react the next time they woke. It was fine if they only came to retrieve their son, but it'd be a problem if their hatred for the Catalanians who'd stolen their child made them aim that hatred toward the empire and demand to know why they hadn't brought him back to them.

When that happened, even if Keel himself explained the situation and defended Zen and Heinri to his parents, the two humans mustn't do anything that could be seen as ill-intentioned. Keel had only stayed behind of his own volition because of his feelings of friendship, but it'd be bad if his parents interpreted it as Zen and Heinri tricking Keel into staying behind to take advantage of his divine beast's mana.

That was why Heinri gave Zen some conditions:

Do not misuse sorcery.

Keep it under control and use it within reason.

Rely on Keel's power as little as possible.

Specifically, Keel could provide backup when Zen was up against other nonhuman opponents, such as the twintail fox not too long ago, or lend mana for Zen to fight back against hostile sorcery, like now. Keel's involvement had to be limited to those two things. Heinri

would approve of Keel's stay in the empire if Zen strictly adhered to those conditions.

That promise Zen had made with his best friend still lived on inside him!

"How peaceful the earth goddess's arms are." Zen created a wall of earth to counter Shiltz's terrifying lightning spell.

"How long and quick are the thunder sovereign's arms." Shiltz upped the pressure of his attacks.

Lightning strike, impact strike, freezing strike, cursed strike, fire strike—he threw out fierce attack after fierce attack. Zen focused entirely on his defensive sorcery to endure them all. If any of these spells got past him, Keel would be all right, but Elysia wouldn't be able to put up any resistance. He absolutely couldn't afford to make any mistakes.

Under the onslaught of Shiltz's offensive sorcery and the mental toll it was taking on him, sweat ran down Zen's forehead as if he were being slowly broiled.

That was when Elysia, who'd been behind him, interjected briefly. "Excuse me, father." She extended her hand and dabbed his sweat with a handkerchief. She was thoughtful and, above all else, calm.

She has real bravery. It's amazing that she can do this in this situation. If things took a turn for the worse, she'd be killed by those sorcery skills, helpless. It would be only natural for her to be frozen in fear or start crying like a baby, and yet here she was—even though as a member of the imperial family, she probably had at least some idea of the Vajra Temple's fearsome power.

That's just how much she trusts me.

He couldn't lose to this pressure. *She's the child Aness and Heinri left behind. She's my daughter right now. If I don't protect her, then who will?!*

Summoning even more mana from inside his soul, he gathered it at his brow. "Let the wind blow and the storm roar."

"What?!"

Zen used wind sorcery to blow away the ten thousand arrows that Shiltz had thrown his way, the excess momentum then slamming into the other sorcerer like a gale.

While Shiltz staggered back, buffeted by the wind, Zen took advantage of the opportunity. He charged in with a blade.

He ran with such determination, it showed his willingness to cut off an arm or two. This sorcerer monk had planned the assassination of a fourteen-year-old girl. As if Zen would show him mercy!

"Is the emperor not ashamed of himself for targeting the life of his niece, who's so young? Can he really be proud of the fact that he called upon your powers?"

"Quit your drivel," Shiltz snapped. "How dare a mere government official like you slander our gracious emperor!" He tracked the movement of Zen's sword and just barely evaded it. He was probably the type of sorcerer monk who was also trained in fighting. While Shiltz might not be good at handling weapons, he clearly knew some martial arts, like how to dodge and evade attacks.

However, Zen didn't care about the particulars of that and swung his sword a second and third time, cornering Shiltz.

"You're right," said Zen. "I am nothing more than a mere government official. There's no way my voice would reach the emperor. However, the golden dragon divine god is seeing His Majesty clear as day!"

As the first emperor Julian's sworn friend and now the empire's guardian, the dragon king was still keeping its promise to its friend to this day. Emperor Julian had stated that if the golden dragon deemed his descendants no longer fit to rule Catalan, he wanted the golden dragon to use its godlike magic to destroy the imperial family.

