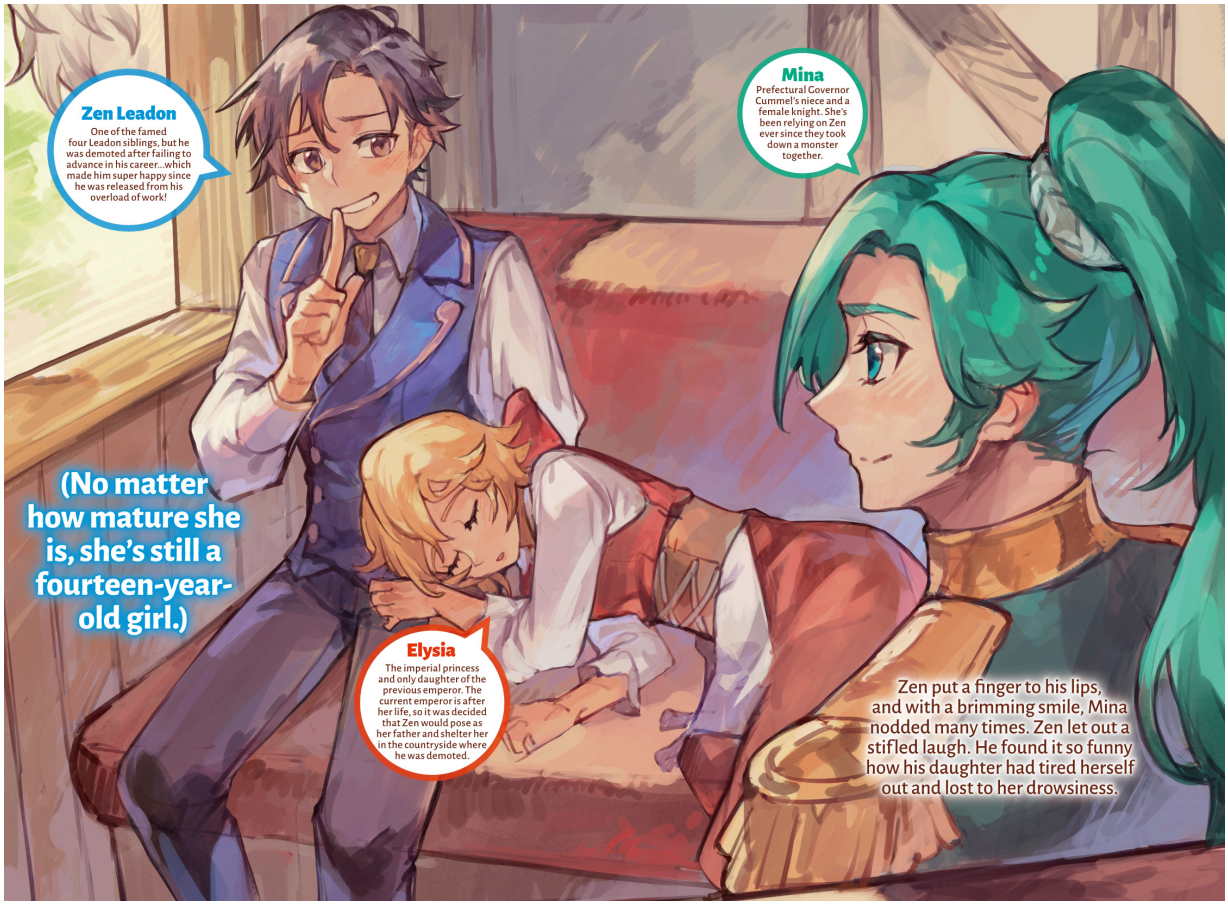

Take These Talents Elsewhere
A Delightful Demotion to the Countryside
2
Author: Akamitsu Awamura
Illustrator: Tapioca


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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!
Mina
Prefectural Governor Cummel's niece and a female knight. She's been relying on Zen ever since they took down a monster together.
(No matter how mature she is, she's still a fourteen-year-old girl.)
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 and shelter her in the countryside where he was demoted.
Zen put a finger to his lips, and with a brimming smile, Mina nodded many times. Zen let out a stifled laugh. He found it so funny how his daughter had tired herself out and lost to her drowsiness.


"You said you were going to let me eat my fill, but I don't think you'll be keeping that promise."
Keel
The divine wolf who is Zen's best friend; a young vanargand that possesses the mentality of an adult human.
Zen was drenched and shuddering, and Keel gave his body a great shake, the motion flinging the muddy water from his fur.


Zen's words held no intention to fight, nor a desire to ridicule them. He was fully sincere in making that proposal.
"Hey, why not let us go? None of us will have to get hurt that way. You don't look like the most loyal people to me anyway."
Around fifteen people remained, and they drew their swords one after another.
"Where did you come from?!"
"Y-You!"

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Prologue

With a triumphant look on her face, Elysia announced to her father, “The hems of your shirt were starting to come undone, so I mended them!”

Zen looked surprised. “When did you get so good at sewing?!”

“Hee hee. As you can see, I’ve always been good with my hands.”

“That’s amazing, Elysia! I’m sure you’ll make a great wife in the future.”

“Thank you very much, father. All I have to do now is find a wonderful husband.” She glanced over at Zen.





“I had a dream like that, anyway,” Elysia reported dejectedly. Her ponytail also seemed somewhat unenergetic, hanging down limply. Zen’s shirt was in this fourteen-year-old girl’s hands.

She’d failed at using needle and thread to patch up the hems that had been coming undone, instead tragically worsening the damage.

“As I always say, you don’t have to push yourself, Elysia.” Zen comforted his pretend daughter.

Indeed, Elysia wasn’t related to him by blood. She was actually the imperial princess of the Catalan Empire—and first in line to the throne, no less. Although, here in Nazalf Prefecture in the state of Cylin, way out in the sticks of the empire’s southernmost region, she had to stay disguised as a mere village girl, the poor thing.

Zen couldn’t bear to see how disheartened and remorseful she looked just because she’d ruined one shirt. Beyond anything else, the sight of her reddened fingers that she’d accidentally pricked was just so sad.

“I know we can’t really live a rich life since we don’t want people to find out our true identities, but we have plenty of money from Sharla’s farewell gift. I can buy a replacement shirt no problem,” he said, reasoning with Elysia gently to make sure she didn’t hurt herself further.

But while Elysia remained dejected, she said, “But isn’t it better if I can sew? The money Sharla gave us won’t last forever, and we don’t know how long it’ll be before we can return to the imperial capital. We should generally try to live a lifestyle that’s in proportion to your small salary.”

“Ack...” Zen immediately hacked like he was spitting up blood, unable to object. His salary back when he was working at the central government agencies hadn’t been too bad, but because he’d been demoted to an ordinary government official at a tiny village town hall, it had been slashed to a really pitiful amount.

“What if I just wear my town hall uniform at home too?” he suggested. “They’re provided to me, and I can have them immediately replaced if they get all frayed, and it won’t hurt our finances.”

“I don’t really want to live with someone who wears a uniform

around the clock...”

“Yeah, I figured.”

Even this imperial princess, a girl that was beyond sheltered, doubted his common sense, as if asking, *There are limits to how much of a workaholic you can be, right?* Zen’s face stiffened.

Besides, what was really important here wasn’t the household finances but his worry for Elysia.

“A-Anyway, you’re working hard enough, Elysia. I don’t want you to push yourself any more than this!” Zen argued vehemently with her.

“You keep saying ‘push yourself,’ but I’m actually pretty capable, you know?” Elysia said huffily, a complete reversal from her previous depression. “I can cook now, right? And you eat what I make every day, saying how tasty it is and asking for more helpings, right? It’s only a matter of time until I can sew too.”

“S-Sorry, I shouldn’t have said that...” Zen hurriedly apologized, realizing he’d somehow hurt her pride. It was really hard to deal with the feelings of a young lady who was at such a sensitive age!

As she looked like she was totally pouting, Elysia said, “I think I’m just different from you. I’m not someone who can’t do the household chores no matter how much time passes.”

She’d once again hit him where it hurt, and Zen practically screamed his apology. “I’m really sorry for being a workaholic!”

I think it’s amazing she’s working hard, and it’s admirable. But she’s the imperial princess, so I really don’t think she has to learn how to sew... he caught himself thinking, but would it be too thoughtless to point that out? Would she pout again? What Elysia needed was a top-class education and to broaden her insights for her future when she’d be crowned empress.

Indeed, if she rightfully ascended to the throne, she’d be in a position where she didn’t even need to marry into a family. It would’ve been different if she’d been lower in the ranks of succession. These days, in the western region of the continent, which was considered the cultural sphere, girls who were good at embroidery were really popular. That meant whether one was a commoner or an upper-class woman, they were probably expected

to learn how to sew to prepare for a future marriage of convenience.

However, that didn't apply to Elysia. If she was going to work hard at something, then frankly, Zen would like for her to learn a thing or two about political economy or geography or history. Truthfully, she did occasionally pester him for lectures on various topics, but they could afford to do it two or three times as often.

Elysia isn't necessarily ignoring her duties as an imperial princess, but...it feels like she really prefers focusing on becoming a domestically skilled young lady rather than caring about what's actually necessary.

Then, wasn't it a father's duty to support that? Maybe so. She was still a fourteen-year-old girl. It wasn't like she had come into this world wanting to be an imperial princess. And she'd only ended up having to live in this remote region after her life had been threatened by the current emperor, her uncle. It shouldn't be a crime for her to be carefree and do what she wanted for this short period of time.

Zen himself had been born to a notable family of bureaucrats, and he'd spent every day of his life studying to become a great civil official and military officer for as long as he could remember. It'd be a lie to say it hadn't been painful.

The reason he'd been able to have a decent adolescence was that he'd happened to be blessed with the right human relationships. It was because during that hellish Advanced Civil Service Exam, he'd met his first love, Aness, and his one-of-a-kind best friend, Heinri. Elysia was the child they'd left behind after their deaths. Although she wasn't his real daughter, he loved her dearly.

I wish for Elysia's happiness from the bottom of my heart, he thought to himself. But what on earth should he do to achieve that? It was so difficult to raise a child. It really made him rack his brain. Not to mention he was just plain inexperienced.

It might've been different if I'd already been married with kids. At times like this, he really felt how he still had a long way to go.

It'd already been fourteen years since he'd sunk himself fully into the world of government officials. He'd managed to pass the

Advanced Civil Service Exam, but for him, it had only led to a stressful and busy life with no hopes of a promotion. He'd barely had the free time to breathe, let alone get lost in love, and marriage had been a dream within a dream. Yet somehow, all three of his older siblings had created families while they were in their twenties!

That's right. Even his older brother Yohia, who was even more of a workaholic than Zen, had immediately settled down with a good woman their father had introduced to him through an arranged marriage meeting. Their parents had always pestered his older siblings, insisting they hurry up and get married. Meanwhile, they'd never brought Zen any prospective spouses.

"You can just move along at your own pace, Zen."

"It's just as your father says. Even if you don't rush, I'm sure you'll find a good woman one day."

They always reassured him, looking at him kindly. Of course, he knew this kindness was a mere sliver away from pity.

I'm someone who hasn't been able to get a promotion at all despite being born into the Leadon family. There's no way anyone would be interested in marrying me! Well, this is much better than being forced into arranged marriage meetings that I don't want, though. However, he had to admit it made him feel a bit frustrated. Also, his married coworkers in the central government agencies had acted like they were better than him.

Everyone would grumble about how "marriage is the end of your life" while actually carrying around an air of both superiority and joy. Zen had heard his coworkers boast endlessly about their love lives through the guise of idle complaints.

Even so, it's not like I have anyone I'm interested in, so it'd be silly to get married now just for the sake of it.

Just like his parents had said, there was no need for him to rush. More importantly, he had to devote himself to carefully raising his daughter as a single father. At the very least, knowing how inexperienced he was, he had to do it with everything he had.

***

"When I was in the inner palace, I heard the court ladies gossip many times that girls who are good at embroidery are popular. Do you think that's Sir Zen's type?" Elysia grumbled as she swept the living room.

It was after they'd finished breakfast and sent Zen off to the town hall. She was complaining to the large white wolf, Keel, who was curled up in front of the fireplace. However, he hadn't acknowledged anything she said at all.

"Are you listening, Keel?" asked Elysia indignantly.

Keel, whose favorite pastime was sleeping, let out a big yawn with his large jaws. "*I apologize. I'm just so tired.*"

Although they were in the southern part of the empire, which had a warm climate, they *were* still just over halfway through February. Keel spent a majority of the day in front of the fireplace dozing.





I thought doggies liked to run around outside even on cold days, but is Keel different? He's just like a kitty. There'd been plenty of watchdogs at the palace, along with cats they'd had as pets, so even as a secluded princess, Elysia knew things about them.

Even so, there was probably no point in comparing Keel to the dogs and cats there. He was hardly a normal white wolf, after all, with his three-meter-long body and mysterious voice that resounded in the heads of humans when he spoke.

"You've been with Sir Zen for around twelve years by now, right? Don't you at least know what his type is?" she persisted, not letting Keel sleep until he humored her.

Keel hesitated. Then, as if giving up, he responded in a sleepy voice. "*I wonder. I only know of one girl who Zen liked.*"

"You're talking about my mother, Aness, right? So that means he prefers a girl who focuses on her career instead of family?" In that case, endeavoring to study political economics would get her closer to being Zen's type after all, not improving her embroidery.

"*I wonder. He's an easygoing person. I don't think he cares about superficial things like whether someone can sew or has good practical skills.*"

"So he really just loved mother for who she was?"

He thought for a moment. "*Indeed. It wasn't any one thing that made her match up with Zen's tastes. Her personality, her talents, the way she was raised—even how she and Zen met and the relationship they had was all part of it. That's how you should think, at least.*"

"Hmm. You've given me much food for thought, Keel." Keel had actually been keeping the fact that he could talk a secret from Elysia until not too long ago, so they'd only started exchanging words like this very recently. The more they talked, the more Elysia understood how smart this white wolf was. "But then doesn't that mean I'm nowhere close to being Sir Zen's type? I've often been told I look just like my mother when she was younger, but I don't think there's much else that's similar about me..."

"*It's too soon to come to that conclusion. I told you it's about the organic mixture of several complex components, didn't I? You're*

your own person. That doesn't mean your charm won't be to Zen's taste."

"So that means I have a chance!"

"*However, your age difference is a clear factor that works against you. That kind of superficial thing is considered important in human society, right? Zen does tend to be bound by social norms in some regards.*"

"Oh, Keel, you're so mean. You bring me up only to push me back down again." She pouted, puffing out her cheeks. If she were to have made a facial expression like that back at the inner palace, the court ladies around her would have angrily scolded her for being rude. But there was no need to worry about that in this village. "If I don't know what I should do to become Sir Zen's type, then don't you think I might as well work hard at sewing? There's no reason he should be so adamant about stopping me, right? It's like he's limiting my potential."

"*Well, that's probably because he wants you to focus on your future as an empress*," Keel responded like it was obvious.

Elysia knew that too, of course. She had also been the one who first wanted Zen to teach her the basics of how to govern a country. She didn't intend to neglect that, and yet she insisted, "Right now I'm only a village girl. Coco is going to laugh at me if I can't mend a single thing." She'd brought up her more experienced, six-year-old peer who was learning housework from the same teacher.

Keel nodded as if to say, *Indeed.*

"Oh, Sir Zen is just so stubborn." Elysia kept up her grumblings since, conveniently, she had someone here willing to listen to them. Internally, though, she was thinking, *But to put it another way, his stubbornness means he has a strong will. That's yet another one of Sir Zen's wonderful qualities.*

The phrase "love is blind" totally applied to this situation, but Elysia, who was a maiden who loved the idea of love, didn't realize that yet.

In any case, it was only for now that Elysia could live a carefree life as a simple village girl. Whether it was in five or ten years, she'd

one day have to return to the imperial capital.

The leading figures and bureaucrats who supported her, including the Leadon family, were all powerful people worthy of her trust. They would stir up political strife to expel the current prime minister's party from the imperial court, and then they'd undoubtedly come to retrieve her.

When that happened, Elysia would be crowned empress. She would no longer have freedom. She'd have to muster the full power of her limited abilities and work diligently in the government to put the empire at ease. Marriage would definitely not go according to her wishes either. She'd probably be stuck in a loveless political marriage with a partner who was chosen based on his usefulness to the empire. As someone who'd been born as the imperial princess, she'd already long prepared herself for that.

But that's why...at least for now, I... She wanted to live freely while she was in Todd Village. And if she could, she wanted to try being in a relationship with a man she loved. You would think five or ten years would feel long, but it was actually very short. Elysia, who was only fourteen, hadn't really experienced it for herself, but that was what all her predecessors had said.

When she'd finished sweeping the house and was taking a breather, someone dropped by for a visit.

"It's another beautiful day out, Elysia. Perfect laundry weather." The next-door neighbor Donna had come to invite her. She was a very caring woman with a large build who was an expert at housework. It was all thanks to her that Elysia had somehow acquired the ability to cook and clean. She honestly thought of Donna as her master.

After Elysia gathered up their clothes into a basket, she turned to the big wolf who was already dozing off again by the fireplace and said, "Watch over the house for me, Keel," before heading out with Donna.

They went to the river together with the other neighborhood women to do the washing. The water in February was cold, and their hands would grow numb if they didn't take breaks. Even so, back at

the inner palace, she'd heard the court ladies complain many times about how the water was piercing cold when they did the laundry. It made her think that although it was also winter here, it was probably much better to do it here in the warm southern region of the empire. Neither Elysia nor the women around her had any frostbite or cracked skin.

Best of all, they completely forgot about the cold and difficulty of the work as they chatted merrily. Naturally, their conversations usually revolved around domestic complaints.

"So Zen stops you from learning needlework all because you pricked yourself a few times?"

"He's so overprotective."

It was Elysia's turn. When she talked about what had happened that morning, although the ladies were slightly baffled, they smiled too.

Looking exasperated, Donna recounted a past episode. "Mr. Zen also made a huge fuss to me back when Elysia started cooking. He told me not to let her use a kitchen knife."

"What a stubborn man."

"I wonder if all city folks are like that?" The women all stifled laughs.

"You have good looks and a good personality, right, Elysia? If you become good at embroidery on top of that, I'm sure men will be rushing in to make you their bride. I wonder if Mr. Zen doesn't want that?"

"Fathers really hate marrying off their daughters."

"My husband just can't let go of our kids. It's so ridiculous!"

As they all playfully bad-mouthed the people in their lives and cheerfully laughed, they vented their daily frustrations. Elysia found this frank atmosphere extremely comfortable. She would never have experienced this in the inner palace.

"Putting your father aside, what about you, Elysia?"

"Do you have a boy you like?"

"If you give him a handkerchief with some embroidery—even a simple design you sewed—any boy would fall for you easily."

Elysia giggled. "Hee hee. Unfortunately, I don't right now." If she

came out and said that she was interested in her "father," there was no doubt it'd cause a huge disturbance. That was why she vaguely dodged the question with a smile.

However, seemingly driven by indignation, Donna exclaimed, "That's also where Mr. Zen's too overprotective of you! When they redid the New Year's festival recently, he kept dancing with you without letting you go. No boy is ever gonna approach you like that."

The other ladies spoke up warmly.

"Ignore your father, Elysia, and go out and have fun more often."

"It's good that you take care of the house by yourself, but it's also important for you to let your hair down."

"You're still young."

And they had even more to say.

"What about my son? You're only two years apart, and he's a hard worker."

"Hey, that's sneaky of you to suggest that!"

"Then how about you meet my nephew? I'm not just biased. He is handsome."

"But he's a total skirt chaser. We can't let him have Elysia!"

"On the subject—my cousin's eldest son works at Nazalf City's government office and is on the path to success. I recommend him!"

One after another, they suddenly started trying to set her up with various people. Actually, they were all *closing in on her*.

"Uhh..." Elysia sat back, overwhelmed.

"Hey now, cut it out," Donna scolded them. "I'm sure Elysia will snag the best man out there for herself, so it ain't none of your business. And it's indecent for you to be so partial to recommending your relatives!"

If Donna hadn't lent her a helping hand, things could've gotten messy. *Th-That's how much everyone wants to welcome me as a bride? They were all already thinking about it?* Elysia was truly stunned.

She wasn't necessarily bothered, but she also couldn't respond, of course. She already had Zen in mind as someone she loved. And as previously stated, she wasn't in the position to give herself permission to marry regardless.

Thank you, Mrs. Donna.

No problem.

Elysia and Donna exchanged gazes as teacher and student. At the same time, Donna suddenly said, "But enough about Elysia. Does Mr. Zen still not wanna settle down?"

With their eyes sparkling, the other ladies latched onto the topic.

"Oh, that's right. If he could find himself a pretty wife and get absorbed in his new marriage, maybe he could let go of his daughter a little."

"Mr. Zen's the kind of good man that's hard to find in the countryside like this."

"How are things going there, Elysia?"

"I-I don't know." With the rush of these inquisitive gazes, Elysia was once again overwhelmed.

Although it'd actually be his first marriage, not second, she seriously had no idea what Zen thought about getting married. If anything, she was too scared to ask. Maybe he just hadn't found someone he was interested in and he'd be willing if he did find a good woman. Or maybe he was prioritizing his role as the imperial princess's father and was completely prepared to miss his chance at marriage. If it was the former, she'd feel a bit displeased, and she'd feel unbearably sorry if it was the latter.

Of course, if Zen honestly wanted to marry someone, Elysia had no right to stop him. Zen was sheltering and protecting her solely out of the kindness of his heart, not because it was his job.

If Sir Zen ever tells me he wants to introduce me to a girl he likes... Ugh, I don't want to think about it... She decided to shut down that train of thought.

However, Elysia was unaware that, even now, a woman's shadow was approaching Zen.

Chapter 1: Another Meeting with the Great Female Knight

Elysia was grumpy the whole time until I left the house, Zen remembered with an amused smile, resting his cheek on his hand at his desk. He was in the village town hall office, with the pleasantly warm fireplace. He, his boss, and his three other coworkers were in the middle of doing the ledgers together.

Elysia may seem mature because she's the imperial princess, but she's become less reserved recently. Now she shows me all sorts of emotions. It makes me happy.

Even if they were only acting as father and daughter to blend in, they did still live together. It was obviously better to have an amicable atmosphere like a real family. It was Zen's duty as the adult to draw the line in their relationship, which was actually between an imperial princess and her guardian. He wanted Elysia to have her fill of living a carefree life together with him (and one large animal) without really worrying about that, and he'd be fine if she was a little selfish sometimes too.

Along these lines, Zen thought, *Maybe I'll get something tasty from the village mayor's tavern and bring it home today.* Just thinking about what to surprise her with was fun. That feeling of wanting to put his daughter in a good mood made him feel like he'd become a real father.

That was when someone spoke to him.

"What's wrong, Mr. Zen? You're unusually distracted today," one of his coworkers who'd been working alongside him asked with keen interest. His name was Max, and he was a young man of twenty-five who'd just gotten married last year. He was friendly and attentive to those around him.

Zen apologized. "Oh, I'm sorry. I actually had an argument with

my daughter this morning... Well, it wasn't bad enough to call it an argument, but we did have a bit of a disagreement. I was thinking about how I'd cheer her up."

"Wow. You're so good at everything, though. I didn't think you'd struggle with these kinds of things."

"It really makes me realize how hard it is to be a parent."

"My wife had our first baby last year. I bet we're gonna have a lot of hardships from here on out..." Max grumbled, but his face showed his fondness for his child. His firstborn must be so unbearably precious to him. Even Zen felt his heart being warmed.

Their other two coworkers chimed in.

"Aww, I'm jealous. I wanna get married soon too," whined the youngest member, twenty-year-old Anna.

"But women who do this work are at a disadvantage. If you get pregnant, you'll most likely have to leave your position unless you can find some way around it," said the sarcastic and pessimistic Namnam, criticizing the system.

The Catalan Empire had a much more developed national system and bureaucracy compared to its neighboring countries. Even so, leaves of absence still weren't generally permitted when female government officials became pregnant. They'd have to resign once they began to show, although this policy would change much later on.

The only exceptions were skilled officials who were regarded as indispensable within their respective agencies. That meant only those who were already high officials or those with especially promising futures.

That said, in most foreign countries, women weren't allowed to engage in national politics or local administrations at all. On the western side of the continent, there weren't even any countries who'd allow a queen to rule. Compared to those other countries where evil practices based in male chauvinism still ran rampant, the empire's problems in that regard paled in comparison. It was still a very uncivilized time.

“Then all I have to do is not have a baby! I’ll be plenty happy enough if I can fool around with my wonderful darling!”

“I understand how you feel, but what about when you’re old? Who will support you?”

“That’s so far into the future! Who cares? You always look at the downside of everything!”

“In order to live a fulfilling life, isn’t it only natural to account for and avoid risks every day?”

“And yet your life doesn’t look very happy to me, Namnam.”

“Ugh...”

In a complete one-eighty from that heartwarming atmosphere, Anna and Namnam were getting into an argument. Zen and Max smiled wryly.

The boss of this village town hall, Chief Tomon, cleared his throat. “Let’s keep all the chatter in moderation.” He gave his subordinates a passing glare.

Max, Namnam, and Anna all abruptly returned to their ledger work.

Tomon was a strict person (was what Zen thought), so he’d give you an endless scolding if you angered him. He was also honest about his work (or so Zen believed), so he’d make his scoldings on the spot short and frank, but then at the end of the workday, he’d start in on more thorough lectures about those same subjects. That meant any talking-tos didn’t cut into work hours, which made him a great boss who wasn’t afraid of doing what was needed to keep the town hall functioning as it should (was what Zen believed).

“I’m sorry, Chief. I was the one not paying attention.” Zen recognized that this had all started because of him, and he acknowledged that fact so he wouldn’t involve his coworkers.

“Oh, no, you can afford to relax a little, Zen,” Tomon said with an insincere smile.

“What? Really?!”

“You actually have a tendency to do *too* much work, Zen. I’m always worrying that you’ll eventually harm your physical or mental health.”

“I’m always leaving work at noon, though...” He couldn’t admit it.

He couldn’t tell his “honest” chief that the truth was, every day, he was actually learning the trick of which corners he could safely cut to achieve his daily quota faster.

Tomon’s subordinates voiced their complaints, starting with Anna.

“It’s no fair that Zen gets away with it.”

“You’re awfully lax with Zen, Chief,” said Namnam.

“Why can’t you be a little nice to us too?” asked Max.

Tomon’s expression suddenly turned demonic. “Silence!” he shouted as he rebuked them. “If you have complaints, then at least achieve a tenth of what Zen can do!”

Now, the reason Tomon was nice to Zen was of course because it’d greatly trouble him if his subordinate fully demonstrated his abilities and distinguished himself. He was afraid he’d swipe his position as chief away. All his “worries” for Zen’s health and the like were complete lies. He said those things out of selfishness, not kindness.

But Zen didn’t know about the selfish Tomon’s inner thoughts. To put it more accurately, it didn’t trouble him in the slightest to be doted on by his boss. It only made him happy, if anything, so he’d never been concerned about it from the start.

In any case, Tomon effectively straightened out his subordinates (other than Zen). Everyone hunched over their desks and continued to diligently attend to their duties.

At this time of year, their main work dealt with records regarding Todd Village’s agriculture. The villagers cultivated the surrounding forests over the winter. Although the vegetation never fully withered in this warm region, it definitely wasn’t as lively as it was in the summer. That made it far easier to cut down trees, and as they acquired indispensable materials like firewood and charcoal, they also expanded their farmland.

Because of the present state governor’s guidance, their main crop was potatoes. They made use of the temperate climate to sow the seeds in winter and harvest the crop in spring. That was why, during this time of year, the town hall carried out site surveys to find out

which farms had expanded their land by how much and where, and inquired as to how many seed potatoes were planted and the estimated profits of the harvest for every farmer family in Todd Village. Then it was necessary to record that information in an account book.

Furthermore, the completed reports had to be sent to both the prefectural and state government offices, as well as to the Agricultural Affairs Bureau in the Commercial Affairs Agency. (Catalan loved to have lots of documents.) This duty also fell on Zen and his coworkers. It could be said that during this period of time, they were as busy as they were during tax-inquiry season at the end of the year.

Everyone was already silently absorbing themselves in their work. They reconfirmed the documents they'd prepared, wrote in the account books, and added in calculations. The only things to be heard were the firewood snapping in the fireplaces, the sounds of turning pages, and the scratching of their own quill pens as they wrote.

It was in that silent office and pleasantly focused atmosphere that a brisk young woman's voice called out as she knocked on the door. "Excuse me. Is Sir Zen here?" Both the sound of her voice and her knock resounded with a noticeable clarity.

Everyone reflexively looked up from their account books and turned their attention to the front door. Then Zen and his coworkers looked back at Tomon all at once.

"Go ahead, Sir Zen," said Tomon. "It seems you have a guest."

With the chief's permission, Zen stood up from his desk.

I wonder who it is? I think I recognize the voice. While he couldn't remember to whom that voice belonged, he opened the front door.

"Hello, Sir Zen. It's been a while." A young female knight was standing in the corridor.

It was no wonder he'd recognized her voice. Before the new year, when a twintail fox—a fox monster with two tails—had appeared near Todd Village, she had been the benefactor who'd spearheaded a subjugation party to come to their rescue.

Her name was Mina Houck. She was also the niece of Nazalf's prefectural governor, Cummel Houck. Today, she was only wearing her military uniform without her armor, and it seemed she hadn't brought along any other soldiers.

"Yes, it has indeed been some time—"

"Oh my, I was wondering who it was! It's the hero Lord Mina who saved our village!" Interrupting Zen's greeting, Tomon appeared next to him so fast it was like he'd teleported. He warmly welcomed Mina while rubbing his hands together.

Of course, he was flattering her because she was the niece of the top dog in Nazalf.

One of the chief's small flaws is that he's just hopelessly weak before authority. Zen smiled wryly.

"What are you smiling for, Zen?! Show Lord Mina to the parlor right away, will you? I'll prepare the tea, so be sure to listen well to what business Lord Mina has with you."

"Yes, Chief. Right away." With an even wryer smile, he put up with Tomon scolding him for not being thoughtful and obeyed his directions.

Zen guided Mina to the parlor next to the office. He invited her to have a seat on the sofa, then sat down across from her over the low table. The furniture were simple things that were far from luxurious, all of them suitable for a village town hall.

"The chief seems the same as usual. He's not going to be able to curry favor with my uncle by sucking up to me, though," Mina said in a low voice, slumping her shoulders.

Zen understood her feelings a little. In the empire, the official post of a knight didn't really exist, but many people still stuck to the old custom from before the empire's founding, by which they would use the term "knight" to refer to the commanding officer of each class in the military as well as the guards that protected important people. It was a word that Zen also used without thinking, and no one got upset even when it was said in public.

On the other hand, using the title of "lord" to refer to a knight was completely obsolete in the empire. It was still used in some

foreign countries, where knights were considered a rank of nobility and so not using honorifics was rude enough to offend people.

However, in this empire that had abolished the aristocracy, even using "lord" to refer to a minister, let alone an individual guard or member of the army, was seen as a vivid reminder of nobility culture and how harmful it was, so it was avoided. As such, even if it was to pay respect to Mina, it was excessive for Tomon to go out of his way to refer to her as "lord." His attempts at flattery were much too blatant.

Still, although Zen understood what Mina wanted to say, he defended Tomon. "That's just how much he respects you and, by extension, His Excellency Cummel, who holds the most power in this jurisdiction. I think the chief has a loyalty that's admirable for a bureaucrat." From the bottom of his heart, he backed up his boss as if to say, *He's definitely not a bad person.*

Mina probably didn't really care about the sincerity of Tomon's character, so with a brief, "I see," she changed the subject. Instead, she quickly broached her main topic.

Rather than it being out of impatience, that action was probably the manifestation of her practicality as a military officer. "Are you familiar with His Excellency Stoga, Sir Zen?"

"The prefectural governor of Alona?" Zen confirmed it just to be sure, a habit fitting of a model government official who valued accuracy in his work.

There were three prefectures within the state of Cylin, Nazalf and Alona being two of them. The three prefectures were positioned in a triangle in the northern, southern, and eastern regions of the territory.

"Yes, that's the one."

"I can't really say I know much about him," Zen answered frankly.

They'd had to depart the imperial capital the very next day after Zen's demotion to Cylin, so he hadn't had the free time to thoroughly look into the details of the state's circumstances. What he did know were mostly things he'd happened to hear in relation to

his duties back when he'd been a central bureaucrat.

Cylin was a remote region at the southernmost point of the empire, so what he'd heard was especially little. Furthermore, he'd been determined not to work hard after he'd come to Nazalf Prefecture, so he hadn't gone out of his way to learn about any matters unrelated to the village town hall.

Even so, if he shook out the bag containing his meager knowledge, he did know, for example, that Stoga was the young prefectural governor who'd been recently appointed two years ago. In other words, unlike Cummel, who'd been appointed by the previous emperor, Heinri, Stoga was a high official who'd been appointed by the damned current emperor, Jemma II. For that reason alone, Zen honestly didn't have a good impression of Alona's prefectural governor.

That wasn't to mention the fact that if you took into account that he'd been selected at the exceptionally young age of twenty-seven, and with a lackluster professional history to boot (he hadn't even worked in the head offices before), his appointment seemed even more dubious.

His father was also a wealthy merchant who was notable even in the imperial capital. Zen really didn't want to consider this a possibility, but there was a chance that Stoga's father had bribed the present emperor and prime minister in exchange for Stoga's current position.

If that were true, he was totally a "bought official." Didn't the current emperor and prime minister understand that having a hand in that would be the start of the country's collapse?

No, this isn't something a common government official in the sticks should be worrying about. Zen shook his head slightly. How long was he going to act like a central bureaucrat?

He once again looked to Mina after noticing her watching him with a questioning gaze. "So what about His Excellency Stoga?"

"He's having a birthday party the week after next. I attended it last year, and it was a fabulous soiree. It might be an even bigger event this year."

"Just to be sure, this isn't an official event, right?"

"Of course not. It's His Excellency Stoga's personal birthday celebration." She told him that Stoga would gather his personal invitees, and they'd enjoy a meal, pleasant conversation, and ballroom dancing. That meant, as a public figure, there wouldn't be any issue. No matter how magnificent his party was, he could do what he liked so long as he used his own funds to celebrate his birthday. As a prefectural governor, he should have a significant salary, and he might also have support from his parents.

"However, when I attended the party last year, it was as an official representative of Nazalf's prefectural government office. I accompanied His Excellency Cummel." She purposefully called her own uncle "His Excellency," probably to keep a clear distinction between her personal and work life.

Zen also nodded. "Indeed, it's better to have a good relationship with any neighboring prefectures. In order to achieve that, you have to first start with getting the most powerful individuals of each prefecture on good terms with one another."

"It was especially because it was His Excellency Stoga's first birthday party after being inaugurated. His Excellency Cummel couldn't refuse when he was invited."

It would be ideal if everything could go well with reason and logic alone; sadly, however, humans were creatures that were far from perfect. In order to move public business along smoothly, you couldn't disregard personal human relationships, even when they should by all rights be unrelated.

"However, His Excellency Cummel is extremely busy," she continued. "He's attended His Excellency Stoga's party once already, so he's ordered that he'll only send out a representative this year."

"It does take a week to go to and come back from Alona City, after all."

On top of that, it's official business. You'd want to take into account the possibility of any unforeseen incidents, and seven days doesn't leave enough wiggle room. You'll want to have at least ten days off. Zen's government-official brain immediately launched into calculations.

"It's been decided that I'll attend the party again this year as his representative."

I see. I'm starting to see why she went out of her way to visit me.

"And I need a partner for the party... I'm sure you're aware, but I'm unfortunately a military woman. I don't have many choices in the way of men who might accompany me, so I'm in a predicament."

Hmm. I thought so. At a formal soiree, it was etiquette for men and women to attend as a pair. Only children were exceptions. If a grown adult attended the event by themself, they'd be looked down upon as someone who wasn't a proper adult—someone who was like a child. Zen personally felt that coming to that conclusion arbitrarily was silly, but customs from old times were normally illogical. Cummel was a bachelor, so last year, he'd probably selected his niece Mina as both his companion and his guard.

While it was all well and good to have Mina stepping in as a representative this year, he could've also chosen a companion for her too. There were probably plenty of contenders among his subordinates, like other guards or civil officials who were versed in public relations.

"And uncle said that this time, I should find one by myself..."

She now called him "uncle." That meant that, as her family member, Cummel wanted to see his niece's growth and independence. He was saying that she shouldn't only concern herself with discipline and her duties related to her job as a guard—she should focus more on networking too. Did that mean marriage as well? But that was likely difficult for Mina.

"Could you please help me, Sir Zen?" she entreated him, looking troubled. "Um, please don't laugh when I say this... No, actually, it's okay if you do. Despite how I look, I'm popular among men."

"Oh, I won't laugh. If anything, I figured." Zen nodded with full earnestness.

He'd seen plenty of her intelligence and good character when they'd been together in the monster subjugation party. Indeed, she wasn't a sheltered girl, but her behavior was refined, and she wasn't as militaristic as she declared. Even her looks could be called

beautiful in an androgynous way (though her masculine side could be considered slightly more prominent, so people's opinions might vary). On top of that, her uncle was the prefectural governor, which meant she had the strongest supporter in Nazalf behind her.

If someone like her wasn't popular, then who would be? Zen would've smiled if she hadn't been self-aware.

Zen didn't voice these thoughts aloud, but he probably did convey that he completely agreed with her assessment. As Mina shyly scratched her cheek, she muttered, "Anyway, so that's how things are. If I invite someone from the prefectural government office even while telling them it's strictly for business, I fear they'll still get their hopes up for some reason."

"Indeed, I do think a lot of people would misunderstand," Zen agreed. Boys were stupid and simple creatures. They'd immediately get excited the day a pretty girl approached them. It was like how Zen had been back when he was taking private lessons from Aness during the Advanced Civil Service Exam.

"I'm grateful for your understanding." She bowed her head lightly, looking relieved.

A lady would usually be laughed at as being conceited for saying those things. This possible misunderstanding was a valid worry for Mina, but even so, it probably had taken courage to personally confide in someone.

"Regarding this matter, I thought I could be at ease if it was you who accompanied me, Sir Zen, so I came to visit you."

It's true that I won't misunderstand the situation... However, he'd only met her once three months ago. He hadn't felt like they'd established a connection that would be enough to foster such a strong belief in him for Mina.

"To be honest, I sensed that your personality is similar to my uncle's," she admitted. "You're rational and sensible, just like how you immediately understood what I'm saying. You're someone I can trust to have my back as we accomplish our duties together."

Well, Cummel and I are both former central bureaucrats and are rare people to find in the countryside, so we may seem the same in the eyes of the folks here. Zen didn't mean to act self-important; he

was just thinking about it objectively.

Oh, I see now. I'm a workaholic, so that means it's okay to trust me since I won't mix up my personal and business affairs. He felt it was funny that he'd understood that point, even though he was talking about himself.

"How about it, Sir Zen? It's a little far, but won't you accompany me to Alona City? Of course, it'll be considered official business that has been ordered by His Excellency Cummel, so the prefectural government office will pay for all travel and living expenses. I will detail this all to Tomon to allow you to have some days off from your work at the town hall."

"How wonderful, Sir Zen! You should go!" Tomon cried, suddenly opening the door to the parlor. Even if he'd personally come to serve the tea, his timing was way too perfect.

It seems he was keenly listening in on us, then... Zen half closed his eyes. He wasn't a bad boss, but these weakling-like actions of his were some of his small faults.

"May we receive your permission, Sir Tomon?" Mina asked.

"Of course, Lord Mina! If it's a matter that'll help His Excellency Cummel, it's only natural that I, Tomon, and everyone in the town hall cooperate. As such, please let His Excellency know." This was how a small fry would act. It was almost refreshing how blatant it was.

"Ha ha ha... I will certainly do so." Mina laughed dryly.