"What of it? Spewing gossip is disgraceful enough as it is. The golden dragon divine god does not seek perfection from the emperor, and the preceding emperors haven't been perfect either," Shiltz objected while nimbly swinging his body left and right, dodging Zen's slashes. "While the fourth emperor, Emperor Jemma, was skilled in economics, he had a terrible drinking habit that led to an incident in which eight court ladies died. The eighth emperor, Emperor Luke, indulged in his favorite young mistress and neglected government affairs, ruining his reputation. Even so, the golden dragon divine god didn't deem them unfit to rule the empire! The present emperor killing one imperial princess is nothing!"

"Don't presume a mere human can tell what the gracious dragon king is thinking." The point of Zen's blade skimmed Shiltz's face, leaving behind a vertical gash. "Nobody knows how much more mischief the golden dragon divine god will overlook, nor do they know when its patience will end. Does the emperor truly understand how terrifying that is?!"

Zen truly had no right to speak about politics. However, he'd known Aness and Heinri well. He knew better than anyone how upright their reign had been.

"Even so, that has nothing to do with me," said Shiltz. "We sorcerer monks of the Vajra Temple are nothing but tools of His Majesty the Emperor. If he commands it, then we will accomplish what he desires no matter what."

"That's why I hate you guys! When the going gets rough, you refuse to think or feel any shame at all!"

Zen thought back to his student days when he was challenging the Advanced Civil Service Exam. He remembered Aness's words about the examiner, who'd given him such a nasty assignment where the answer had been to say the question itself was wrong.

"However, I do think this was an important assignment for a good-natured person like you."

"Picture yourself as a government official in the future. When your superior gives you incorrect instructions or when the empire is heading down the wrong path, are you going to just obediently keep your head down?"

"You need to question people and the rules more."

Her words had taken root in his heart, shaping him into the person he was now. However, even if he explained what she'd told him to the sorcerer monk, Shiltz surely wouldn't understand.

"Let's finish this already." As Zen swung his sword, he gathered an enormous amount of mana at his brow. That mana spouted all at once from his entire body like a fierce, raging fire.

Witnessing this with his own eyes, Shiltz shuddered. As a sorcerer monk, he probably had the advantage when it came to pure sorcery;

however, the amount of mana that slept within Zen's soul far surpassed his.

That was only natural. What tied the sorcerer monks of the Vajra Temple to the golden dragon divine god Catal Catalana was only a lesser contract.

First, the golden dragon lent mana to the current emperor, and then that emperor distributed that immense amount of mana to the sorcerer monks. How much mana each individual monk received, as well as when they were cut off, was all up to the emperor.

Since this mana had to go through the emperor first, it created a system that made it impossible for the Vajra Temple to oppose its lord.

Meanwhile, what bound Zen and Keel was a true, direct contract.

Of course, the amount of mana a young vanargand had was no match for what the golden dragon divine god held. Keel was closer to a magical beast compared to the godlike adult dragon.

However, it still made sense that Zen alone possessed more mana than any of the hundred sorcerer monks of the Vajra Temple.

"To think there was such a difference between us..." Even if it made logical sense, whether it could actually sink in was a different story. Shiltz gazed at him in astonishment.

Zen had already stopped walking and lowered his sword, concentrating on the strongest sorcery he could muster. Shiltz put some distance between them to prepare his sorcery too.

"I'll use my secret arts, then!" Shiltz had officially lost his cool composure. The corners of his lips were pushed up, making him look strangely happy.

Zen hadn't anticipated that Shiltz's mind would work this way, but it was obvious that when he saw Zen gathering his maximum amount of mana, Shiltz's response was to single-mindedly start preparing the strongest sorcery he could in return. It was all on the line for this sorcerer monk.

That was why Zen didn't use a flashy sorcery spell. Instead, he chanted, "Shrink into the earth and teleport," and teleported behind Shiltz. Then, he used his hand to strike his head.

That action shattered Shiltz's consciousness, and he fell to his

knees, crumpling to the floor.

Zen had made a gamble, bluffing by using the maximum amount of mana he could muster, and won.

The fight had ended a little anticlimactically, but Zen was well aware that that was just how things often went on the battlefield. It was something the sorcerer Shiltz certainly hadn't known.

For the most part, he probably hadn't fought against anyone other than magical beasts before. Shiltz excelled at pure sorcery, but Zen was the winner when it came to overall skill in combat.

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As Zen tied up the unconscious Shiltz with sorcery, Keel came to his side. "*Wouldn't it be easier to just kill him?*"

"I don't want to kill people!" Zen protested. He knew that a human's and a divine beast's mentalities were fundamentally different, though.