After that, Tomon laid out the tea (setting Mina's cup down so reverently, it went far beyond mere politeness), and after waiting for him to return to the office, Zen and Mina continued their conversation.

"I would very much love to cooperate, but I hesitate to leave my house for ten whole days..." Zen said. Even if Elysia hadn't been the imperial princess, having to leave behind his fourteen-year-old daughter would definitely have made him uneasy.

"I've heard from His Excellency Cummel as well that you have a daughter. What would you think about having her come with you to attend the party?"

"What? Are you sure?!"

"I've already received permission from His Excellency Cummel. Apart from when we're at the party, I don't intend to be so uptight, and your daughter can enjoy this like a normal trip. Additionally, as a daughter of the Leadon family, wouldn't this be an opportunity for her to learn about the real world?"

I don't think she'll learn anything from a local prefectural governor's party at this point, but I'm sure she'll be happy if it's a trip. Even if it was just a small trip to a neighboring prefecture.

"Of course, the travel and living expenses for your daughter will also be funded by the prefectural government office."

"We also have a large wolf who's like a part of the family..."

"I understand. They will all be considered public expenses."

Hell yeaaah! We're going on a triiip! Internally, Zen himself was leaping with joy. Part of it was him purely looking forward to going out with his family, but it was also because this was sure to put Elysia back in a good mood. It was perfect timing.

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"And so, Zen will be going to Alona City for some official business," Tomon explained to his subordinates, who'd taken their seats in the office. It was after he had ordered every member of the town hall to see Mina off.

"He'll be departing in five days," he continued, "and will be gone

for ten days after that. During that time, we must keep the town hall running with just the four of us. Work harder than usual."

"Okaaay," whined Max.

"I'm so jealous of Mr. Zen." Anna sighed.

"Even if it's for official business, I bet it's still mostly a vacation. I'm jealous," mumbled Namnam.

"What's with these unmotivated responses?!" Tomon exclaimed. As their boss, he scolded Max, Anna, and Namnam, who were frank about their low morale.

"No, it's true," Zen said. "I'm getting all the benefits, and yet you guys are getting extra work shoved onto you. I'm sorry."

"You don't have to apologize! It's His Excellency Cummel's direct orders! Hold your head up high and go!" Tomon exclaimed, disguising his selfishness as kindness in order to emphasize how cooperative he was being with Cummel. Internally, though, he was not calm.

Why is His Excellency Cummel requesting this of Zen?! He really is partial to him. He's not trying to somehow have Zen make a notable accomplishment and replace me, right?

Of course, Mina was the one who'd selected Zen, not Cummel, and Tomon's suspicion of Cummel wanting to appoint Zen the chief of this small village town hall was wildly off the mark, but he was genuinely afraid of the possibility.

Now that things have come to this, we'll really emphasize our willingness to cooperate. I'll make it like a major mission that the entire Todd Village Town Hall is taking up instead of only Zen. If we do that, then it'll be difficult for His Excellency to let Zen hog all the credit.

Tomon was fast to think only when it came to selfishly getting along in life.

"There were only four of us before Zen was appointed here. Let's prove that we can keep Todd Village Town Hall functioning even without Zen! Especially to His Excellency Cummel!" Tomon particularly emphasized the "even without Zen" part. The four of them had only kept the town hall running for two months, though, after the previous chief had been promoted. To make matters worse,

they'd been floundering, unsure of when things would start to go awry. Tomon conveniently turned a blind eye to those facts, making unnecessary snide remarks without thinking.

However, Zen didn't seem to interpret it that way. "What wonderfully inspiring words, Chief!" He abruptly stood up, deeply overcome with emotion.

Tomon gaped at him.

"No matter what post I used to work at, if anyone was away for even a day for any reason, they'd receive tons of complaints later, asking them if they knew how much they'd burdened everyone else. It was like lying on a bed of nails. It didn't matter if it was a cold or if you'd taken time off."

Tomon was stunned. *What? I didn't know the central government agencies had such an unfriendly atmosphere...*

"But that's just not right, you know? If the work schedule is so tightly packed that the place won't function if just one person goes missing, that actually means the system is inefficient. Thanks to you, Chief, I've realized just how abnormal that was." Zen kept prattling on and on, as if he'd seen the light.

Moreover, that seemed to have sparked the other subordinates' motivation.

"Huh. Guess there's nothing else for it." Max shrugged. "We'll cover the gap you'll leave, Mr. Zen."

"You're always supporting us, after all," Namnam chimed in.

"We passed the civil service exams too," Anna said, "so let's show off that we're part of the elites around here."

They were now talking in high spirits. Yet Tomon's speech as a chief hadn't motivated any of them.

"Ah, yes, indeed..." Tomon said stiffly. Now that the atmosphere was somewhat nice, he couldn't come out and say, *I was just making a snide comment. That's all.* So, he switched to taking on the attitude of a boss who was warmly watching over his subordinates as they got fired up.

W-Well, everything turned out all right in the end! It wouldn't be wrong to say that my subordinates' inspiration started from what I said. Now, so long as I don't forget to make a grand show of

sending off Zen together with everyone at the town hall, it'll be perfect! Reassessing things, he satisfied himself.

"In exchange, we're expecting souvenirs."

"Hey now, you're so ruthless, Anna. But make sure you get me one too."

"You and Anna are two peas in a pod, Max."

Zen laughed. "Ha ha. I hear you. I'll buy you some, so look forward to it. Same goes for you too, of course, Namnam."

Gazing lukewarmly at his subordinates who were saying such carefree things, Tomon cleared his throat. "Ahem! If you're going to get souvenirs, you should choose something that's the finest of the finest to bring back for His Excellency Cummel. And when you give it to him, be sure to tell him that I've trained you well."

Zen was smart, yet he was likely to neglect something like this. That was why Tomon shared some of his worldly wisdom with him.

Tomon didn't care that his other subordinates like Anna were looking at him coldly, like they were saying, *You always say more than you need to, Chief*, and handed down his orders. "Now everyone, it's about time we get back to work."

However, upon realizing it was almost lunchtime, he corrected himself with a smile. "No, that'll come second. Everyone, let's have lunch. You can leave now, Zen. It's better to leave early to discuss the plans with your daughter."

"I'm thankful for your consideration, Chief. However, I want to work a bit longer today before going home."

"What?"

Zen always reached his quota before noon, and his default was to clock out right away. However, after saying something so unusual, he went to sit back down in his seat.

"What's the occasion?"

"You'll be down a person for ten whole days," Zen explained. "I need to get a little serious and take care of my quotas for that time."

Stop! Don't be such a hard worker! It won't look like we're supporting you anymore! Tomon's face turned pale while his lukewarm smile remained. Each day's quota took all day for people to complete, yet Zen was trying to take on ten days' worth of that

work all by putting in a bit of elbow grease. Tomon wanted to call Zen “You monster!” but he managed to keep the words in his throat...just barely.

Chapter 2: The Fun Carriage Trip

"So that's why you came home late today, father," said Elysia.

"Yeah, and man, I'm starved." Zen was waiting at the dining table for Elysia to reheat his lunch. He naturally hadn't brought anything to eat to the town hall, since he'd fully intended to come home before noon, after all. He'd endured the rest of his work with a growling stomach, casting sidelong glances at Max spreading out the lunch his wife had lovingly made and Anna returning home to eat.

It really had taken a whole two hours to clean up ten days' worth of quotas. There were five days before Zen's departure, so he had thought of dividing the work and doing it little by little, but he'd figured there was no time like the present. It was important to strike when the iron was hot and give it your all.

"Hee hee. Oh, but father, you love saying that you won't work hard anymore. I see that you truly are diligent to your core." Elysia giggled, standing in front of the stove. Her ponytail swayed happily as she stirred the pot. It'd already been four months since they'd come to Todd Village, and it was totally natural to see her standing in the kitchen now.

"No, really," Zen insisted. "I have zero motivation to be so serious about my work now. I just don't want to burden anyone."

"That sounds like you're serious to me, though? Back in the imperial capital, were you not always striving to work more than everyone else, worrying about dragging other people down and making extra effort to support your coworkers who were in poor health?"

"Ugh... I might have been."

She giggled. "Hee hee, I thought so. I can picture it."

"This is probably why I get teased for being a workaholic." Zen looked up at the ceiling.

"As opposed to someone who's *not* serious and burdens everyone

around them, I think it's quite wonderful." She ladled the stew from the pot into a deep bowl and placed it in front of Zen. With that action alone, the sweet fragrance of fatty duck wafted through the air.

Zen decided to pull himself together and dig in.

This duck was something that the best hunter in the village, Gota, had delivered. For some reason, ever since he and Zen had fought together while they were eradicating the twintail fox, he'd occasionally share a portion of the game he caught while hunting. Zen had asked why many times, but Gota, ever the taciturn man, never answered. Even if Zen tried to decline, Gota would ignore him and leave behind a portion of his spoils, not even accepting anything in return.

Elysia had been nothing but delighted, exclaiming, "I'm sure it's because he likes you, father" and "He's like a good fairy," but Zen couldn't help feeling like he just had to pay Gota back somehow.

"Everyone we've met since coming to Todd Village has been so nice... It truly is a great place to live." He was sad that he couldn't see his family, friends, or acquaintances, but otherwise, he didn't miss or lament his flashy imperial capital life at all.

"Yes, I feel that way too." Elysia nodded with a smile, having sat down across the table from him. She'd already had lunch, but Zen was glad that she was keeping him company. No matter how delicious the stew, eating it alone would dull the taste.

Above all else, though, I'm happy she seems to be in a good mood. It'd be awkward if things were still the way they were this morning. I wonder if this invitation to Alona worked on her—it's an amazing kind of thing to bring home, after all. As he thought to himself, he scooped up the stew with his spoon.

"Ms. Mina is also a very nice person. She came personally to invite us, after all," he said without thinking.

"*Mm-hmm.*" For a second, Elysia's face stiffened...or at least it looked like it had.

"Is there something about Ms. Mina that's bothering you?"

"No, nothing at all. She was thoughtful enough to make it so Keel and I could go on the trip with you. She's a very good person."

"Yeah." Had it been his imagination? It must've been. Yeah, he'd go with that.

Reassessing his observation, he then relished the deliciousness of the duck as much as he could. Duck meat was prone to becoming tough, but Elysia's cooking had improved remarkably. Since it had been stewed until soft, its chewiness was just right.

While Elysia sat across from Zen, watching him eat her home cooking like he was really enjoying it, she thought to herself, extremely calm. *Sir Zen said that woman Lady Mina is a good person, but I can clearly see that she has some ulterior motives this time.*

After all, it didn't make sense. If all Mina had to do was find a man who wouldn't misunderstand her intentions, she could've simply selected someone from the prefectural government office who already had a wife and kids. As long as they weren't an obsessively dirty-minded man, they'd probably understand that it was an official business matter and not giddily assume Mina was trying to participate in adultery. Not to mention, they wouldn't act so insolently to the prefectural governor's niece. It was much stranger to come all the way to Todd Village to ask Zen in person.

To Elysia, the things Mina did made it look like she had feelings for Zen and actually *wanted* him to "get the wrong idea."

But it seems that, unfortunately, Sir Zen firmly believes the reasoning Mina gave him. He hasn't thought that deep into it. He was an extremely intelligent person, but it appeared he hadn't caught on to her ulterior motives.

Sir Zen tends to be a bit slow when it comes to people showing him affection. Elysia judged that it likely had to do with Zen's peculiar upbringing.

First of all, he had been raised surrounded by siblings who were just too brilliant, and in addition, he'd been thrown into extremely harsh circumstances at the mere age of fourteen by challenging the Advanced Civil Service Exam at the youngest age possible and competing against every great mind from across the nation (with most being much older than him). Elysia thought that was probably

the main reason Zen had such low self-esteem. Writing it off as part of his humble personality wasn't enough to explain it.

And then, for the same reason, he had a tendency to not fully grasp when other people were praising him. In other words, he had turned into a thickheaded person who didn't comprehend affection when presented with it.

Well, it helps me out this time that he's thickheaded. Elysia would hardly complain about having no rivals in love. Mina might make some moves on Zen during the trip, but all Elysia had to do was obstruct her attempts.

Zen probably had no idea what Elysia was thinking. "Anyhow, I'm glad that you're happy about the Alona trip too, Elysia."

"Yes. I'm really happy to also be invited." Thanks to that, Mina and Zen wouldn't get to be alone together.

Yes, I will absolutely not let that happen. Elysia steeled her resolve underneath her smile.

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On the morning they'd all be heading for Alona, Mina went to Cummel's official residence to greet him.

"Now then, Your Excellency," she said, "I'll be off."

Despite the early hour, Cummel was properly clad in his official uniform. However, with the warm face of an uncle rather than a strict prefectural governor, he said, "All right. Do me proud." It was clear that he wasn't talking about her duties as his representative.

Mina's face went red when she realized. "I-I didn't invite Sir Zen for fun... Not at all..."

"You can do a good enough job of being my proxy, and that'll be fine. All you have to do is flatter the immature, big-headed, attention-seeking prefectural governor and put him in a good mood anyway." While her uncle was a little exasperated, wondering if she was going to make him say it out loud, he continued. "Instead of focusing on that, it's much more important to deepen your connection with Sir Zen. Not just for yourself either. It'd be heartening for me if a man as great as him could become your

husband and a member of our family."

"Y-You're jumping to marriage too quickly, uncle! I'm just a little interested in Sir Zen, that's all..." she mumbled evasively. It was embarrassing to have to describe her exact feelings for a man to a relative.

However, with a serious expression, her uncle asked, "Supposing it were decided that you two would get married. Would you be opposed? Is it impossible to even consider?"

Being asked such an embarrassing question so bluntly made her squeak internally. "U-Um... I mean, uh... I wouldn't say I'd be *opposed*..." No matter how she tried, she couldn't answer in her normal brisk voice.

However, instead of scolding her, Cummel remained very serious as he nodded. "As your uncle, I was keeping an eye out for who you'd choose to be your partner at the soiree. It was of great interest to me. Since you've had no love interests in your life until now, I'd have understood if you'd simply chosen an acquaintance or coworker pragmatically. However, when you said you wanted to ask Sir Zen, I realized that's what I wanted for you too."

That was probably why her uncle had cooperated with her to have Zen agree. The travel expenses and such for Elysia and Keel were actually coming out of Cummel's pocket. If they used the prefectural government office's funds to cover the expenses for anyone other than Zen, it'd be crossing the line between business and personal affairs. Her uncle, who was firm even with himself, couldn't let that slide.

"Listen well, Mina," he said. "When deciding on a husband, the kind of man you should choose is someone you're not repulsed by and who has more than enough good qualities—like Zen. If you seek a relationship based on love and affection, it won't last long."

At Cummel's thorough advice, Mina was speechless.

He's a great man who doesn't act on his emotions, always approaching his work with reason and logic, but...I didn't think he'd approach even marriage that way. It was kind of funny, but also not.

However, it was precisely because it made sense that her uncle spoke with conviction. "Sir Zen has his own mind and his own

circumstances, so I won't be so absurd as to say you absolutely must have him marry you. But on this trip to Alona, I at least want you to use that chunk of pocket money I gave you to deepen your bond with Sir Zen and his daughter." Essentially, Cummel was asking if he could expect that much of her.

"Y-Yes, uncle." She had to answer, even though she still felt a little anxious inside.

I do want to get to know Sir Zen more, though. And I'd rather not create an awkward rift between his daughter and me either. She decided to think that Cummel had said these things as a way of supporting her.

They would travel to Alona via carriage. It was a fine, two-horse carriage with more than enough room for three people to ride comfortably inside. The design itself was fairly spartan since they'd borrowed it from the army, but it had outstanding functionality. The seats themselves were quite cushiony and especially comfortable to ride on. Their butts wouldn't hurt during their three-day journeys each way. The coachman was also a veteran army civilian.

Mina went to Todd Village in high spirits to pick up the group in person, feeling grateful for her uncle's consideration and preparations, but they quickly ran into a problem...

"It's a little too cramped for Keel..." Zen mumbled.

"I apologize... I'd heard he was big, but I didn't know he was *this* big..." This was Mina's first time seeing Keel's massive size. He was so big that it was honestly funny that the horses weren't spooked at all. Mina was both surprised and full of remorse. It was her own fault for not checking. It was times like these when she really felt just how much of a militaristic person she was (in short, inconsiderate).

It was probably fine for "knights" in foreign countries to behave this way; however, just like what the official title of "military officers" implied, they were essentially government officials in the empire. It was desired for them to do well in their studies, including social etiquette, in addition to military arts. Mina was getting away with not being good at both only because she was low in the ranks, being located in the countryside. She hadn't grown at all since Cummel

explained that to her.

"What should we do, Keel? Maybe we'll have you ride on top of the roof?" When Zen asked Keel, the white wolf nodded as if to say, *I'll do that.* With a nimbleness you wouldn't expect from such a large body, he lightly jumped on top of the carriage.

What a smart wolf! It was like he completely understood human speech! She could understand why Zen said he was practically a part of the family.

"I'm sorry for the inconvenience, Sir Keel!" Mina called an apology to the rooftop like she was speaking to another human.

Keel nodded back to her as if saying, *Don't worry about it.* It seemed that, just like his big body, his heart was big too.

Mina then formally exchanged greetings with Zen's daughter. "I'm Mina Houck, His Excellency Cummel's guard. Thank you very much for your cooperation and your accompanying us, Madam Elysia."

"I'm Zen's daughter, Elysia. Thank you for your invitation to this trip and your kindness, Lady Mina."

They both deeply bowed their heads before speaking at the same time:

"Please relax a little when speaking with me. You don't have to call me 'lady.'"

"It's much too embarrassing to be called 'madam' by such an honorable knight."

Glancing at each other, they both giggled.

"I'll call you Miss Elysia, then."

"And I'll call you Miss Mina."

They nodded to each other.

Mina's first impressions of Elysia were *She's pretty, elegant, and above all else, I feel like she's a good girl. Just what I'd expect of Sir Zen's daughter!* She really was Zen's kid all right. (Well, not actually, but Mina didn't know that.)

Mina smiled as she took Elysia's hand, and with a bow that knights would use toward a young lady, she escorted the girl into the coach.

Zen also boarded, and he sat together with his daughter on the bench across from Mina.

After Mina had a brief word with the coachman, the carriage swayed as it departed.

"Barring any unexpected delays, we're set to reach Alona City in three days. The party is in six. If things go as planned, let's enjoy some sightseeing and treat ourselves while we're in the city," Mina said, promptly explaining the details of their upcoming schedule.

This is necessary, of course, she thought. *I'm not talking about this because I'm so militaristic that I don't know how to come up with conversation topics.* No one was criticizing her, but she made excuses for herself.

Elysia smiled and listened quietly, but as soon as Mina had finished with all the explanations, she leaned in as if she couldn't wait.

"I've heard from father that you're a wonderful and reliable female knight. Now that I've finally met you in person, I see that you truly are so gallant. When did you decide you wanted to become a knight? Were you aiming to become one since you were a child?" On top of Elysia's praises, there came a barrage of questions marked by intense curiosity.

"Hey now, Elysia. It's rude to ask all that so suddenly," Zen scolded her.

"No, Sir Zen. I don't mind." Mina was grateful if anything. As someone without much education and who'd never been very girlish, she'd actually been anxious about if she would be able to get along with a young lady of the famous family of bureaucrats, the Leadons.

"I've been a tomboy for as long as I can remember," she started, happy to talk. She saw this as a good opportunity to show what kind of person she was to Zen as well as Elysia. "I was always getting bruised up. Instead of obediently staying in the house, I liked being active outside. I preferred riding horses over playing with dolls, and instead of learning how to do makeup, I learned to wield a wooden sword and kept the neighborhood brats in line."

"When I was still young," she continued, "my parents would joke that I'd become an amazing female knight someday since I was too much of a tomboy. But I took it seriously back then. After hearing them say it over and over again, I started actually wanting to aim for

it."

"You were so innocent," Elysia commented.

"Ha ha. I guess that's putting it nicely. But at any rate, after I decided that I was serious about studying military arts and horsemanship, I pestered my parents for a tutor. It came out of the blue for them, though."

"Did they oppose it?"

"Yes. They were vehemently opposed at the beginning. They scolded me numerous times for taking those jokes so seriously. But even so, I held true to what I wanted. I was even prepared to leave the house in the worst-case scenario."

"So that means in the end, you didn't actually need to leave?" Elysia was only fourteen years old, but she was a good listener and a wise girl. She instantly picked up on the little nuances and understood them.

She really is Sir Zen's daughter! As Mina thought that to herself, she continued her tale. "My uncle Cummel supported me. At that time, he was still working in the head offices. In our family, he's regarded as a wise man who is exceptional even among our relatives, so my parents sent him a letter to consult about talking sense into their tomboy daughter. However, the opposite happened. Uncle persuaded *them* instead. He said there were many women in the imperial capital who work as brilliant military officers, and that what was important was their motivation and aptitude. How such old ways of thinking like how I must work a feminine job and worry about my expected future as a woman didn't suit the empire."

Even now, Mina distinctly remembered how deeply her uncle's perspective had moved her, and how thankful she'd felt. Mina was still diligent about her duties as Cummel's knight, but she wasn't as faithful as she was just because he was the most powerful person in the prefecture.

"So your parents started supporting you becoming a knight?" Elysia asked.

"That's right. They'd really just been worried about me, but they were open-minded enough to accept uncle's advice. I'm proud of them."

"You're wonderful, Mina, and that story is very wonderful as well." Elysia listened until the end with keen interest, clearly enjoying herself.

In the one-in-a-million chance—no, hundred-million chance—that Sir Zen and I get married, she'll become my daughter. As a daughter, Elysia was a little too grown for the twenty-five-year-old Mina. But if that happened, Mina wanted to become a mother that Elysia could be proud of. To that end, she wanted to get closer to her on the trip for now. Zen's daughter was such a mature girl. If Mina put in the work, it should definitely not be hard.

"If you have anything else you'd like to ask, then fire away." Mina kindly smiled at her, showing that Elysia didn't have to hold back.

As Elysia looked at Mina's smile that, even to a fellow woman, was attractive, she smiled equally as wide. *I was prepared for her to be a beauty since Sir Zen had said so. But with her good personality, she really is a formidable foe. It puts me in a tough position.* She evaluated the woman, extremely calm.

Oftentimes what you hear about someone and what you see when you actually meet them are very different. However, Zen's compliments on a woman's appearance were surprisingly credible. It was probably because after growing up close to the finest beauties such as his sister Sharla and his former school friend (and Elysia's mother) Aness, the two women had become the standards for beauty for him.

From Elysia's point of view as well, Mina was decently pretty, though her looks still didn't beat her deceased mother's or Sharla's. Elysia was being unbiased here and not showing any favoritism. Realistically, no man should feel unsatisfied with Mina's appearance.

On the other hand, Elysia had already realized that you had to take Zen's compliments on other people's personalities with a grain of salt. At the end of the day, he was extremely good-natured. Additionally, he had a talent for laughing off others' small faults. He was able to let things move along without getting upset over every little thing. That was why, even after Elysia heard Zen say that Mina was a good person, whether it was actually true had been questionable.

However, it seems I cannot deny it. Elysia took care not to let out a sigh. Mina's unconcealed tomboyishness was unlikely to hinder her in romance. That also went for how she stayed true to herself. The imperial princess could strongly feel her sincerity and desire to deepen her bond with not only Zen but Elysia as well. She also strongly felt the woman's naturally honest attitude; it was impossible to mistake her actions for flattery.

She reminded Elysia a little of her mother, Aness, who, although she had been strong-minded, had never lost her femininity. After talking to her even just a little, Elysia could already see how likable Mina was. In other words, the more time they spent together, the higher the probability became that Zen would start to like her.

I'm sorry, but I can't let that happen. Elysia had tagged along more with the intention of getting in the way of Mina's plans than to purely enjoy the trip.

But, nevertheless, doing things like bad-mouthing Mina in front of Zen or outright sabotaging her would make Elysia feel ashamed. Naturally, it'd weigh heavily on her conscience. Above all else, she had to consider how things would appear in Zen's eyes.

There was nothing to gain if she soiled his impression of Mina while also hurting her own, ending the trip in a double knockout for the both of them. That was probably the most deplorable thing she could do.

What's important here is to have Mina understand that it's impossible to get between Sir Zen and me.

On the other hand, if Elysia came to realize how overwhelmingly wonderful Mina was and understood that she would make him happier than Elysia could, Elysia was prepared to quietly step back and support them.

This was how Elysia hoped to fight. She felt this was the proper way. For that purpose, she had to gather some information.

It's like that saying: "Know your enemy and know thyself." For instance, Mina didn't seem to have much experience with love—or rather, she seemed like a late bloomer. Elysia could tell the woman's feelings toward Zen were still barely developed too.

She knew she could find out more just by listening for a while;

hence why Elysia had been hurling questions at her. It was admittedly a calculated move, but it couldn't be avoided.

I thought I wasn't like my mother at all aside from my face. Though Aness had possessed an open mind and a scheming personality, she'd still supported her husband, Emperor Heinri. After encountering a formidable enemy, Elysia realized for the first time that she indisputably had that same blood flowing through her veins.

However, even the imperial princess of Catalan, who was trained to have plenty of patience and self-restraint, had some things she could never hand over.

And that's my prime minister, she thought to herself inside her heart, calling Zen by that title with a flood of emotion.

Elysia was currently getting fired up. However, she hadn't realized that she was getting a little *too* excited.

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How many hours had it been since leaving Todd Village? They were using the small highway of Talum, which ran from Nazalf Prefecture to the city of Alona in the northeast.

The scenery was beautiful, and through the carriage's windows, they could see how the vineyards running along the hills seemed to go on forever. Those vineyards were on both sides of the highway and continued into the neighboring prefecture. With how expansive the rural landscape was, the atmosphere felt more majestic than tranquil.

Elysia, who'd been gazing out the window without losing interest, said, "I'd heard that the empire's south was covered in forests, so I completely thought there were no open areas without trees."

"Yes, there are many people who think that," said Zen. "However, if you look at the actual ratios of this area, woodlands make up only fifty percent of it."

"Only half!"

"Even so, forests make up only thirty percent of the empire overall, so what we have here is definitely a lot compared to that. If this region really were completely forested, it wouldn't be habitable

for humans. It would have remained undeveloped, not even considered a remote region."

"When you say it like that, it makes sense," Elysia said, fervently listening to her father.

Mina looked at the two warmly from the seat across from them. No, she herself found Zen's talk just so interesting.

She likely would've found it boring in the past. Back then, she probably only would've wanted to ask things like how he'd come to possess all that bravery he'd displayed back when he'd exterminated the twintail fox.

However, her mindset had changed ever since her uncle had advised that, as a military officer of the empire, she should expand her knowledge more. Just like Zen, she longed to become a knight who was accomplished in both military arts and book knowledge, who wasn't just strong.

That was why now, as she listened to him talk about geography, she found it more fun than dull.

"Even out of the other states in the empire's south, Cylin in particular has a lot of plains. Twenty years ago, His Excellency the State Governor put policies in place to use those plains along with the warm climate to cultivate grapes on a large scale."

"So he first gathered people from the neighboring states?"

"Yes, you've remembered that well. It's like how the state invested public funds into creating and reconstructing easy-to-live villages like Todd Village, and how they were used to promote Cylin as a nice place to live. With the increased manpower the state gained by attracting more people, it was able to use those excess flatlands to expand the state-run farms. The results of that are what you see now."

Mina, who'd been born in Cylin, hadn't known its political background. Twenty years ago was when she'd become aware of the world around her, when she first started horseback riding. She still hadn't had a private tutor at the time, so she was being taught in the Nazalf City suburbs by her aunt who loved riding. Mina had vaguely thought to herself how everyone was developing farmland, how they'd established some delicious-looking vineyards, and how

they were expanding them more and more.

She'd assumed that was just how the world worked. She hadn't fathomed what great pains the current state governor had taken to fuel Cylin's development.

"Sir Zen, is it true that Cylin's grape wines are growing popular in the imperial capital too?" asked Mina.

"Indeed," Zen affirmed. "Famous brands have been popping up one after another over the past twenty years. They're popular in the imperial capital as well as with neighboring countries."

Zen continued teaching Elysia. "However, what makes the state governor amazing is not just that he created a new export industry. It's that at the same time, he established potatoes as the primary crop."

To keep their attention, he half jokingly added, "Imagine it—nobody would have energy if there were grapes on the dining table instead of bread."

Then he continued. "With the empire's south's climate being what it is, they can plant the potatoes in the winter and harvest them in spring. Then, from summer to fall, they cultivate grapes. Yes, that means there's no leisure season for farmers in Cylin. But for all the work the citizens put in, they earn more money than those in neighboring states. That attracts more settlers, who come here seeking that." As a result, although Cylin was the most remote region in the empire, it was one of the areas that'd grown its population the most over the past twenty years. Even Mina, who lacked education, could understand how much more prosperous it was than before.

Zen went on, praising the governor passionately. "After hearing about all the governor has done, it's easy to just think, 'Oh, makes sense' and move on. But when you really think about how he came up with the idea from scratch and actually developed the land, you realize he truly did something special. Not just anyone could've accomplished what he did, so you can't criticize the work of the previous state governors either. After all, the current governor was formerly from the Agricultural Affairs Bureau in the Commercial Affairs Agency, so he was particularly qualified to tackle the needs of

this unique region."

Mina had accompanied Cummel several times to visit the current state governor as part of her duties. To be honest, she hadn't imagined that such a gentle old man was such an amazing person.

The political talk had been fun, but because it'd centered around food, it made her stomach growl. With a red face, she proposed, "I prepared food for our journey. Shall we have lunch?"

"Oh man, that'd be great," Zen said.

"Indeed," Elysia agreed.

Mina nodded and took out three baskets from a box alongside the luggage next to the seats. Inside each basket were five small, potato bread sandwiches with fillings of smoked pork, grilled chicken, scrambled eggs, turnip salad, and grape jam.

"What an elaborate lunch," Elysia said in surprise.

"Actually, my mother prepared it. I didn't have anything to do with it..." Mina wasn't sure where her mother had picked up the news, but she'd been unusually excited upon learning that Mina would be going on a trip with a man she was keen on.

Scrambled eggs were Mina's favorite. Feeling her mother's love, she promptly took that sandwich first. At the same time, she wondered if the sandwiches would suit Zen's and Elysia's palates. She peeked at them for their reactions.

That was when something unexpected happened.

"Here, father. Say 'aah.'"

"I'm telling you, this isn't what a father and daughter should do!"

Elysia had taken one sandwich and held it up to Zen's mouth, trying to feed him. It was a sugary sweet gesture, far more befitting of newlyweds or a young couple than family members. Paired with Elysia's cute appearance, the action's destructive power was beyond comparison.

"But we always do this."

"No, we do not! Not always! You're making us look bad!" Zen shrieked, taken aback.

"We're on a trip, after all. Let's enjoy this new change of pace."

"There are limits to how much you can cut loose, okay?!"

"You can feed me instead, father. Aah..."

While Elysia innocently opened her mouth like a baby chick, Zen threw her a rebuttal. "Like I said, other people are watching! Please keep that in mind!" It was as if he were saying, *Have some modesty!*

I-Is this really a conversation between a father and daughter?! Mina was surprised too. It somehow felt like they were showing off something they shouldn't do. Even she found her heart pounding. However, while this wasn't their everyday routine, in reality, it probably wasn't something so unusual either.

Zen himself had said as much while scolding Elysia. "We don't always do that" meant they did do it sometimes. "Other people are watching" meant "It's okay when nobody's looking."

Is this normal in the imperial capital? The big city really is wild. Uncle Cummel was a well-off bachelor who'd never married, but if he did have a daughter, she wondered if they'd have pulled the same "Say 'aah'" act in front of Mina and the rest of the family.

I can't picture that at all... Mina thought. At any rate, she didn't taste the sandwich thanks to that terrible culture shock. It was her favorite food that her mother had gone out of her way to make for her, but it was already in her stomach before she knew it.

Elysia finally listened to Zen and gave up on them feeding each other. Her behavior suddenly changed to that of elegance, eating the sandwich daintily and complimenting how tasty it was many times with Zen.

However, still thoroughly shocked, Mina could only manage vague replies.

After everyone finished their meals, Mina retrieved their empty baskets.

With their stomachs full, Zen and Elysia relaxed and became quiet. Mina looked at their contented faces and knew that their compliments on her mother's home cooking hadn't been just flattery.

I should take this opportunity to learn how to cook from mother... I-I might become Elysia's mother too, so...

As soon as that thought crossed her mind, she snapped out of her shock with fresh resolve. This was a trip with the three of them, after all. An opportunity. She couldn't stay stunned forever.

In her head, she started mulling over what topics to bring up or

what to ask them next, when Elysia suddenly pointed to the left window, drawing their attention. “Look, father!”

“Whoa, that’s a big flock of swans.”

A flock of swans with majestic white wings was flying northeast. They happened to be near the carriage, moving alongside it. It was an impactful, captivating scene that made Mina understand Elysia’s excitement.

However, soon enough, Mina and Zen couldn’t keep birdwatching anymore. That was because Elysia suddenly did something bold.

Elysia had been sitting on her father’s right side, so she naturally scooted closer to Zen in order to get a better look at the swans out the other window. While that itself wasn’t a problem, she abruptly clung to him, wrapping both arms around his right arm.





"Elysia?!" Zen squeaked.

"I'm sorry, father. I just wanted to get a bit closer so I could see them."

"I understand that, but couldn't we just switch places instead of you clinging to me like this?! And why are you holding me like that?!"

"Hee hee, I wonder?" Elysia smiled mischievously. Didn't she just say she wanted to see the flock of swans? What happened to that? She was staring point-blank at Zen's face, not even looking out the window anymore.

What a dangerous smile. This is what they call a temptress! Mina could never imitate that.

"I think the excitement of this trip is making me act up a little," Elysia said.

"'A little?' You're way too excited!" Zen shrieked, overwhelmed. Even Mina was taken aback.

I don't think this level of closeness is appropriate for a father and daughter! She didn't know where to look. She somehow felt she was being shown something she shouldn't see.

Hmm... This is unexpected. She'd intended to get closer with Zen during this trip. If possible, she'd wanted him to look at her as a potential love interest. However, after witnessing Elysia playing around with him like a lover, Mina felt like she'd totally lost confidence in her goal.

Even with Elysia being all over him, Zen didn't seem to mind it, naturally only thinking of her as his daughter. He was simply concerned about other people watching them. In that case, even if Mina clung to him like that, he might still not think anything of it, since to him, she was just a business partner.

Then does that mean I have to take on an even stronger approach? Mina was someone with nonexistent sexual experience with men, always teased by her friends for how innocent she was at twenty-five. Just imagining Zen and herself feeding each other or linking arms to fool around made her feel plenty excited as it was. It was really difficult for her.

In order to get his attention, would she have to badger him for a

kiss? Or take her clothes off to make Zen realize how she felt? Would it have to be something so extreme?

As if I could! No matter how much she was teased for being a late bloomer, her sense of virtue wouldn't permit that approach. *I didn't realize the imperial capital's public morals had eroded so much... The city is really scary.*

Mina'd had the pride of a popular woman. She'd been overconfident, thinking it shouldn't be impossible to attract Zen's gaze. Now, she found it such a hard mission. She of course didn't know that this perception was a misunderstanding, and now that they were on the trip, she was hesitating.

Meanwhile, Elysia naturally couldn't read Mina's mind either. While sitting across from her with a smile, she peered at the knight and thought defiantly, *Take that, Miss Mina! Can you do something as daring as this?!* Of course, Elysia didn't ease up her attack. She entwined her arms around Zen's right arm and continued to cling to him.

"H-Hey, Elysia. Maybe it's about time you gave it up...?"

Zen looked uncomfortable, but she ignored him anyway! She squeezed his arm even tighter. "What's the harm in humoring me every once in a while? You're always at work, father. I was lonely."

"I'm only gone for work in the mornings!" Zen cried his objection, but Elysia was obviously just teasing.

Hee hee. This is fun. Elysia laughed without a care in the world, not forgetting even for an instant that she was showing off to Mina.

Elysia absorbed herself in the feeling of Zen's right arm. It looked thin, but it was the sturdy arm of a man. The muscles weren't just for show. It was a real soldier's arm. Even after the two of them (and one animal) had started living together, she'd never clung to him like this before.

No matter how much she wanted to fool around with him, in her usual mindset, Elysia had shame and knew she had to behave like his daughter. She couldn't act in a way that'd make others question her sense of virtue like this.

Right now, though, she wholeheartedly didn't want Mina to take

Zen away from her, and the special atmosphere that came from being on a trip was making her bold.

What should I do next to trouble—or please—Sir Zen? Should she cling to his chest instead of his arm? Should she throw her arms around his neck like an adult woman? Or should she sit on his lap and lean against him like his daughter, seeking his affection?

Hee hee. I may as well do everything. Eehee hee. She had plenty of time until they reached the inn town they were going to stop at tonight.

As Elysia continued to contemplate many things, she remained unaware of how much the trip was affecting her. Going out somewhere so far away with everyone was fun, and she was just so happy and unbelievably excited.

But that was the excitement of a trip talking—the kind of thing that'd make her writhe with shame upon looking back.

She wasn't *just* not in her usual state of mind. She was fully carried away.

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The only sounds inside the carriage were the clack of the horses' hooves and the rolling wheels as they traveled over the cobblestone road. Elysia had just drifted off to sleep, using Zen's lap as a pillow. Zen put a finger to his lips, and with a brimming smile, Mina nodded many times.

We're on a trip and all, but there's a limit to how much excitement one can handle. I do understand how she feels, though. Zen let out a stifled laugh. He found it so funny how his daughter had tired herself out and lost to her drowsiness.

No matter how mature she is, she's still a fourteen-year-old girl. He peacefully watched her innocent sleeping face on his knees. He truly was glad he'd taken up Mina and Cummel's kind offer and brought her along.

This was Elysia's second time going on a trip. It'd taken about three weeks from the imperial capital to get to Todd Village.

However, she probably hadn't had the luxury of enjoying their travels back then. It had also been her first time leaving the imperial capital—not to mention how she'd had to spend the entire time with a man she'd just met. Even if he was a friend of her parents, it would've been impossible for her to completely relax.

This time, she could get excited and doze off like this precisely because she was so comfortable now. It meant the four months they'd spent living together hadn't been for naught.

I'm also understanding more and more how fathers feel, Zen thought. His love for her grew deeper by the day as he discovered just how precious having a daughter was.

He felt the pleasant weight on top of his knees, affectionately stroked her hair, and let himself forget, just for this moment, that she was an imperial princess.

That was probably why a memory came to him suddenly, something that had happened fourteen years ago.

It was several months after Zen had passed the Advanced Civil Service Exam and started his court service. Aness and Heinri had invited him to the inner palace for a dinner party in front of the second gates, which even men were permitted to enter. Aness was pregnant, and her stomach had already grown significantly. It was the first time they'd seen each other since she'd entered her second trimester, and she was well into it by that point. Zen was so happy, but Aness seemed to feel differently.

With a dark expression, she made a self-deprecating confession. "I'm having this child solely because of my selfishness," she said. "It's to secure my position as empress by birthing an heir." It might've been the maternity blues talking—a term that wouldn't be used till the far-off future.

Zen had been surprised at the time. Aness was a woman with a strong backbone, yet she'd become timid during her pregnancy. She was probably dealing with an unfathomable amount of hardship and pressure from having suddenly moved up from a commoner to an empress.

She continued her confession. "I could never say that I wish for

this child to be happy. I have no right to say that."

Back then, they hadn't known the gender of the child yet. However, as someone who would be the first in line to succeed the throne and eventually bear the responsibility of ruling Great Catalan, this child was likely destined for a tumultuous life. It wouldn't be a peaceful one, at the very least.

"Aness is confiding in you because you're you. We can't say this to anyone else," Heinri said, supporting her.