Of course, since Zen was an imperial bureaucrat, he couldn't say no if he received a transfer notice to the troops or the Ministry of Military Affairs. There, if his superiors gave the order (so long as it wasn't lawless or unnecessary), he'd have to go to war and probably kill. However, for times when he had the freedom to stick to his own principles, he definitely did not want to do it if he could help it!

"We need to know if he has other comrades too," he added.

"*I see. That's reasonable.*"

Zen shared a conspiratorial smirk and nod with Keel, but the moment was over quickly. Now that he'd successfully protected Elysia from the assassin, he turned around with a look of relief.

Elysia was weak, unable to stand. She stammered, "I-I'm so glad you're okay, father."

"Are *you* okay?!" Zen panickedly rushed over to Elysia, who'd suddenly collapsed on the spot.

"O-Once the relief hit me, I just lost all my strength." As Zen supported her upper body, Elysia smiled as she cried. The tears were flowing profusely. Yet she hadn't cried or caused a commotion when faced with Shiltz's frightening sorcery and murderous impulse.

"I was taught my whole life to be calmer than anyone else in the room and keep a straight face if I was ever attacked. I was told my anxiety would infect even the bodyguards," she admitted, embarrassed. She swiped at her face repeatedly to hide her unstoppable tears.

As expected of the imperial princess. She had incredible bravery. But in the end, she was still a fourteen-year-old girl. She'd actually been terrified.

"I'm sorry for making you worry," Zen apologized.

"Oh, no, I believed that you'd protect me with your life. What was actually scary to me was whether it *would* cost you your life."

Elysia's concern had been for Zen's safety, not her own. That fact painfully conveyed her devotion to him as a daughter.

She continued. "I didn't think the emperor would send an assassin from the Vajra Temple... I hadn't realized how serious they were about getting rid of me... To be honest, I've been too optimistic... I can't forgive how naive I was..."

"No, it's okay, Elysia. You don't have to worry so much." Their foolish emperor was the crazy one here, making the imperial princess—his fourteen-year-old niece—say something like this.

Even so, Elysia cried, "It's not okay! I can't keep involving you anymore, Sir Zen! A sorcerer who's even more terrifying might come next. That's why... That's why... Please, stop guarding me. Live for yourself..."

Elysia clung to his chest and fervently appealed to him. "You're sick and tired of work now, right, Sir Zen? You want to have an easy retirement, right? So you must stop protecting a troublesome imperial princess like me! I'll explain it to Lady Sharla myself. I'll have her find me a new guard too. So, please... I'm begging you..." She continued to cry more and more, unable to continue her sentence.

Drawing Elysia closer, Zen answered her. "Protecting his daughter isn't work to a father, Elysia." Although he wasn't actually a father, he said these things, acting like he was one to her. "There are all kinds of hardships out there. I had no life skills, and it wasn't easy at all to learn to live outside my parents' house—but even so, I've

enjoyed my everyday life with you, Elysia. I'll welcome these hardships, and even this is a fulfilling retirement to me."

With a wry smile, the various failures he'd experienced up till this point came to mind. At the same time, he was filled with a warm feeling. "What about you? Hasn't it been fun?"

As Elysia kept her face buried in Zen's chest, she nodded her head.

"Then it's fine. Let's keep going like this."

"It's not fine," she sniffed. "I'm sure another assassin will come!"

"Hmm... It's true, that does sound like a hassle..."

"It's not about it being a hassle! It's a matter of life and death!"

"It won't be. So there's no problem," he said with a mischievous look on his face.

"What?" Elysia looked up at him with a confused, blank expression.

"Even if the Vajra Temple sends every single one of their monks to attack us, your father here won't lose. Well, I might not win either, but carrying you myself to the ends of the earth to run away isn't a big deal. Leave it to me." These weren't baseless words he was spinning just to ease her worries. He was truly saying them from his heart.

"I've often been told that I'm too good-natured..." he said. "But as you can see, I'm pretty shrewd and cunning. I was raised being tested to no end by my terrible siblings, after all!" he exclaimed, adding in a joke at the end.

"There's some merit to your words if Lady Sharla and your other siblings trained you..." Elysia forced a smile. Even so, Zen was relieved to see it.

"So yeah, we had a wild start to our year, and I might be unreliable as a father," he said, "but I look forward to spending this year with you."

"Yes, father. To tell you the truth, I'd also rather be with you. I feel safest when I'm by your side." Elysia once again buried her face in his chest, clinging to him.





Epilogue

"That damn Zen... Just when I was thinking he'd finally sent me a letter... I can't believe what he sent along with it."

"If you're going to look happy while complaining, how about you be honest with yourself and accept that you're happy?" The eldest brother Yohia chided Sharla. No matter how much time passed, she was always a kid.

The two of them were in the study of the Leadon family's main residence. What had Sharla so astounded was the arrival of the renowned sorcerer monk Shiltz, who'd been put in a state of apparent death by sorcery for a while. The knights who served Nazalf Prefectural Governor Cummel had responsibly taken on the duty of transporting Shiltz back to the imperial capital.

"I didn't think someone would find the imperial princess's whereabouts so quickly." Yohia sighed.

"The silver lining here is that he didn't tell any of the other sorcerer monks."

"All thanks to that Shiltz guy's ego, wanting to show off. He was too eager to make an accomplishment and stand out."

Zen had written in his letter that Keel had looked inside Shiltz's head, so they knew these things for a fact. He'd added one more thing too.

"We'll be sending over Shiltz himself, so please deal with the aftermath for us. I'm sorry that I'm such a pathetic little brother, having to rely on his family like this."

As Sharla sat rudely on Yohia's desk, she flapped the letter around. "What a cheeky little brother he is. What does he mean pathetic?!"

"Yes, things turned out as we expected." Yohia let out a rare smile. He'd believed that Zen, who'd made a contract with a divine beast and studied under the Vajra Temple's previous high priest,

would definitely protect Her Highness if a sorcerer monk assassin was sent.

"Well, if all you have to do is protect Her Highness, then even I can do that..."

"It'd probably be impossible for you to get by as a family with her in a remote village." Zen might have had weak life skills, but Sharla was even worse. Her life skills were hopeless. If there were no one to look after her, she'd become like a baby, unable to live on her own. While someone with weak life skills could still be trained, those who were hopeless would never improve.

"Hmph! And *you* would be too cold-blooded for Her Highness to open up to you when you're supposed to be creating a home."

"Well, I don't object to that." Although as a public figure, Yohia was able to earn other people's respect, he knew very well that as a private individual, his temperament didn't really encourage the affection of others.

"In the end, there's no one more qualified to shelter and guard her than Zen."

"He can easily do anything, and he's liked by everyone, after all."

It was true that he didn't have any outstanding talents like Yohia and Sharla, but like how a strong light makes a dark shadow, Yohia's and Sharla's skills and personalities had plenty of shortcomings. On the other hand, Zen had no weaknesses at all. His abilities and personality were terrifyingly in balance.

People in society said funny things about Zen, like how he was just the spent tea leaves of his older siblings or that he was a disgrace to the Leadon family, but from Yohia and Sharla's point of view, those were absurd things to say.

Indeed, his older siblings highly valued Zen.

"First of all, half the reason people say those things is because of you, Yohia."

"That's because the reason I purposefully sent him around the central government and made sure he never got promoted wasn't his abilities. It was all part of my plan," Yohia affirmed, unashamed.

In the past, there had actually been a decent amount of pushback from Zen's direct superiors, like the section chief of the Tax

Bureau who'd greatly valued him, to keep Zen in their departments. However, Yohia made full use of the authority granted to him as the Chancellor of Ceremonial Affairs and sabotaged his little brother's life as a government official.

Why had he done that? It was of course for the empire's future. It was to put Zen at the lowest rung of every post and have him understand all the intricacies of the six ministries' work.

"He really is a skilled man," said Sharla. "My brain would collapse in three days if I had to be an office worker and deal with all those numbers! Before it even got that far, I bet I'd thrust my letter of resignation at my superior's face."

"I think it'd be impossible for me to take command at the front lines of the Ministry of Military Affairs or Ministry of Justice myself."

Their younger brother was the only one who held that talent that made him a jack-of-all-trades—or well-rounded, to phrase it better. That was why Yohia, through his convoluted way, purposefully had Zen gather experience everywhere he could.