Zen nodded heavily. He understood. As the emperor and empress, they couldn't allow other people to hear even their most mundane or idle complaints. Humans were far from infallible, but as if they were living gods, Aness and Heinri had to behave like they were. That was why, no matter how terrible the things Aness was saying might be, Zen didn't raise his eyebrows. As their friend, he would take their secrets to the grave.

Knowing that, Zen asked, "There's something you want to say to me, isn't there?" He guessed that there was something else Aness really wanted to tell him.

And then she actually did say something nervously. "I'm sure this child won't be happy. It's because of my selfishness that I'll birth it in spite of that. However, even so, that's exactly why I swear I'll raise it with as much love as I can."

She made a vow in front of Zen that she couldn't let anyone else hear. As she did, she stroked her large belly. Those tender strokes weren't those of an empress. They were definitely of a mother. Zen could see the gesture no other way.

He said from the bottom of his heart, "If possible, I'd like to hold it one day." The child of his closest friends.

That'll probably be impossible, though... It was because, as just a government official, Zen had no right to touch the empress's child.

When he swallowed back those words without saying them, Aness and Heinri smiled sadly.

Right now, Zen looked back on that memory from fourteen years ago.

Huh. It wasn't impossible at all. It seems my wish was granted a

long time ago.

As his chest suddenly ached remembering Aness's and Heinri's faces, he continued to stroke Elysia's hair as she slept. For now, at the very least, he could do this much in place of her late mother.

Chapter 3: Law and Order Should Not Be Taken Lightly

It was true that memories from long ago sometimes showed up in dreams. That was what was happening right now. It was a bitter memory that Zen would have rather not revisited, from before he was twenty years old.

His whole body felt hot, like it was burning. It was from the countless sword wounds he'd received. Unable to handle the series of slash attacks, unable to fully evade them, he was being minced up moment by moment. He was somehow getting by with only minor wounds, but how long would he last?

His enemy hadn't even shown his full power yet. Would that happen or would Zen lose his concentration first?

"Is that all you got, little brother of Sharla Leadon?" The man laughed wickedly. He played with his sword, lightly bouncing the flat of the blade against his own right shoulder. He hadn't properly readied himself even once since the battle had started. Despite that, Zen couldn't detect any openings.

His stance was adaptable. Or it was always perfect. Something that could be considered one of the ultimate swordsmanship techniques out there.

"I have a name, you know! It's Zen Leadon!" Zen shouted back at him. It was a bluff. Unlike the man, he was holding his sword in front of him in a conventional way, but his shoulders and elbows were stiff. He looked just like a cat with its fur standing on end.

"If you still have the ability to shout that much, then that's more than enough." The corners of the man's lips twisted up even higher as he casually rushed in.

The sword he wielded wasn't impressive at all. It was a crude one that could easily be bought anywhere. However, in this man's hands,

it turned into a demonic blade.

Zen saw through the man's technique, how he raised the sword above his head and was about to bring it down diagonally, and tried to receive it. However, he failed. The man's trajectory warped, and the tip of his demonic blade cut Zen's forehead.

Zen couldn't understand what had happened. He couldn't understand in what way you could move your body to manage such an attack. It was normal enough for an attacker to miss, but was it possible for the person ready to meet the blow to cut through the air instead?

He really is trouncing me, though, so I have to accept that it is possible. The blood ran from the wound on his forehead and trickled down his nose. He resisted screwing up his face with displeasure.





"You sure are something else. If you were any average joe, your head would've been split in two by my blade just now." The man let pass a good opportunity for a follow-up attack, instead grinning and letting his sword hang loosely. Then with a clinical tone of voice, he noted, "You're good at judging how far you should keep your distance. It's proof that you got a good foundation from your training." It was like something an examiner would say. They were in a real sword fight, yet he was so carefree.

"It's nothing special. My sister Sharla would've turned it around with a counterattack," said Zen.

"That may be true. She was the most promising among my pupils." His smile took on a nostalgic quality. No sooner than that, he suddenly charged in.

Just like before, he was going to bring his sword down diagonally from over his head, but his blade technique changed. Without changing the trajectory midway, he swung straight down. It'd become like the king's sword—a technique that Sharla often wielded. And it was even sharper than hers.

As part of what she called "training," Sharla had beaten Zen up countless times, so Zen managed to evade this attack successfully.

"Did you imitate my sister just now...?" asked Zen.

"No. Sharla Leadon saw my sword technique and stole it," the man replied. If anyone else had said this, it'd come across as too pretentious, but there was credibility to his words. He used a demonic sword that went beyond common sense. Even with an ordinary, second-rate weapon, he surpassed Zen's sister.

Monster... That was all Zen could think.

Zen had long since been transferred away from the Guards Bureau, but just a week ago, Sharla had recruited him for a manhunt. It was because every night, someone was appearing in the imperial capital to cut people down, seemingly at random.

Zen had finally encountered this man in an alleyway shrouded in darkness, and now he had his doubts that this person was really a human being at all. He actually wouldn't be surprised to be told that the man was called things like an evil spirit or a demon. He was certainly a monster.

This is bad. Forget winning—I don't even feel like I can buy enough time until Sharla comes running.

Zen was definitely not a swordsmanship prodigy. It would hardly be his first time losing, but this was the first time he'd felt like he could die.

Sweat and blood ran down his forehead. His throat was dry from fear. His knees were about to give way.

"In that case, why don't you run?" As if reading his thoughts—as if toying with him—the monster spoke.

Partially as a bluff, and partially to encourage himself, Zen countered him. "You're a criminal who's killed people every night. And the empire pays me for my service. That's why I can't leave you be. I have a duty to protect this country and its citizens. Isn't that easy to understand?"

"Do you have a reason to risk your life for that duty?" asked the monster. "Isn't it smarter to throw that aside and run away as soon as possible? Will you not regret anything when you die?"

"Of course I don't want to die," Zen replied. "However, I'm the type of guy who can't turn a blind eye." He had to laugh at himself for how he'd stumbled through life, though. He'd been viewed completely as a fool by his colleagues, ridiculed for being good-natured. It couldn't be helped. He'd been like this since he was born.

"This is the first time someone has stood before me because they couldn't turn a blind eye." As expected, the monster burst into laughter. "Just as you wish, I'll have you die on the job."

"That's rich coming from you. You didn't have any intention of letting me go anyway." As the two shot back and forth, Zen's shivers began to settle down. His resolve had been steeled after he voiced how ready he was. Was that why this monster had asked him those questions?

No, there was no way.

"Well, here I come." Although in a normal fight to the death you'd attack without a word, this monster had gone out of his way to announce he was making a move. He once again came in with a casual slash.

Zen went to counterattack. Indeed, he was done being on the

defensive. If he couldn't stave him off or protect himself anyway, he might as well strike back with all his might. He'd strike while this monster still hadn't brought out his full power, and they'd both kill each other.

That was what he was going to do. If a military officer of the empire was going to lose his life in the line of duty, then that was what he *should* do. Zen had been raised by his family to force all his emotions back with logic.

Even if I'm nothing compared to my siblings, I'm a man of the Leadon family too! He'd show his enemy that fear was but one emotion!

"Now!" the monster cheerfully shouted and let loose a slash. Once again, he made to swing his sword down diagonally.

Zen could no longer ascertain if this would become the flexible demonic sword or the king's sword. He instead stepped in and swung upward.

The two swords clashed. There was a sharp pain. He was sliced from his right shoulder to his left side, and blood bloomed from the wound. However, at the same time, his sword sliced the monster's left shoulder.

Was it too shallow...? Seriously wounded, Zen fell to one knee and tried to stem the blood by pressing his hand to the gash. His pain had only earned him a shallow wound on the monster. He'd successfully cut the man's left sleeve and nothing more.

The two of them were illuminated by the faint moonlight that poured into the alleyway. The monster's left shoulder was exposed. In Zen's limited field of vision, he could see the tattoo engraved there in detail. It was the crest of the three-eyed dragon.

The head was strangely exaggerated in the design, along with its three eyes that were even more enlarged. A shiver ran up Zen's spine. He felt like those three eyes were staring straight at him.

"You've passed, Zen Leadon." The man looking down at him was still smiling. "Starting today, you are my pupil."

The dragon's eyes weren't smiling at all. Their intense gazes suddenly let up. The monster turned on his heel.

"Wait! Are you running away?!" Zen was going to chase after him

right away. He couldn't overlook a felon who'd cut people down night after night.

However, his legs no longer listened to him. He'd lost too much blood.

The monster said, "I won't kill you. You already have a good foundation, so keep going. Train hard."

Leaving behind those words, he disappeared into the depths of the darkness.

Zen's eyes flew open.

"A dream..." He was staring up at an unfamiliar ceiling.

It made sense; they were staying at an inn that Cummel had arranged. They'd departed Todd Village yesterday, and it was now morning. They were in the middle of their exciting trip, and yet...

Why did I have a dream like that now? He hadn't wanted to remember something like that. Ever since then—perhaps fortunately—he'd never met that monster again. But he also hadn't heard of him being caught either.

Sharla was in the same boat as Zen. She'd come across the man once when she was a teen, and while tasting her first defeat (different from Zen's), she'd managed to retaliate. After that, he'd just called her his pupil without her say-so, let her go, and that had been it.

Zen remembered his sister flying into a rage, saying that she definitely would have her revenge. Was that monster still killing people night after night somewhere? He'd be pretty old now if he was alive, though.

No, even if I think about it now, there's nothing I can do. Zen was no longer a guard, let alone a central bureaucrat. He was a minor official who'd been demoted. If he happened to meet that monster again, he'd probably run away this time. He could probably turn a blind eye. Maybe. Surely.

"You sure are quiet today," said Zen.

"P-Please don't tease me, father..." Elysia was fidgeting in shame on the carriage seat next to him.

It was right after they'd left the inn.

"There was something wrong with me yesterday. Exciting trip or no, I was too pushy—I mean excited." As she glanced at Mina sitting across from her, she dropped her head, red-faced. "Please forget what happened..."

Unbeknownst to Zen, during the night, Elysia had actually reflected on all the things she'd done. Unable to bear her feelings of shame, thinking to herself, *I'm such a child! I really fell asleep after tiring myself out from excitement*, she'd covered her head with the blankets and writhed with shame, screaming to herself.

"I see. You weren't yourself yesterday, Elysia. As you are father and daughter, it seems that behavior truly was unusual for you two. Yes, I understand. I shall forget." Mina also appeared somewhat relieved and gave several quick nods.

Seeing her reaction, Elysia regretted her actions even more, realizing she'd approached things the wrong way. Of course, Zen noticed none of her internal cringing.

In any case, she'd changed completely from yesterday. She took the initiative to bring up some mundane topics to pass the time. Zen and Mina replied with smiles and the three of them had fun chatting.

The carriage peacefully proceeded down the highway. Keel was also enjoying his second sleep on top of the roof to the fullest.

The Ezwaz Highway that they had used to move from the imperial capital to Nazalf City was a major highway that cut vertically through the entire southern half of Catalan. Compared to that, Talum Highway, which connected Nazalf City to Alona City, was very much a branch road.

It was only just wide enough for two large carriages to pass each other. Even so, Catalan never dismissed the importance of its transportation network, so it was properly paved with cobblestone, and frequent inspection parties preserved the peace of the journey.

If this were a different country, the roads likely wouldn't be paved unless it was an especially important main road. It'd be good enough if they were weeded. That would be considered relatively well managed. You'd probably also have to be on high alert for bandits

and robbers along your journey.

Cobblestone paving and maintenance cost a lot of effort and money. As a fellow government official, Zen admired the hard work and attentiveness of the prefectural government offices for not neglecting it despite being so far out in the country.

Well, at least, he admired it to a *point*.

What changed his mind was what happened when they entered Alona after crossing the Talum Mountain that served as the prefectural border.

Zen was startled several times as the swaying carriage jolted with a loud *thunk* sound. He was enjoying his time chatting with Elysia and Mina, yet every time that happened, it put a damper on the fun.

Each time, when he looked out the small rear window, he could see that the wheels had run over some turned-up cobblestone or large crack. It was proof that the highway wasn't being well maintained.

Still, other than those times, the road wasn't showing its age so much as to be noticeable. That meant it'd probably only been a year or two since the prefecture had started neglecting its repairs. Zen made this guess based on his experience working at the Highway Bureau in the Public Works Agency.

There aren't a lot of tax funds to work with, especially all the way out here. This might be on an acceptable level...

The road was perfectly maintained on the side that was under Nazalf Prefecture's jurisdiction, though, which Cummel ruled over. It was hard not to doubt the abilities of the Alona Prefectural Government Office—and by extension, the current prefectural governor Stoga—in comparison.

No. That's really unacceptable of me. I'm too preoccupied by my prejudice toward His Excellency Stoga for being selected by the current emperor and not Heinri. When it comes to this road, I should focus on praising His Excellency Cummel instead of complaining. It might be harsh to expect too much in this remote region.

As he became aware of his unpleasant feelings, he pushed them down, and the carriage reached town.

It was South Talum, the third biggest town in Alona Prefecture. It

had a population of about fifteen hundred.

Just before they arrived, Keel deftly got off the roof. When Zen opened the door for him, the wolf skillfully slipped into the passenger car while it was still in motion. It'd be cramped for a short while, but his giant body would've stood out and frightened the townspeople. There was nothing else they could do. They also planned to have Keel continue to hide here until nightfall, when they could sneak him into the inn room.

The inn that Cummel had prepared was the best one in town. That'd gone for the inn yesterday too; His Excellency had splurged a good amount of money on their travel expenses. (Well, if an important person such as himself had been the one visiting, he probably would've had to spend ten times as much for the large number of people he'd have had to take along.)

In the large, three-story building, they were guided to the spacious corner room on the third floor. "This is the best room in the inn."

It was honestly a bit lacking just by sheer virtue of the view outside the window. You could only gaze at the crude inns in the surrounding area and the rural landscape of the suburbs. However, the furnishings were something pretty special.

In particular, the four canopy beds were such that would normally be used for nobility in foreign countries. They were large and first-class. The partitioning screen in the middle of the room offered privacy between the genders.

Although it was certainly much better than going on foot, even just being jostled by the carriage for so long had tired them. Zen promptly sprawled out on the bed with relief. It probably wasn't even four o'clock yet.

It was common sense to find an inn town to stop at before sunset. No matter how safe the empire's highways were, it got risky the moment it got dark. There were many potential dangers out there like robbers and wolves.

And at this hour that was so early that it wasn't time for dinner yet, this inn came with a massage service. Three ladies of various ages came to massage them as they lay on their beds.

When they massaged Zen's muscles that were sore from sitting so long, like his lower back, his thighs, and his calves, he felt indescribably good.

Aah, I feel like I could meeelt! Zen bit back the weird voice he'd nearly let out.

Meanwhile, he kept hearing Elysia giggle beyond the partition. It seemed she felt more ticklish than good.

She's so young... Now that he thought about it, Zen himself hadn't needed massages when he'd been a teen. Lucky.

After their massages had concluded and the women had left, an employee came in to call the three of them to dinner.

They were getting a good appetite going now that their circulation had improved. As they all headed to the dining hall together, Elysia asked, "What delicious things is this area known for, father?"

"We'll find out soon enough." Although Zen had been in the Commercial Affairs Agency, he obviously couldn't know the products of each and every town in the countryside (unless it was something especially famous). However, they'd probably be listed on the menu, and he felt that the real pleasure of the trip was to find out. But that was when Mina spoke up.

"I think you'll be left speechless." With Mina slumping her shoulders, Zen suddenly felt uneasy. Last year, when she'd attended Stoga's birthday party with Cummel, they'd also used this inn to travel to and from the event.

Sure enough, she was right.

They were seated in a dining hall with a refined atmosphere. It didn't compare to the restaurants of the imperial capital, sure, but the table and service were brimming with a high-class feel.

And then, after partaking in lots of delicious salt-grilled local chicken and local grape wines, he let his guard down, thinking that his worries had been unfounded. However, that was when *it* was brought in.

"This is our restaurant's specialty. It uses this town's local delicacy." A smiling young waiter served them a hot pot dish. The main ingredients were loach fishes that'd been caught in the

swamps of the surrounding area. The loaches, each about the size of a pinkie finger, were brought out in a large pot of grape wine, swimming together until the fire boiled them alive right there at the table.

The three of them were all undoubtedly at a loss for words.

Truly, the act of eating animals meant taking life. But was it too much to not want them to show such a cruel cooking method?

"There were a decent number of people who found this interesting when we came here last year, but..." Mina mumbled.

"I see. It seems this is great entertainment for some people," Zen murmured. In that case, was it narrow-minded to criticize this cooking method?

As the group of loaches violently writhed around inside the boiling pot before his eyes, Zen felt ashamed at his ignorance. Now, whether that gave him an appetite was a different story!

With disappointment written on their faces, they partook in the wine-boiled loaches.

It's so fishy and smells of mud... I really can't think this is tasty... Zen thought glumly. Freshwater fish was eaten in both the imperial capital and Todd Village, but Zen, who should've become used to the taste of freshwater fish, was at a loss. It made him consider being honest and asking the waiters to just serve him an eel or something.

It was possible that there wasn't anything wrong with loaches as an ingredient in itself, and that it was only his horrible first impression that had affected his perception of them.

"W-Well, father, I'm sure this will become a fond memory to look back on..." Elysia murmured.

"Ha ha ha... You're so mature, Elysia..." Immediately finding the positives was one of her good points. Or maybe she had just been raised differently. After all, in the inner palace, if the imperial family wasn't careful and let out their complaints, the court ladies taking care of them would be given a good scolding by their superiors. In the worst-case scenario, they'd be fired.

And naturally, when it rains, it pours.

A drunken patron in his forties just happened to pass by Zen's table. It seemed he'd just returned from the bathroom.

He paused with a look that said, *Oh, what do we have here?* Elysia's and Mina's good looks had caught his eye.

With a vulgar grin, he rudely barged in, and with a somewhat pretentious, overfamiliar way of speaking, he asked, "You on a trip, ladies? Welcome to South Talum! I'll treat you to a drink to welcome you, so why don't you join us?" He pointed to a table in the very back.

Zen hadn't particularly been paying them any mind, but the group sitting there was a bunch of hard drinkers making a huge ruckus. They were significantly ruining the mood of the fancy restaurant.

"No thank you."

"We're fine."

"Come now, don't be like that. It'll be a good time," the man insisted.

Elysia and Mina had curtly turned him down, but he annoyingly persisted. It was the arrogance of someone who refused to read the room and realize he was causing trouble. He was speaking in a way that made it clear he thought himself sophisticated despite doing vulgar things. These were both attributes of a specific kind of person Zen was very familiar with.

The man once again pointed to his table and said, "That man over there is Sir Palk, who manages the town hall."

We really are in the same line of business... Zen resisted the urge to click his tongue. Everyone at that table in the back causing a ruckus were probably this town's government officials, including this man. There was a lamentable number of people in the government who were of this personality type. They misunderstood themselves as the rulers of Catalan, a country without a nobility class and whose government was run by bureaucrats.

In the end, we're all at the emperor's beck and call, though. In this era, they still didn't have the general concept of public servants, but this mindset of Zen's was exactly what was desired in a government official. However, these countryside officials were ignorant, their mindset completely on the opposite end.

"Sir Palk is an elite among the elites. He's a central bureaucrat who was temporarily transferred here to build up his career. Man,

but maybe this kind of talk is difficult for you girls to understand. Ha ha ha!" The man bragged as if it were his own accomplishment and talked down to the girls without knowing Elysia's true identity.

He kept talking. "There's no harm in becoming acquainted with Sir Palk for just a moment of your trip, is there? The opposite is true, if anything. You wanna leave South Talum in a good mood, don't you?"

Man, he's just threatening them in the end. What a rotten personality.

Now put in an unhappy mood, Zen had just about had it. He mulled over what he should do. However, someone hurried over from the other side of the restaurant to deal with the man.

A waitress who was younger and more formal-looking even among the other waitresses came out to rein in the countryside government official. "Dear customer... I'll keep you company for a drink, so please stop calling out to the other customers."

"Ha ha ha! Why didn't you say so? Ha ha ha!" With the official in good spirits, he returned to the back table as he rubbed the waitress's backside.

Even as she endured that unpleasant experience, the waitress looked back at Zen's table for an instant and bowed her head as if saying, *I'm sorry for the inconvenience.* The professionalism was admirable.