"Being versatile enough to comprehend the duties of all six ministries and having a personality that everyone likes are two qualities that are desired in a prime minister," he said.

"It's just as you say, Yohia. Zen has the ability to stand above us in time." Those like Yohia and Sharla who held innate sharp skills were suitable to become chancellors, but it was the prime minister's duty to lead and make use of such capable individuals. Yohia and Sharla knew this, so they were raising Zen while looking at the long term. They were viewing things from the lens of the world and the nation, a perspective at a height that most people couldn't reach.

And even now, while Zen was kept away from the central government, he was continuing his education to become a prime minister.

"I can't entrust the empire to fools who can't see beyond their self interests," said Yohia. "Before long, I'll have Jemma II abdicate the throne."

"Indeed. The wise Lady Elysia is the one who's suited to become the empress of Great Catalan."

"When Her Highness ascends to the throne, she'll need her prime

minister by her side."

"That's what Zen's for. That's why we want the two of them to live carefree lives in the countryside, building a relationship of mutual trust."

Yohia and Sharla nodded to each other. It was necessary for the two siblings to make sure their opinions aligned whenever they had the chance. It was because they were both wise and great at taking the initiative, so if they weren't completely on the same page, it could lead to a fatal error. If that happened, they wouldn't be able to fight against the emperor and the formidable prime minister's party and drag them out of power.

Five years. Or ten. They'd overhaul the imperial court's system and definitely bring Elysia back.

"Until that happens, if Zen and Elysia could possibly produce an heir, it'd be some peace of mind for the Leadon family," said Yohia.

"You're wishing for too much— No, you're too impatient."

See, if they weren't careful, they'd immediately find they weren't completely on the same page.

A rare wry smile arose on Yohia's face. "Indeed," he said to his astonished sister.

***

However, their younger brother didn't know what was going on in his older siblings' heads. "I don't wanna go to work... I don't want to work..."

Zen was complaining like a child first thing in the morning. He was procrastinating by messing with Keel, who was curled up in front of the living room fireplace. He'd painstakingly brushed the wolf's coat so that it was twenty percent fluffier, but Zen promptly smushed his face in it, rubbing his cheeks into it.

"*Don't you think you've become too lazy, Zen?*" Keel asked, annoyed. He'd been sleeping in late this morning until he was interrupted by Zen.

"I can't help it. Anyone would get like this," Zen whined, claiming it was just an inevitability.

First off, a big reason he was slacking off was that he'd successfully protected Elysia from the Vajra Temple's assassin. On top of that, he'd shoved all of the annoying aftermath onto his siblings. The damage control to appease the Todd Village's inhabitants, who'd witnessed Shiltz, had been carried out perfectly too.

"He's a stalker who's been following Elysia since she was in the imperial capital."

"We were surprised that he'd follow us all the way here."

As Zen packed on lie after lie, the other villagers spoke.

"Elysia's the prettiest girl out there. I'm sure it tormented the man."

"The city is so scary. Seems like it was tough for you too, Mr. Zen."

Everyone understood and was compassionate. No one would have believed him if he'd said the truth, that Shiltz was actually a conjurer and an assassin who'd been sent by the emperor, though!

Zen had fought with Shiltz in another realm he'd created with sorcery, so no one had witnessed them. From the villagers' perspective, it'd probably looked like they'd suddenly disappeared as if they'd been spirited away—not that anyone was particularly concerned about their sudden disappearance. They'd all been in a panic, running away from the plaza, so they hadn't had time to look around them, and their memories were vague.

At any rate, Zen went around spreading the news that the stalker guy had been safely apprehended and that the prefectural governor would be handling him (his older brother Yohia should've already arranged to have a letter sent to Cummel explaining the situation in detail).

Thus everything had been settled—or at least it should've been, but an unforeseen blessing came Zen's way.

Tomon, the town hall chief, had caught wind of the rumors and went out of his way to visit Zen.

"What a thing to happen right at the beginning of the year, huh, Sir Zen?"

"I'm certain it was a huge shock for your daughter too."

"Girls around that age are very sensitive. You can't disregard how sensitive they can be."

After this senior man shared his elderly insight, he said, "So until your daughter has completely recovered, look after her at home."