As she was made to sit by that Palk fellow, the countryside officials had her pour them drinks.

In this world, it wasn't uncommon for there to be establishments where women had to entertain customers, but this restaurant shouldn't fall into that category. Those government officials were throwing their weight around as if they owned the place.

With a great sigh, Zen called out to the eldest waiter who was working. "Excuse me, there's something I'd like to ask."

"Of course," he replied. "What is it?"

"Do those guys over there come here often?"

"Indeed. They're regulars."

Zen had guessed correctly that they would probably frequent the best restaurant (aside from the loaches) in the best inn in town.

"But they're behind on their payments, I imagine."

The waiter of course didn't say anything, but his face betrayed the affirmative. This was also exactly what Zen had guessed.

Central bureaucrat or not, if Palk was on a temporary transfer, he'd be receiving a salary befitting of a town hall official in a remote region. Needless to say, that went for the countryside officials that were his followers too. There was no way they had the financial ability to visit a high-class restaurant like this.

For the most part, they were probably threatening this establishment while abusing their authority, saying stuff like "We can take away your business license if you go against us."

"And they aren't *just* eating without paying. They demand bribes from you periodically too, don't they?"

He kept silent again, but Zen could guess the answer by his pale face.

What typical corrupt officials. Zen couldn't help his anger. They were a hopeless bunch. This establishment was likely not the only victim of their crimes either. He had to deal with them somehow as soon as possible.

Yes, although this wasn't his duty, he couldn't turn a blind eye. He thanked the waiter and stood up.

"Sorry, you two. I'm gonna go over there for a bit." After giving Elysia and Mina a heads-up, he casually headed to the table in the back. Then he leaned down next to Palk, who eyed him with suspicion, and softly whispered in his ear.

"Say what?! I-I mean, what did you say?!" the man reflexively shrieked and half rose to his feet. His followers were surprised and seemed puzzled, but Palk didn't have the luxury to pay them any mind.

He stared at Zen, trying to figure out his true identity. However, as Zen continued to whisper in his ear, his drunken-red face turned pale.

"E-Excuse me." He then turned tail and hurriedly left the restaurant, leaving behind his subordinates. Immediately afterward, he quickly came back and paid for the food and drink for the day.

Despite not understanding what was going on, his followers at

least figured they couldn't leave their superior alone. With that in mind, they followed after him with tilted heads.

Zen and the waitress who had been pouring them alcohol were left behind.

"Wh-What on earth happened?" She looked like she'd just been bewitched by a fairy.

"Well, it's like that saying: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. An injustice for an injustice..." he answered tartly.

As he thought about how it served them right, he looked at the waitress awkwardly and said, "At any rate, I don't think they'll stir up trouble anymore."

After dinner had ended and they'd returned to their room, Elysia and Mina asked impatiently:

"Tell me how you did it please, father."

"How did you chase off that wicked bunch? And so skillfully too."

"It wasn't that skillful. I just couldn't ignore it." Zen once again looked awkward. By this time, the sun had already set, and they'd quietly invited Keel in through the window.

It looked like Keel wanted to say, *What did you do* now*?* but he didn't say anything since Mina was there.

Zen guessed what he was feeling and only rebutted with a silent, *What do you mean* now*?*

After that, as Zen fed Keel his dinner of plenty of grilled chicken, which he'd procured with the excuse of a late-night snack, he answered their questions.

He slumped his shoulders since it wasn't something he was proud of. "I only 'informed' him that a tax inspector from the Police Agency has come to look into his corruption."

"But that's a lie."

"It's not like I said *I* was the tax inspector. It doesn't *technically* count as identity fraud! I'd win in a trial!" Zen explained desperately, but internally, he was thinking, *Granted, that doesn't change the fact that a lie is a lie.*

Meanwhile, while looking half astonished and half impressed, Mina said, "I'm surprised that Palk fellow believed you. You didn't

even have proof."

"Being a central bureaucrat is in itself a position," he explained, "so they have particular expressions and mannerisms. The peculiarities of people from the Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Military Affairs are particularly strong." And Zen had actually been in the Inspection Bureau in the Ministry of Justice. Rather than just impersonating one, he actually *had* formerly been a tax inspector. It was because Palk was a central bureaucrat that he could sense when someone was the real deal. So that was all the more reason he'd fallen into Zen's trap and come to a misunderstanding.

That wasn't to mention that this was a remote region. It was stranger to think that there were people just popping up who could pretend to be a tax inspector from the head offices. Zen had just happened to be present.

"Palk is probably desperate to figure out how to cover up his corruption right about now," he said.

"Like how?"

"If he can clear the debts he's racked up and pay back the bribes he's taken, he can insist that he didn't mean to do what he did, and that it'd all been a misunderstanding. Depending on the judge, he could be found not at fault." However, Zen wasn't actually a tax inspector, and Palk wouldn't be made to stand at the witness stand either.

"If he settles what he's done in his past and lays low from now on, it'll help the people of South Talum. I have to consider this good enough for now."

Zen didn't have further authority to do anything else. He intended to report about it to Cummel, but Cummel couldn't meddle in another prefecture's government. Thus, as things stood now, this incident was over.

Zen felt there was another, deeper problem buried under it, though.

"How are they allowing guys like them to run loose? What is the state of law and order here?"

"There are no corrupt officials in Nazalf!" Mina exclaimed. "I mean, it's not like they don't exist, but His Excellency Cummel is

always keeping a watchful eye, and he strictly punishes any mischief no matter how small."

"Indeed," said Zen. "Realistically, I don't think it's possible to one hundred percent wipe out corruption." What was important was the hard work of the statesmen and getting that number close enough to zero. The statesmen had to habitually make sure that the government officials under them were aware of the high risks associated with having a hand in corruption, and that you couldn't easily get away with it. They had to instill a respect for the law that wasn't just lip service. *That* was law and order.

"The empire's bureaucracy is functioning almost perfectly. That goes for where we are now, one hundred years after its founding," Zen proudly declared. It was the result of all the previous emperors' hard work and self-discipline. By extension, it was thanks to the feeling of dread they felt toward the golden dragon god Catal Catalana, who was the guardian of the empire.

The first emperor Julian had entrusted his will to that well-known dragon king. *"If you one day deem that the imperial family no longer has any right to rule over Catalan, I want you to destroy my descendants with your godly powers."*

"However, it's impossible to think that everything is perfect," Zen continued. "The data sadly says that the farther you get from the imperial capital, the more difficult it is to keep an eye on things. Law and order loosens and corrupt government officials increase in number. It doesn't matter how brilliant the central tax inspectors are. It exists as a certainty."

It was rare to see a case like Nazalf that remained clear of corruption all the way from the prefectural government office down to the village town halls, which was thanks to Cummel's virtuous nature and astuteness.

On the other hand, what about Alona? Following what that data said, could it not be helped that corrupt government officials existed here?

Maybe not, but there was still the question of the degree.

"It's unbelievable that in a big town like this, they overlook such brazenly corrupt people working at the top," he said. This was the

very definition of detestable.

Zen continued to explain the situation carefully to Elysia, who was sitting beside the bed. "You see, I don't think there's anything more detestable than corrupt government officials."

He of course didn't approve of ordinary criminals like bandits either; however, the damage they caused was nothing compared to what the abuse of government authority could do.

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Zen reflected back on when he'd just been assigned to the Inspection Bureau in the Police Agency. He'd been twenty-four years old, and Aness and Heinri had still been alive.

Zen was a close friend of the emperor and empress, as well as a member of the Leadon family, so the chief of the Inspection Bureau had high hopes for Zen despite the fact that he hadn't moved up even once in his career. Thus, the Inspection Bureau chief made an arrangement for him.

"I'll assign you to one of our highly skilled tax inspectors, so I want you to learn all you can from her."

This new boss he was assigned to was fifty years old and had definitely been in the business a while.

"We don't have enough people to take it easy and train you," she said. "Learn as you go."

So he was taken on an undercover investigation right away. Their destination was the state of Teshtorya, two states away from the imperial capital.

His boss explained to him that they didn't have a particular target; this undercover investigation was part of the surprise audits they carried out periodically all over the country.

It was an unenviable job. Central bureaucrats from the other ministries would loathe having to go somewhere so far away, complaining that it was like they were barnstorming. However, the Inspection Bureau was full of serious and honest government officials who didn't shy away from doing what needed to be done.

His boss was in such good physical shape, you wouldn't think she

was fifty years old. In good spirits, Zen went with her into Teshtorya.

"We'll visit the state government office and audit their account books later. First, we blend into the streets and gather information about any government officials who are doing unusually well for themselves."

At his boss's suggestion, they decided to pose as mother and son for the duration of the trip. They stayed in the state capital for many days, moving from place to place. Before long, they zeroed in on a minor government official named Beton.

Beton was a mid-rank employee in the Public Works Department, and he spent time with some notorious hoodlums in secret.

Moreover, thanks to a population increase, a certain village had been promoted to a "town," and a plan was in progress to repair and expand the countryside road that connected it to the state capital. Beton had leaked that plan to gangsters in return for a bribe.

The gangsters had then bought up plots of land all along that road at cheap prices, with the intent to demand lots of money from the Teshtorya State Government Office as compensation for being evicted when construction began.

After looking into him, his boss took Beton to an inn and interrogated him. Of course, Beton acted like he was completely unaware at first.

Then Zen's boss said, "Sorry, but we don't have time for this," and suddenly threw a punch in his face.

She smashed Beton's front teeth, her arm power so strong that it amazed Zen. Where did a middle-aged woman get that kind of strength?

Unable to bear the pain, Beton confessed his crime.

"I just did it impulsively. Please forgive me," he apologized, pressing his forehead to the floor.

However, as his boss pressed her foot down on the back of Beton's head, she said, "What the hell are you saying? Corrupt government officials must be hanged for their crimes. That's been a given in Catalan since long ago."

He sharply raised his head, his face turning a pitiful shade of white. "I-I didn't know that. My chief never said anything like that!"

Regardless, it was true that in the empire, punishment by hanging was the law for corruption. He couldn't get out of it by saying he didn't know.

"Huh. By your chief, you mean the one in charge of the Public Works Department, right? What did he tell you?"

"He said that he'd show me a good way to make some pocket money and that we could split the profits seven to three. He told me no one would find out anyway, and even if we were caught, all we'd have to do is pay a fine and everything would be all right!"

"There was no way that was true, yet you let yourself be wheedled into it. Ignorance truly is a sin," she spat. Zen, who'd been silently listening next to her, was dumbfounded too.

Beton wailed like a child. He cried, "I've reflected on myself! I won't ever do it again! So please spare my life!" but all Zen's boss did was shake her head.

"Catalan never forgives the corruption of government officials. Never," she said grimly.

"Please make an exception! Please, I'm begging you, please..."

With the authority Zen's boss held as a tax inspector, she decided to offer up a plea bargain. "In that case, give me a list of all the corrupt officials you know of. I'll see if I can at least spare your life then. You might even get away with just some forced labor in the mines as punishment."

With Beton's back against the wall, he sang like a canary.

To collect evidence regarding the information he'd told her and dig into it further, Zen's boss diligently continued her secret investigation of the Teshtorya State Government Office. Zen absorbed her methods and stood at her beck and call as she unearthed corruption after corruption.

The chief of the Financial Affairs Department had been the first to fall into corruption. He'd been embezzling public funds, which came out of taxpayers' hard-earned money.

Then he conspired with four other department chiefs who were his friends, which included the Public Works Department chief, and they continued their corrupt deeds. They accommodated corrupt merchants and gangsters, giving them special privileges and taking

bribes as payment.

On top of that, they chose ignorant subordinates like Beton and dragged them into their circle of accomplices, framing them as the perpetrators. The department chiefs only took a portion of the money and made it so that, like a lizard with its tail, they could cut them off at any time to save themselves. Of course, those subordinates hadn't been questioned before until today.

There was a Tax Inspection Department within the state government office, but that department chief was an accomplice too.

"The corruption those officials are causing from their positions is despicable!" his boss exclaimed. "Even bandits and brigands put their lives on the line when they're committing their crimes."

And now here was the reason that not even a small act of corruption could be overlooked.

When government officials abused their authority by committing corrupt deeds, they could manage some powerful risk control—like taking the teeth out of audits and the administration of justice, for instance. With that, they'd get full of themselves and soon normalize their corruption.

The moment even minor acts of corruption were overlooked as unimportant, those officials would gather more accomplices and eventually become one powerful force, impossible to control.

It was the same in Teshtorya. Unless they were stopped, it was only a matter of time before, even if the wrongdoings of the Financial Affairs Department chief and his accomplices came to light, not even the state governor would be able to oppose their corrupt party without fear of assassination. If things came to that, rather than fighting, the state governor might choose to become complicit instead.

Then those corrupt officials would erode governmental authority and rot away the roots of the administrative organization itself. It was the complete opposite of what they were supposed to do—shoulder the burden of the whole world and the country.

"Before Catalan, there were many similar countries who operated under a centralized government where bureaucrats worked at the emperor's beck and call. They had strong national policies, and it

was a given for those countries to become great or powerful," his boss said with a pained expression as they were returning to the imperial capital. It was after they'd finished investigating Teshtorya. She didn't feel satisfied with the work she'd done.

The state government office had decayed so greatly that, upon taking into account the potential dangers, they'd given up their plans of revealing their identities as tax inspectors and conducting an audit of the state books. They'd leave that inspection to the Police Agency, which possessed military power, while they were forced to back off after only conducting their secret investigation.

His boss wasn't someone who cared much about achievements, but she couldn't forgive her own powerlessness.

She continued. "However, not a single one of those countries remain. At the very least, they don't exist in the western region of the continent where we are."

Those countries had all met the same fate and fallen into ruins.

"As the enforcement of law and order loosened, the government officials, who'd received their authority from their emperor, began corrupting from the top down. The power structure decayed. These countries should've been great, but the decay ate them from the inside, and the nations' power itself declined. Without exception, this chain of events happened to every one of those countries. They repeated the same despicable and foolish acts."

After a pause, Zen spoke up. "Yes. It's exactly as you said."

His boss barked a laugh. "Hah! I guess you don't need this kind of lecture. You passed the Advanced Civil Service Exam, after all."

"If you want to drown your sorrows over this, I'll accompany you for as long as you want, you know?"

"You're ten years too early to be doing that, you little devil." She suddenly slapped his back, and Zen held back a wry smile.

However, even if she wasn't satisfied with what they'd accomplished, her investigation report had undoubtedly been useful, and the Teshtorya State Government Office was later purified.

The Director General of the Police Agency took the matter seriously, and under his strong leadership, a larger-scale investigation was conducted, and the corrupt government officials

were purged. It again proved that law and order remained intact in Catalan, and it was likely a relief for Zen's closest friends, the emperor and empress.

Still, Zen looked at this all from another angle.

It could be said that the Inspection Bureau, which was filled with many excellent tax inspectors like his boss, was the pride of the empire, and the bureau's ability to function correctly was because of the bureau chief and their capabilities. By extension, it was thanks to the keen eye of the Director General of the Police Agency that had appointed that bureau chief.

And even further, the Director General of the Police Agency, who was an elderly person known for his devout loyalty to the imperial family, had been handpicked personally by Heinri and his father.

It wasn't due to any clever techniques that the empire succeeded where the others had failed. It was extremely difficult to ascertain what people were suited for, give them the appropriate posts, and have them fully show what they were capable of. However, the ceaseless hard work of the previous emperors had made it possible to achieve. They'd made it so that Catalan would never tread the same path as those fallen countries.

Elysia listened intently to Zen's long story. Mina had been listening with interest until partway through, but as the night grew late, she couldn't stay awake anymore and fell asleep.

Zen decided it was about time to wrap up his lecture. "Of course, the reason Catalan can remain special today is certainly in part because of the intimidating golden dragon divine god that is keeping an eye on the imperial family. However, the previous emperors' hard work and the value of their efforts haven't faded away either. You really have to admire that."

"Sir Cummel must be going through great pains to keep Nazalf Prefecture free of corrupt officials too..."

"And for the emperor, the scale extends to the whole nation. Saying it's ten times more difficult is an understatement."

However, Heinri had done it. That was why Zen wanted Elysia to carry on that legacy when she was crowned empress one day, even

if it was an unfair thing to put on this still-fourteen-year-old girl.

I'll do everything I can to support her, Zen thought to himself, looking at Elysia. He felt like he was praying.

Did his feelings reach her?

"I'll never forget what you've taught me," Elysia said, resolute, clenching her fists on her knees. As the next empress, she was incredibly dependable.

Now, how about you, Your Majesty the Emperor? The new prefectural governor Stoga was overlooking corrupt government officials like Palk. It'd been the current emperor Jemma II who'd selected him. Did Jemma II understand the hard work and powerful determination of his ancestors?

The night drew on, and while Zen's irritated feelings continued to bubble up inside him, he climbed into bed. The reason he struggled to fall asleep was probably not the muddy loaches in his stomach.

Chapter 4: Eat! Drink! And Doubt?!

It was the third day of the trip. The carriage finally arrived in Alona City before sunset.

"I'm glad nothing happened along the way. Let's relax and do some sightseeing for the next two days just like we planned," said Mina.

Zen and Elysia were delighted, though after Keel had climbed into the carriage to avoid scaring the citizens, his giant body had wound up halfway on top of them, so their smiles were slightly strained.

Alona City had a population of about three thousand. According to Catalan's categorization of administrative districts, it was a small city that just barely met the requirements to be designated as such.

Nazalf Prefecture was along the Ezwaz Highway, which was an important traffic route between the north and south, and it was blessed with land and maritime trade since it also faced out onto the Giovanni Sea. In comparison, the scale of Alona Prefecture was more appropriate for a remote region.

Not only was it a place filled with forests, it also had many marshes that hindered its growth. However, that made it suitable for the cultivation of rice, which had long sustained the population, and animals like birds and freshwater fish were caught in abundance in the marshes on the outskirts of the city.

That meant that, even if they weren't economically wealthy, they didn't struggle for food.

Zen, Elysia, and Mina noticed something as their carriage headed down the main street in Alona City.

The city was alive with many stalls, street performers, and troubadours uncommon for this remote country, as well as people distributing sweets to children.

"Is this a festival?" Zen wondered.

"Do you know about this, Miss Mina?" asked Elysia.

“Well... This didn’t happen last year.” Mina cocked her head, puzzled. If this was a long-established festival, then it was definitely strange that it hadn’t been there last year.

They ascertained the reason after arriving at the inn.

“The festival to celebrate the prefectural governor’s birthday started yesterday,” a young female employee told them as she guided them to their room.

Stoga had taken up his post shortly before this time last year, so he’d just let the opportunity pass by, but this year, he’d sent notices in advance to the citizens. With the prefectural government office spearheading the event, they’d made the preparations to organize this festival.

“I see,” Zen said, showing that he was listening while taking care to not make his voice sound strained. To be honest, he felt conflicted.

If Stoga had been a noble, it wouldn’t have been unusual to hold a festival in his dominion and have his citizens celebrate his birthday on a grand scale.

However, as a prefectural governor, he was a government official. It was questionable for him to imitate a noble. There were limits to how desperate for attention you should be.

While even more unpleasant feelings bubbled up inside Zen, the woman gave him some unexpected information.

“The new prefectural governor is popular, so everyone is happy to celebrate him.”

“He’s popular?”

“Yes. Taxes have become much lower since he was appointed, making everyone’s lives easier. Also, they all like how lively things are with festivals being held whenever there’s an opportunity—like the one we’re having now.”

“I see...” This time, his tone had gone flat, and he had to cordially correct himself and say, “I mean, that makes sense.”

Elysia looked inquisitive, seeming to catch this subtle nuance, but she didn’t voice her question aloud.

For now, the three of them arrived at their room. (Incidentally, they’d reconvene with Keel later as usual. They’d had the inn take

care of their carriage, and the coachman would stay at another reasonably priced accommodation.)

This inn they'd be staying at for four days in Alona City was leagues more luxurious than the one they'd stayed in yesterday. It had once been a noble's estate and garden before Catalan's founding and had been reformed many times until it had become the inn it was today.