He continued to ramble on his own. "Yes, that's a good thought, actually. I'll use my authority and treat it like you're on an official holiday. You should spend two or even three weeks together as a family and take it easy!"

Zen couldn't help but thank the heavens and his eldest brother for this good fortune that had blessed him with such a wonderful superior.

Of course, the truth was that Tomon simply didn't want Zen to make any accomplishments.

So for that reason, Zen had found himself with some unexpected vacation time. The end-of-the-year holidays at the Todd Village Town Hall already seemed unbelievably long from Zen's perspective, who was so used to the central government agencies, yet here was an additional three-week bonus.

If he could keep living idly like this, then it was normal to not want to work anymore. Even if he thought *I really should get back to work soon*, it was natural that he couldn't find the resolve.

Although he'd grown completely unmotivated, there was no reason for anyone to criticize him.

"*No. Go work. For your daughter too.*"

"Don't look so serious when you say that... Let me escape reality..." Zen kept grumbling, ignoring Keel, who'd given him a piercing, critical stare, and kept burying his face in the wolf's fluffy fur.

"*What would happen if Elysia heard you spewing all these pathetic things?*"

"She won't hear. She's a good girl, so she's making breakfast."

"No, father, I hear you."

Elysia, who should've been in the kitchen, had come to the living room, startling Zen.

"If you really don't want to work that badly, then I guess I have no choice. I'll go find a side hustle to put food on the table." Elysia sadly placed a hand on her cheek.

At a breakneck pace, Zen started rambling. "It was a joke, Elysia. I was wrong to say it. I'll go back to work starting today, so don't worry!" Sharla would kill him if she learned afterward that he'd made Her Highness pick up a side job.

"*More than anything, though, you're surprisingly the type who'd be dominated by your bride, Zen*," said Keel.

"Not that we can see my potential wife anywhere on the horizon."

"*Right.*"

Zen tilted his head at Keel's tone, which seemed to imply something.

On the other hand, Elysia stifled a giggle. "You have a strong sense of responsibility, father. You don't seem like you'll be fired from the town hall now, so I've been put at ease."

"I can't force you to live on the streets." He'd talked just the other day about how he'd protect her, arrogantly acting like a father. If he allowed her to suffer like that, calling him "uncool" would be an understatement.

"Now then. I've made a delicious breakfast, so eat up and work hard."

"Thank you, Elysia." Zen really felt what a capable daughter she was. He'd thought when they'd just moved to the village that he wasn't going to make Her Highness do any of the housework, but he left many things to her now.

I was acting like a spoiled child by saying I don't wanna work. I'll work hard for Elysia. With that renewed desire, he followed her to the kitchen.

He didn't notice how Keel, who'd tagged along, was looking at him as if he were saying, *You really are whipped.*

Then two humans and a wolf had breakfast.

Maybe Elysia had gotten the hang of it, but recently, her cooking skills had improved dramatically, and her repertoire had increased. This morning, they were having an exquisite meal featuring noodles with plenty of sauce that used minced meat. Zen wound up asking

for seconds that morning.

"Maybe I'll go for thirds. I might get fat, though."

"You work as much as you eat, so you'll be fine if you work a lot."

Zen paused. "Um, I feel like you keep bringing the conversation back to my work today, Elysia."

"*You've finally noticed*," Keel said.

"Can you understand how anxious your daughter felt upon witnessing her own parent grumbling about how much he didn't want to work this morning?" Elysia huffed.

"I'm sorry, I was totally in the wrong!"

Zen bowed his head into the kitchen table like he was driving in a nail, and Elysia let out a stifled giggle. "I was joking."

Zen lifted his face and gave her an embarrassed smile. For the person he was now, this was a relaxing morning. This was his new life in Todd Village that had started last year and continued into this one.

However, upon hearing a sudden, relentless knocking on the front door, he could no longer take it easy.

"Who's knocking this early?" Perplexed, Zen left his seat and headed for the entrance to open the door.

"Mister Zen, please come back to work soon!"

"W-We can't run the town hall with just the four of us..."

"The New Year's festival was canceled because of that whole stalker mess, right? That's why we're having such a rough time right now. All these petitions keep coming in every day, telling us they want it to be held again, but because this isn't something that usually happens, they want the town hall to organize it this time!"

"That being said, we don't have the know-how, so we're floundering here!"

"I-I'm sure you're good at calculating budgets and adjusting schedules, right, Mr. Zen?"

"We'll handle all the negotiations and gather the villagers' opinions, so please help us!"

Of course, it was his three coworkers, Max, Namnam, and Anna, who'd come here desperate for help.

"Oh my, it sounds like they really need you, father." Elysia had

walked up behind him and was smiling like she was truly proud.

"Sorry, I guess I don't have time for thirds," Zen said to her. "I might not even be able to make it home before lunch today."

"Then I'll come by with a lunch box."

"Thank you. That'll be really helpful."

He told his three coworkers to go on ahead to the town hall, then hurriedly prepared to leave for work.

"By the way, I also voted to redo the festival," Elysia said.

"Really? Then I'll work hard to make it happen. It feels a little like I'm mixing work with my private life, though."

"Not at all. This is surely what the people want."

While they exchanged these jokes, Zen made his way to the door, and Elysia saw him off.

"If the festival can be redone, then please dance with me again," she said.

"Looks like I can't refuse. We didn't have our fill of dancing, right?"

Elysia smiled. That smile somehow vividly reminded Zen of Aness from her student days, with a mischievousness that was also mixed with an elegance that Aness hadn't had. "Yes. So this time, stay with me the entire time. Until the sun sets."

"Huh? You mean—!"

Afterword

Nice to meet you, everyone. Or it's good to see you all again. I'm Akamitsu Awamura. Thank you very much for picking up *Take These Talents Elsewhere: A Delightful Demotion to the Countryside.*

What would happen if there was a heavily bureaucratic country where it's a given to be accomplished in both military and academic arts, and the protagonist, who'd been a career-driven government official in the central government agencies, got demoted to the remote countryside (under special circumstances)?

Everyone around him would probably rely on him. However, from his point of view, he'd have so much free time while working in a town hall in the middle of nowhere that he could happily take it easy every day while having a blast!

That's what I'd imagined, so I took this idea I'd been mulling over, wanting to make it into a story. Now here it is, published.

Usually, I write under GA Bunko, but by chance, I wound up working together with DRE Novels.

The editor who'd mediated between my illustrator Senmu-sensei and me during my debut novel currently works as DRE Novel's editor in chief. Furthermore, that person was also editing the works of my friends, Toba Toru (*The Genius Prince's Guide to Raising a Nation Out of Debt*. It's interesting!) and Misora Riku (*I Kissed My Girlfriend's Little Sister*. It's also interesting!). They often took me out to eat with them and always treated me nicely, so when I was asked to write something for DRE Novels too, I immediately agreed.

Plotting a novel and writing is the same no matter where you work. However, like how I received guidance from a new editor, worked with a different proofreading team, and experienced how high-tech their system for signing contracts was, there were subtle differences that I wasn't used to. It was fun to have those fresh experiences. I feel grateful every day.

Now it’s time for my special thanks corner!

The first person I’d like to thank is Tapioca-sama, who put us at ease with their cover art that overflowed with warmth. On top of that, Zen’s blue uniform is just so cool. I wish all the illustrations inside could’ve been colored too... I can’t help but think that, although I know it would’ve been rather impossible!

I thank Abe-sama, my editor, who prioritized my needs and wants in order for me to give this project my all. I also thank my editor in chief, Obara-sama, who asked me to work together with them.

And of course, I express my thanks to each and every one of my readers. I’m sending you all of my love from Hiroshima. Thank you very much.

In volume 2, everyone will be once again relying on Zen, and after he becomes involved in a corrupt incident, Zen will feel like he’s resolving everything at an easygoing pace, while from everyone else’s perspective, it’ll look like he’s settling them in a flash! Don’t miss it!

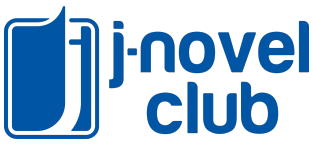












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Take These Talents Elsewhere: A Delightful Demotion to the Countryside Volume 1
by Akamitsu Awamura

Translated by Mizuki Sakamoto Edited by Alex Chiccola

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Ebook edition 1.0: July 2025