This was obviously the best inn in town. In addition to its gorgeous appearance and interior design, its historical feel and style were impressive.

In particular, the entire fifth floor, which was the topmost floor of the building, was a multibedroom suite that Cummel had gone out of his way to reserve for them. There was one bedroom per person, and you could relax in the communal living and dining rooms.

The view of the garden from the windows was also incredible. There was such a splendid array of color in the flower beds, it made it difficult to believe it was winter. It also made it easy to forget that this was actually a city.

Granted, this place was located a fair distance from the center of the city, and whether guests considered it inconvenient or peaceful depended on their preferences. Zen was of the latter opinion, so he liked it a lot.

"They'll make dinner in our room, so we can take it easy and enjoy," said Mina, who'd stayed here last year.

"Wow! That's great!" Zen exclaimed.

"That means we won't need to worry about getting involved with strange people again," Elysia chimed in.

Zen and Elysia were pleased. Tasty food was an important part of enjoying a trip. Aside from the last dish of loaches, everything had been delicious at the inn yesterday, but there was a special vibe about this inn that made them feel like they could expect something even better.

"This city has many local specialties too," Zen explained. "The marshes nearby are blessed with nature. I heard the waterfowl you can catch there, like ducks and sandpipers, as well as an endemic carp species called Alona carp are extremely delicious. I think you

can catch blue cranes too, though hunting them is normally prohibited."

Elysia listened keenly with her eyes sparkling at Zen's great knowledge. However, knowledge was only just that. They wanted to get a real taste for themselves too.

While they waited for the spread of exciting new dishes to appear on the dining table tonight, they invited Keel in through the window.

"I've told the inn about Sir Keel, so he can move around freely on this floor," Mina explained to Zen as she brushed Keel's bushy white fur. She'd taken care to ensure that the chef who'd come to make their daily meals and the employees who'd enter to clean wouldn't be paralyzed in fear upon seeing the enormous wolf. It was a huge relief that they wouldn't have to hide him every time someone came in. And Keel himself was probably happy to be able to have a good sleep wherever and whenever he wanted.

"However... I do apologize. I thought they'd definitely be frightened if I told them he was a wolf, so I said he was a dog. I hope that doesn't offend you, Sir Keel." She sincerely apologized to Keel like she was talking to a human as she stroked the back of his ears.

As if Keel were saying, *I don't mind, and you shouldn't either*, he licked her cheek in an understanding way. It probably tickled; Mina laughed innocently.

Well, Keel is actually a vanargand anyway. If he got offended over things like that, then even claiming he's a wolf would be an insult.

However, Keel was smart, and although he was still an immature vanargand, he was mentally an adult. No matter what people thought he was, he wouldn't bat an eye.

Mina's thoughtfulness and the lie she told had probably been the right decision.

"Eek! I was told you had a large pup, but I didn't think it would be this big..." The young chef who'd been called upon to cook for them stiffened at the sight of Keel. Mina was probably right that if he'd been told that Keel was a wolf and not a dog, he'd have been paralyzed on the floor with fear.

In any case, once he recovered from the shock, he quickly started

preparing dinner. There was a simple kitchen next to the dining room in the suite, and a waiter and waitress rolled in tableware and ingredients on a service cart.

The ingredients had already been prepped, so all that was left to do was cook them and dish them right out onto the table. This was where the chef would work his magic.

As expected, in almost no time at all, they began to present the three of them with plate after plate, starting with the appetizers. As Zen, Elysia, and Mina sat at the antique table in the dining room, they dug in.

The waiter put a large plate with a giant roasted bird on the floor. It seemed the chef had prepared a meat dish for Keel in advance, and the wolf gnawed on it, looking like he was enjoying it.

"Good for you, Keel. That's a filling meal." Elysia briefly put down her knife and fork, watching Keel eat with a smile.

Meanwhile, Zen had also stopped eating and was looking over at Keel. He was frozen, his utensils still in his hands.

Why is it so big? What kind of bird is that...? He couldn't help his concern. There was no way it was a chicken or a duck. Compared to those, it was such a ridiculously huge size that it felt like a joke.

Swans inhabited the marshes on Alona's outskirts, so he thought that was what it was at first.

However, upon digging through his memories, it looked even larger than those in the flock they'd happened to spot the day before yesterday on their journey.

There's no way... He swallowed back those words. He had a bad feeling about this.

Zen stared intently at the roasted bird, and the waiter, who noticed him, said with a smile, "For the main dish, we've prepared an especially famed delicacy even among all of Alona's specialties—a whole roasted blue crane."

I thought so! Zen thought indignantly, his suspicions proven right.

Blue cranes were the largest birds among the empire's native species, measuring one hundred and sixty centimeters long on average. There were four other species of crane that crossed over

Catalan depending on the season, but blue cranes were said to be nearly twenty centimeters bigger since their habitat was the same all year round. On top of having a great deal of meat on them, they were also extremely delicious.

However, they only inhabited a small part of the marshes in the empire's southern region. Fearing that they'd be hunted to extinction, the third emperor, Emperor Carls, had prohibited people from hunting them.

Then, during the eighth emperor Luke's reign, it was determined that their population had recovered, and the ban on hunting them was lifted during a certain time of year.

During the Carnival season, you were allowed to hunt them, although only with bow and arrow. You couldn't use traps. Additionally, if their meat wasn't eaten while fresh, it was still prohibited to preserve it by pickling or smoking. In Catalan, the month and day that Carnival was held depended on the region, but it was always around fall, not winter.

If that was the case, then why was Keel currently sinking his teeth into a blue crane? Wasn't it normally prohibited to hunt it?

"Man, I didn't think we'd get to eat blue crane at this time of year. We sure are lucky," Zen said, refraining from using a critical tone as much as possible. He still didn't know who was responsible, after all.

Sure enough, the waiter and waitress told him with carefree smiles:

"It's by the grace of the new prefectural governor."

"The Carnival season, which used to be only once a year, is now held once a month."

"That's why we now get to eat blue cranes every month."

That's some twisted logic. It completely misses the point of the original law. Zen was stunned. However, it was true that time and time again, twisted logic like this was tolerated in legal interpretations.

This would eventually reach the central government, and someone like the director of the Judicial Affairs Bureau would

probably tell Stoga it was a twisting of the law and warn him not to do it again—and then that'd be it.

Or perhaps news of this had already reached the central government and they hadn't really seen it as a problem. There was also the possibility that the current emperor, who'd appointed Stoga, and the prime minister had defended him, saying he'd done nothing wrong. Regardless, it didn't seem like this was something Stoga would be punished for.

"The chef put his all into preparing it, so please look forward to it."

"I'm so happy. This is my first time trying blue crane," Zen responded, smiling. Whatever he was thinking to himself, there was nothing actually wrong with this inn or this blue crane. He truly was going to eat it with pleasure.

So they all relished the splendid dishes of wild rice risotto, turtle soup, Alona carp stew, and a palate cleanser of lingonberry juice. Then at last, the whole roasted blue crane made its debut.

The chef brought it out on a service cart and carved it in front of them.

At any rate, the huge roast was incredible in appearance alone, and Zen was even more excited since he'd seen Keel get a taste of it first.

As the chef quietly set the plates in front of them, serving the blue crane with deep-fried potatoes, Zen kept his impatient heart in check. Then he used a knife and fork to take his first bite.

Delicious! For an instant, that word felt like it was going to blast out of his head. The umami packed into the blue crane meat was even stronger than duck's. It had a good texture too, with the meat neither too hard nor too soft. The sinews were fine and velvety, and the feeling of each bite was irresistible.

Because of how big the bird was, it was more like a cow than a chicken with how there was a distinct difference between the fattier parts of its body and the leaner sections. Those differences could be enjoyed, and Zen firmly preferred the less fatty parts!

More than anything, the flavor was indescribable. Unlike chicken meat, which stirred your appetite right away, the blue crane was

elegantly sweet. It had a taste that made you want more no matter how much you ate.

Th-This tastes like a sin... Zen understood that this taste would make humans go mad. He could also understand that it would spur humans to overhunt them, and without regulations in place, the blue cranes would be hunted to extinction. He understood this way too well now. From the bottom of his heart, he felt that this one moment had made his trip to Alona worthwhile. But without Stoga's ridiculous policy, he normally wouldn't be able to eat blue crane this time of year.

While his chest stirred with some unpleasant emotions, he couldn't stop cutting the meat with his knife.

The taste of sin...

On that day, until the moment he fell asleep, Zen was a philosopher.

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The next morning, Zen stood at the entrance of the inn as he saw Elysia and Mina off in a carriage. They were going to get their dresses prepared for the party that was being held the day after tomorrow.

In the western region of this continent, a custom from old times dictated that men wore formal suits and women wore dresses for events like soirees and banquets. Catalan was no exception.

They had a peculiar culture by which it was fashionable to wear a different dress every time there was a party, and that it was gauche to wear your best clothes repeatedly until they wore out.

In short, craftsmen would custom-make these extremely expensive silk dresses, adorning them with extravagant lace and embroidery and sometimes even gems, only for the dresses to be thrown away after being worn only once.

The problem here was that Catalan's upper class consisted of bureaucrats, not nobility. Aside from those of similar backgrounds to the powerful Leadon family, who'd produced ministers for four generations in a row, a normal bureaucrat didn't have many assets.

Of course, the empire did pay them wages appropriate to their positions—if anything, they were generous.

Take Cummel, for example. As one would expect of a prefectural governor, who sat at the top of the local government hierarchy, he received a good enough salary to buy a vacation home and employ a family of caretakers for it. He'd also easily thrown his pocket money into Elysia and Keel's expenses on this luxurious trip (although Zen still thought they were being covered by public funds).

However, Cummel was only considered "moderately" rich. The financial power he held was nothing compared to that of aristocrats, who extracted immense amounts of taxes from the citizens in their territories. The money they had was on a whole different level.

Thus, for the bureaucrats of this country, having one dress made was already expensive enough, but ordering a new one for every party became an extravagance that really stretched their finances thin. That was when the dress rental business developed in Catalan.

In the empire, if a settlement was big enough to be considered a city, it'd definitely have at least one dress rental store.

Naturally, renting one was way cheaper than having something custom-made, and you could comfortably change from dress to dress even on a bureaucrat's salary. It was a price point that satisfied those who needed dresses for official business, like Zen's group, and those who just needed them for entertainment purposes.

Because of that, Mina had used Alona City's dress rental store last year, and she had agreed to take Elysia there with her this time.

During breakfast, Elysia had teased Zen. "Are you not going to choose my dress, father?"

"You shouldn't care about what your father wants. Wear what you'd like," he said, making a plausible excuse. He was actually reluctant because he felt that women took forever to choose clothes; Sharla had put him through enough of that pain. However, he felt like Elysia saw right through him.

I'm not a real father after all. Sorry. He internally repeated his sad excuses. Well, he didn't know that a majority of fathers were in the same boat, reluctant to accompany their daughters shopping for that very reason.

"Have fun. Remember to be thankful to Miss Mina for showing you the way, and to His Excellency Cummel for covering the costs."

"Yes, father."

After he said some fatherly words to put up a good front, he saw Elysia and Mina off as their carriage departed, waiting until he couldn't see them anymore.

Now then, we'll be heading out too! Zen happily headed for the rear garden. Any father out there would probably be overjoyed to finally get some me-time.

There was a well-equipped stable in the back, which housed the guests' carriages as well as the inn's own horses. The inn managed everything there, of course.

A carriage was on standby there with Keel already waiting inside.

Incidentally, the carriage that Elysia and Mina had just taken had been provided by the inn as well, a convenience offered to guests since the inn was a fair distance from the city center. The carriage in front of Zen right now was the one they'd taken from Nazalf.

He was very familiar with the coachman by now, so Zen cheerfully said, "Let's get going, please." He'd already told the coachman the destination.

Zen was going out to the marshes on the city outskirts to catch carp!

He knew Elysia thought that while fishing was something he really loved, he was also extremely horrible at it. But he just couldn't give up this hobby.

"Alona carp are delicious, but it seems they're well-known for being fun to catch too," said Zen. The stew at last night's dinner had been perfection. It'd been upstaged by the blue crane, though.

"*I've heard that too. Kulzawa was grumbling to no end about how jealous he was that you were going to Alona.*"

Their next-door neighbor Kulzawa (Donna's husband) was Zen's fishing master, who was teaching him how to fish. In this day and age, travel was mostly a hobby for rich people. That meant that no matter how incredible Alona Prefecture was for fishing, it was pretty difficult for commoners from other areas to visit.

"I need to tell him stories of our trip when I get back."

"*You don't mean you're going to brag, do you?*"

"Ha ha. That'd upset him for sure."

As they sat inside the carriage, which was still quite cramped thanks to Keel, they continued their friendly conversation with Zen half buried under his fluffy coat.

Mina wasn't here, so he could converse with Keel without reserve (although speaking loudly enough for the coachman to hear was out of the question).

However, when they exited Alona City, the carriage started shaking the moment they started treading a small, unpaved road. If Zen wasn't careful while talking, he'd wind up biting his tongue.

After they'd both grown quiet, they reached a large fishing village. The people back at the inn had recommended it as a good place to rent fishing equipment and a boat. They probably did get a lot of customers. When he greeted the first villager he spotted, they were friendly and showed him around like they were used to it.

Although, just before that, when he and Keel first exited the carriage, the sight of this giant white wolf had caused a bit of a stir among the villagers.

At any rate, he paid the fee to borrow a fishing rod, and he also bought bait and a fishing basket.

Heh heh. I bought the biggest basket. Zen chuckled to himself. Of course, he fully intended to fill it up and take it home. Keel looked at him doubtfully, though.

Anyway, he couldn't turn back now!

"It's a good place for amateurs to fish," the villager had said, telling him of a fishing spot that was right next to the village.

It was closer to a marsh than a pond. It was so small, and the water was muddy.

There were people who'd arrived before him scattered around here and there, and from a distance, he could see that some were on small boats while others fished from the shore.

"I wonder if you can catch more fish if you go right in the middle instead of staying on the coast." Zen decided to follow what the villager had told him.

There were a number of small boats that the village collectively

owned that were docked right nearby. It seemed the village would let you borrow them for a fee.

The boat was just big enough to fit Keel and Zen together, and because of that, Zen could row it himself.

We're all set! It's time to get going!

It was his first time rowing a boat, but he immediately got the hang of it. He chose a spot around the middle of the pond (marsh?) where he figured he wouldn't get in the way of the other people fishing.

Keel was actually sensitive to the cold, and he grumbled, "*The wind is so cold...*"

"I'll catch lots of fish, and you can eat as much as you want later, so please bear with me for now," Zen comforted him while casting his rod.

"*Your persuasion falls a bit flat when you're so bad at fishing...*"

"I'm telling you, I'm going to improve eventually!" Zen objected, but Keel glared at him as if saying, *You sure are confident*.

But wouldn't you know it! After casting his line into the water, he felt something snag onto it before long.

"I got one!" Zen cried and pulled it in.

The fish that'd latched onto the bait pulled back, determined. Not only was this rascal strong, it was also thrashing around.

Zen found it so fun how the fishing line's tension conveyed the creature's struggle. However, if he pulled it in with all his strength, the line would snap. That was why he was careful with the amount of force he exerted. Then he waited for his prey to tire itself out, and...

"I got it!!!" Fishing up a splendid carp, he let out a joyful cry. The carp was much thicker than the one in last night's dinner. It continued to thrash violently, jumping and leaping in the air full of energy.

I see now. This is why this carp is so famous!

It hadn't felt like he was just fishing. It was as though he'd been in a great battle—an exchange of the utmost caliber against a formidable opponent as they fought for dominance. Zen was washed in a euphoric sense of accomplishment as he'd come out the victor

in that fight.

After he removed the hook from the Alona carp still thrashing around in the boat, Zen put it into his fishing basket like a trophy. "Did you see that, Keel? I've improved!"

"*It could be beginner's luck.*"

"Oh yeah? I'll show you that it wasn't just luck. Watch closely."

Zen once again cast his fishing line. He immediately got a bite and fished another up. He put the thrashing Alona carp into his fishing basket like a second trophy.

He threw his line out a third time. Once again, he immediately got a bite and fished another up. Into the trophy basket it went. It was a big haul!

Aah... All my efforts are finally paying off... As he fished up a fourth and a fifth fish back-to-back, he trembled with excitement. His energy was exactly the opposite of Keel's, who'd already started dozing off. (Come on, pay attention!)

Besides being a workaholic, Zen was also good at studying, but he didn't know a lot about things that were outside of books. Therefore, he was unaware that carp were gluttons, and Alona carp especially weren't cautious of fishing hooks and had a habit of biting immediately.

Moreover, while they were larger than other species of carp and stronger as a result, they also tired out quickly. Generally, anyone could easily catch them, no matter how bad they were at fishing. It also gave you the illusion that you were fighting against something really strong. That was why Alona carp were famous for being fun to fish.

However, in this world, ignorance was bliss.

"I got it! I got it! I got iiit!!!" Zen didn't even know how many fish he'd caught at this point, but he was still reeling them up one after another through his sweat and hard work (that was how Zen saw it, at least), and he couldn't keep himself from shouting.

He'd completely reverted back to a childlike innocence. He was more than just excited. Thus, he got carried away and yanked the

fishing line. The fish flew up into the air and the abrupt loss of tension made him lose his balance on the boat.

And in a stroke of bad luck, Keel shifted his position as he slept and moved his weight in the same direction. As a result of these two factors coming together, the boat completely capsized.

Aaagh?!

"*Huh?! What happened?!*"

Thrown underwater, Zen let out a soundless scream, and Keel woke up in a panic. They were desperate to get their heads out of the water, greedy for air.

As a silver lining, this region was warm, so despite being submerged in a pond (marsh?) during winter, they didn't immediately freeze to death. However, it was definitely sapping away their body heat. They couldn't stay floundering in shock forever.

They both frantically swam for shore—well, Keel was more composed. As for Zen, while Sharla had forced him to learn how to swim, hammering its importance into him, he definitely wasn't good at it. The imperial capital was located inland, and he was a young man from a good family who'd grown up in a city. He'd never spent time at rivers before and hadn't had any opportunities to swim of his own volition. He was also still fully clothed, which made it even more difficult.

The only reason he managed to reach the shore was the formidable power that manifested itself when a human's life was at risk: an adrenaline rush.

However, after they'd crawled out of the water, they were met with a new danger.

"I-It's so cold..." Zen mumbled through his chattering teeth.

"*You said you were going to let me eat my fill, but I don't think you'll be keeping that promise.*"

Zen was drenched and shuddering, and Keel gave his body a great shake, the motion flinging the muddy water from his fur. They had to go to the fishing village right away and warm themselves up.

With that thought in mind, Zen looked around to get their bearings.

"Oh my, what a disaster," said a gentle, sympathetic voice. When

Zen turned in the direction it had come from, he was met with an old man with pure white eyebrows and a long beard beckoning them.

There was an open fire burning next to where he was on the shore, dangling his fishing line, and it seemed he was inviting them to come over to it. Moreover, this was not the first time they'd met this old man.

"Y-You're...!" Zen started.

"It's been a while, Sir Zen of Todd Village. What a strange coincidence this is." Just like the last time they'd met, the old man was chuckling with a somewhat otherworldly aura.

They'd met around two months ago on the anniversary of Aness's and Heinri's deaths. Zen had failed to catch a fish to use as an offering, and this kind old man had given him a grass carp he'd caught. Zen mentally called him the fishing hermit.

"I didn't think I'd see you here!" Zen exclaimed.

"I'm a man living out a comfortable retirement. If there's a good fishing spot, I'll go there no matter where it is."

"Thank you for what you did for me back then. And here I am, troubling you once again."

"Oh, no, not at all. Now hurry up and come to the fire." This smiling fishing hermit was definitely a sweet old man.

Zen accepted his offer. Taking off his drenched coat, he went to the fire together with Keel.

The winds on the shore were cold, although not as bad as in the middle of the pond (marsh?), and he nearly let out a squeak every time it blew against his bare skin. He was really grateful for the fire in front of him.

He wrung out his coat thoroughly and spread it out to dry.

"It's good that you don't seem to be too injured, at least," said the fishing hermit.

"Yes. However, I need to apologize to the villagers later." The fishing rod was probably at the bottom of the pond (marsh?) by now, and he had to retrieve the boat, which was still floating upside down. He of course intended to compensate them for the damage he'd caused, so he hoped they would forgive him.

"I promised this guy that I'd let him eat all the carp I managed to catch later..." he lamented, referring to Keel. "Man..." What a waste.

However, the old man hummed. "Oh? But I think freshly caught carp would be too muddy to eat, even for him."

"Huh? Really?"

"You need to soak them in well water for a week to remove the mud."

"I didn't know..." Zen was very much a workaholic who was unconcerned with cooking. He felt Keel's cold stare.

"It's best to sell your day's catch to the fishing village and use the money to buy some delicious carp at one of the restaurants in town."

"I see... That's enlightening..."

"Ho ho! Calling mere fishing 'enlightening'... You're as serious as always."

Zen did have some growing to do.

The fishing hermit had a natural quality that made it so that, although he was laughing at Zen, it didn't bother him at all.

As he was warmed by the fire, he enjoyed pleasant conversation with the fishing hermit. Impressed by the elderly man's deep fishing knowledge, Zen could forget about the cold as he eagerly listened to him. Keel also started dozing off, as if lured in by the peaceful atmosphere.

Then, after Zen's body and clothes had almost dried completely, he noticed a noisy group that happened to be passing by. They all carried bows and arrows, so they were probably local hunters. They all looked pleased with themselves, their cart loaded with the many blue cranes they'd caught.

It's just... Why do I get this uncomfortable feeling...? Zen asked himself.

He'd surmised from their appearance that they were hunters, but they didn't feel like it.

For example, hunters like Gota from Todd Village had a certain vibe. They gave off an air of competence, like veterans in the field or something like that. Compared to them, these hunters seemed young and inexperienced.

If I actually look closely, they all look like teenagers. Even so, normally it'd be better for a veteran hunter or two to lead them. Didn't they want to have someone to learn from? Even if they weren't in a guild, surely there was something like a local community that could pass down techniques to the next generation.

The more I think about it, the more strange this seems... Due to the nature of his work when he'd been a central bureaucrat, he couldn't stop his habit of analyzing.

The fishing hermit probably realized what Zen was thinking. "The new prefectural governor is encouraging the youth to become hunters," he said.

"Hunters? Why?" Zen had never heard of a policy like this. He had to clarify that he'd heard correctly.

"Apparently, while these wetlands are already the perfect hunting grounds, the entirety of Alona Prefecture is overflowing with forests. It seems he feels it's best to take advantage of that."

"It's true that the southern forests of the empire are rich in resources, but..." Were there any other states or prefectures that used that reason to encourage hunting specifically?

"His Excellency likely has his reasons. While it's not a lot of money, the prefectural government office is offering grants, so there are many young people who are taking this as an opportunity to become hunters."

"So even if things don't go smoothly at first, they won't starve." That must be why, just like the group that had passed them by, they were okay not being taught by anyone. They were good so long as they managed to catch something, and it was annoying to have someone like a teacher nagging them. They wanted to take it easy and have fun hunting with their friends.

Or maybe even if they did want a leader, there weren't enough veterans to cover the sudden increase in new hunters.

To be more precise, hunters had a lot of their own regional rules —or rather, unspoken agreements. It was possible that the veterans were fed up with these crowds of ignorant youngsters coming into their hunting grounds. There might be friction between the two

groups.

"Apparently, there actually are small skirmishes here and there," said the old man. "However, the grants are given equally to experienced hunters too, so they don't complain about the prefectural governor."

"I'm sure that the fact Carnival is held every month now is not only to become popular with the citizens, but also out of consideration for the hunters too." If the veteran hunters could catch a lot of high-selling blue cranes, they'd also be happy. Even new hunters got more chances to make money. It appeared Stoga was a man who *did* think some.

However, that's precisely why I wonder why he's encouraging hunting... The unpleasant feeling in Zen's chest was increasing by the day.

As Zen frowned to himself, the fishing hermit said, "You've come all the way out here to Alona City. Why not try and enjoy fishing one more time?"

As a matter of fact, Zen would do just as the old man said.

Once his coat was dry enough to put back on, he briefly returned to the fishing village. He explained to the villagers what had happened, reimbursed them for the damages and gave his apologies, and rented another fishing rod.

He then returned to the fishing hermit and thoroughly enjoyed his time fishing and chatting alongside him like they'd done once before. The fishing hermit even shared his lunch with them.

"We were planning to cook the carp we got on the spot and eat them, so..." When Zen explained that he'd had no idea that it was necessary to rid the carp of mud and that was why he hadn't prepared lunch, the fishing hermit roared with laughter.

"Ho ho! You were counting your chickens before they hatched—or carp, in this case."

Incidentally, when Zen said he'd intended to only grill them with salt, the old man once again laughed, informing him that grilling carp would only make the meat dry and that he should stew or deep-fry it instead.

Despite it all, when Zen was with this old man, he could truly

relax. Normally, he would've wanted to crawl into a hole with embarrassment.

Amusing themselves with fishing into the afternoon, they started packing up to go home not long before sunset.

"If you're returning to Alona City, would you like to come along in our carriage with us?" Zen proposed to the fishing hermit.

"I have made arrangements to stay in the village for tonight," he responded. "I do appreciate the thought, though."

"I understand. See you again at another fishing spot somewhere."

"Yes, I'll be looking forward to it."

Hoping they'd meet a third time, Zen parted ways with the fishing hermit.

Zen once again thought of how the old man didn't just have deep knowledge about fishing—he was also familiar with everything about the world. He might actually be a renowned intellectual. Of course, Zen wouldn't do anything insensitive like pry.

While basking in the afterglow of his fishing experience, he had the coachman, who'd been on standby at the village, bring out their carriage.

"That sure was fun, Keel," Zen said fondly.

"*Indeed. Especially how nothing went as you planned.*"

"Don't say that!"

"*We have some good travel stories to tell now. You have some for Kulzawa, and I have some for Elysia.*"

"Please don't tell Elysia!" Zen cried. He was deeply troubled, wanting to save his dignity as a father.

He'd let out a loud voice, so the coachman looked back at him in confusion, wondering who he was talking to.

***

While Zen and Keel enjoyed their day fishing, Elysia and Mina were having fun picking out dresses. They'd gone to a large store in Alona City's business district. This particular store did offer rental dresses, though it primarily specialized in high-class clothing that appealed to the many demands of the wealthy.

When they got out of the carriage with Mina escorting Elysia, a female employee was already standing by to greet them and show them inside. They had four whole employees attending Elysia and Mina even though it was just the two of them.

The female employees themselves were dressed in fine attire, and you could sense their good upbringing through their speech and mannerisms.

No matter what kind of customer walked through the door and when, the employees treated them with the same polite courtesy. That was probably thanks to the shopkeeper's thoughtful policies. When Elysia and Mina told them they hadn't come for custom-made clothes, only to rent—and even mentioned their limited budget—the employees didn't look down on them.

If anything, one employee remembered that Mina had paid a visit last year (What a great memory! And how professional too!), and the conversation grew more animated from there. Elysia could relax too because of that. In truth, since Elysia had been raised in the inner palace all her life, there were many things still unusual to her, including this store and employees like these.

At any rate, back when she'd been an imperial princess, it had been impossible for her to visit any shops herself. After coming to Todd Village, It'd become normal to go to the general stores, but even so, the atmosphere of this high-end store was completely different. She thought she'd gotten used to shopping, but this differed so much from what she was used to that she found it incredibly interesting.

"How do you like this dress, young miss? The color accents your hair beautifully."

"Or would you prefer this one? You have an incredibly noble demeanor, so I think a mature design like this would suit you as well."

Elysia giggled. "Hee hee. They're both so pretty. It's hard to choose."

"Then how about..."

The employees brought out one rental dress after another from the back and held them up in front of Elysia for her to see in the

large full-length mirror. (She wouldn't try them on since putting on dresses was a difficult affair.)

To be honest, they were all quite cheap compared to the dresses she'd gone through during her days in the imperial palace. These didn't have a single gem on them, and even if they also used silk, the textures were rough, the sewing work was crude, the embroidery and lace were simple, and the designs lacked artistry.

Even so, Elysia was having fun. She'd had no idea how exciting it was to choose her own dress for herself. She definitely wouldn't have been allowed to do this as an imperial princess.

Elysia's grandmother, the empress dowager, was a very kind person. For as long as Elysia could remember, her grandmother doted on her an awful lot and always gave Elysia the best sweets.

Aness would often grumble, "It's no fair. I want to fawn on you too, Elysia, but I have to harden my heart sometimes to raise you to be a great imperial princess. The empress dowager pushes that thankless role onto me. She gets to always be the fun, smiley grandmother, monopolizing your affection. It's no fair at all."

However, looking at her mother's face, Elysia knew she was just saying these things without meaning them. She could see the deep gratitude Aness felt toward the empress dowager, who treated Elysia kindly.

On the other hand, the grand empress dowager, Elysia's great-grandmother, was a somewhat difficult person. For as long as Elysia could remember, her great-grandmother had forced an all-too-severe education onto her, and every time Elysia saw her, the woman would scold her over every little thing.

Her great-grandmother wasn't a bad person. If anything, her feelings toward the empire were the strongest out of anyone's, so she only gave Elysia these repeated lectures in order to raise her properly as the future empress.

Aness often grumbled, "It's a little tough dealing with how idealistic she is. Even if I tell her it's unreasonable to constantly demand a two-year-old straighten her posture, she'll just keep persisting. She'll tell me that if a member of the imperial family can't

do that much, then it's a disgrace to the citizens. Or she'll say that Heinri could do it at that age. On top of that, her demands always come down to her own personal idea of how things should be. I'm sure she's simply bad at thinking logically in general."

Looking at her mother's face, Elysia could tell these were her true feelings. Considering the complicated hierarchy of the two women's relationship, these criticisms were the most Aness could voice.

And in actuality, when Elysia showed herself at the parties in the Goldragon Palace, the dresses she wore were all picked out by the senior court ladies to appeal to her great-grandmother's tastes.

To speak even more frankly, Elysia didn't really like her great-grandmother. For example, for as long as she could remember, the empress dowager would often read her fairy tales. However, the grand empress dowager strongly opposed it. She'd nagged that if Elysia's grandmother was going to read to Elysia, it should at least be a piece of classical literature befitting an imperial princess instead of foolish things like fairy tales.

But the empress dowager ignored Elysia's great-grandmother with a smile and continued to read the fairy tales Elysia begged for. She would secretly boast of her superior way of thinking, saying things like, "For a child of this age, even a fairy tale makes for a good education," or "If I give you something you can't understand yet, you'll only come to dislike studying," or "I raised Heinri like this, so my methods aren't wrong."

Those words had made Elysia's mother laugh a lot.

And then something happened one day. It'd been when Elysia was six years old. Back then, she'd really wanted a friend.

"Friends" in fairy tales frequently appeared as irreplaceable although common figures. However, they didn't exist in the inner palace. No matter how many times she asked the court ladies who always took care of her to be her friends, they rejected her with cold faces. "We are your servants, Your Highness. We could never become friends." They also scolded her sometimes, saying there must be a clear distinction between master and servant. It was unbearably lonely.

One day, a sixteen-year-old court lady who'd newly become her

attendant responded in secret. “If you’re okay with me, then by all means, you can have me as your friend.” She happily said it was an honor.

When they were completely alone, they could be close and treat each other casually as friends. Elysia was over the moon that her dreams were coming true.

But that was when something else happened: That court lady was arrested by the Imperial Guards. Her crime had been embezzlement.

It seemed that that court lady had always bragged to her coworkers about how she was special for being Elysia’s favorite, and it was found that the girl would have them give her expensive ornaments and luxury consumables in the inner palace, lying that Elysia had requested them and helping herself instead.

The betrayal greatly shocked Elysia. Then the grand empress dowager rubbed salt in the wound.

“You’ve done something truly foolish, Elysia,” she said. “You neglected to draw a distinct line between master and servant. That’s why this happened.”

She lectured her for hours. “You’re not self-aware enough of the fact that you’re a future empress. What do you mean you ‘want friends’? A ruler has no need for those. If anything, you should understand that it only puts the empire in danger.”

She rebuked Elysia repeatedly, her words bordering on verbal abuse.

Her father defended her, saying, “I also have a friend I could never replace. Although we seldom meet, he is an invaluable source of support to me. His existence is an asset to the empire and is of no danger at all.”

However, the stubborn grand empress dowager wasn’t willing to hear it.

Elysia’s mother embraced her and apologized through tears. “I’m sorry you were born an imperial princess. I’m sorry that you couldn’t have a completely normal, happy life.”

Elysia didn’t bear a grudge toward her mother, but she did toward the grand empress dowager. In her young mind, she greatly

detested her. It was also easy to direct her anger over the betrayal of her first friend toward her as well. That was why the uncomfortable dresses Elysia was made to wear to appease the grand empress dowager became symbols of Elysia's hatred.

Of course, I don't hate her now, though. After she'd turned fourteen years old, she had started to think her great-grandmother might have had a point. Nevertheless, if she had to say whether she liked her or not, she definitely didn't.

In that case, is picking a dress that I actually want a small act of rebellion against my great-grandmother? When Elysia realized that, she couldn't help getting excited. She'd always been mature for her age, so she was usually quite obedient, but by all rights, she was in a rebellious phase.

I'll choose whatever dress I like! She wouldn't compromise.

These dresses were meant for rental, so they were all crudely made, but she thought to herself, *That's exactly why I should choose the highest quality one among them.* She felt like this was a test of whether she had a good eye, and she was itching to rise to the challenge.

The employees were so incredibly kind (or maybe very passionate about their work?), and they told her to examine them to her heart's content. They humored her, never looking displeased, speaking into her ear on either side with mischievous smiles.

"Just one dress can change the way men look at you."

"This is the best chance to appeal to that special someone if you have one you're eyeing."

Should I have Sir Zen think I'm cute or pretty? Or should I be greedy and choose something that'll accomplish both? Hmm... I must think carefully.

She was having even more fun. Although she was once again appealing to someone else's tastes, the significance and the way it made her feel was completely different.

Elysia continued comparing the different dresses, thoroughly discussing with the employees about not wanting this or not wanting that.

Then she suddenly checked to see if she wasn't making Mina wait.

But she saw that wasn't the case.

"How about this dress? It's the perfect length for your height, Lady Mina. And above all, it'll certainly elevate your stylish presence to something even more elegant."

"Ah..."

"Or what about this one? Your shoulders are broad, but with sleeves as puffy as these, you can go for a more girlish look, opening the door to another facet of your charms."

"Umm..." Caught in the middle of the employees, Mina was completely worn down. Elysia could clearly make out what the female knight was feeling. Mina very much wanted to wear a beautiful dress, but she normally had zero interest in this field, so she couldn't decide on one on her own. That being said, she was indecisive about leaving such an important choice up to the employees too, finding it questionable. That was why Mina had become a creature that could only respond with "Ah" and "Umm."

Unable to suppress a stifled laugh, Elysia came to lend her a hand. "How about we take a break, Miss Mina?"

"Y-Yes!"

"In that case, please come this way, dear customers." The employees readily led them to the back, and Mina and Elysia went together to the parlor.

In addition to the black tea the employees brought out, they even gave them a light meal since it was lunchtime. It was delicious, but the portions were small. Elysia didn't have to worry about overeating and making her stomach stick out. The store was thoughtful enough to not ruin their figures.

Well, at any rate, the service was incredible. Rentals, compared to clothes that were tailor-made, were way cheaper, but they were still expensive. If a customer liked a dress or the store enough, they might think about having one made custom for them next time.

The store took that possibility into account and gave every customer a royal welcome. However, there was a lot the imperial princess still didn't know about the world outside the imperial

palace, so her analysis hadn't gone that far. She was just deeply impressed, thinking about how this store was so friendly.

And as the two of them partook in the lunch and tea, they made pleasant conversation for a short while.

"It seems you're fighting a tough battle..." said Elysia.

"To be honest, I'm clueless about fashion..."

"What about last year?" Elysia asked. "Was choosing a dress difficult then as well?"

"It went quick last year since I let the employees pick... Choosing a dress is a pain, after all..."

"So why are you so indecisive this year?" The answer was obvious, but Elysia asked anyway.

"Umm..." Mina hesitated.

This is a little too mean. Elysia immediately regretted asking.

Still, this could also be considered a good opportunity to speak honestly. She made up her mind and changed the question. "You're worried about looking nice for father, right, Miss Mina? Just like me."

"Umm..."

"I'll come right out and ask—are you thinking about getting involved with him romantically? Maybe even marrying him?"

"Huh?!" She clearly hadn't expected Elysia to throw a question like that at her. She was panicked, her face bright red. The imperial princess found herself thinking that this lady, who was a whole eleven years older than her, was cute.

"I promise I won't tell father, so you can tell me," Elysia said with a smile.

"Oogh..." Mina averted her gaze. Then, however, she seemed to strengthen her resolve. "I am thinking about it a little, yes..." she confessed. Even her ears were red, but she probably thought it'd be cowardly to lie to Zen's daughter in order to get closer to him.

Elysia truly thought Mina was such a noble female knight.

And since they were already here, Mina seemed to figure she might as well go all the way. "I-I also want you to tell me how you really feel, Miss Elysia. In the one-in-a-million...no, hundred-million chance that Sir Zen and I marry, as his daughter, would you be opposed?"

"To be honest, I don't really want to see my father eyeing women other than my late mother. However, if he wants to marry you, I'll give you my blessing," Elysia said. Despite the first part not being strictly true, she spoke from her heart in response to Mina's sincerity.

Of course, just like she couldn't reveal her true identity as an imperial princess, she couldn't lay her feelings for Zen bare. Even so, she told Mina sincerely that she didn't have to hold back in front of her.

Mina looked like a weight had been lifted off her shoulders. With a broad smile, she expressed her gratitude and happiness. "Th-That makes me very happy to hear." Her smile was so innocent, even Elysia felt her heart warming.

However, Elysia suddenly came to her senses, and with mixed feelings, she thought, *Oh, if only Miss Mina were more of an unpleasant vixen, I could've driven her away from Sir Zen without holding back. The more time I spend with Miss Mina, the more I notice her good qualities. If anything, I might fall for her before Sir Zen does.*

She put her right hand on her cheek, deeply troubled. That was why she couldn't help wanting to tease Mina again.

Just as Mina put her cup of tea to her lips with relief, Elysia said, "Shall I practice calling you 'mother,' then?"

"Huh?!" Mina coughed and sputtered. She must've been terribly surprised.

But when the coughing subsided, she looked serious. The question had just been some evil teasing on Elysia's part, but Mina was so sincere that Elysia felt bad.

Mina answered, emphasizing that "In the one-in-a-hundred-million chance Sir Zen and I get married, I don't intend to become your mother." She paused, then corrected herself. "Ah, no, I of course will work hard to become a wonderful stepmother to you. But the words you just said have made me understand very well how precious your mother still is to you. It would be presumptuous of me to act like your real mother, and you have no need to call me that either."

"Well, Miss Mina, how should I put this... While I do still love my

mother, I don’t dislike you either. I’m not opposed to calling you mother.” Elysia responded with sincerity this time, in part because she felt guilty.

However, Mina shook her head. “No, if we’re going to become family, it’s not good to force any part of our relationship. Besides, I just came up with a good idea.”

“And what’s that...?” Elysia asked, puzzled.

With a bright face, Mina responded, “I’ll become your friend, Elysia.”

Elysia’s heart started beating faster.

Meanwhile, as if satisfied with her own words, Mina nodded to herself. “Even putting aside our positions and family relations, I feel like acting like mother and daughter would be forcing it. However, I can put my all into building a friendship with you, and I can stay genuine. And above all, what makes this idea so wonderful is that—”

Elysia gulped. “Is that...?”

Even more confident, Mina finished, “Even if I end up not marrying Zen, you and I will still remain friends. Right?”

“You shouldn’t sound like you’re giving up on father already.” Elysia was unsure whether to smile.

The result must have been a strange expression, because Mina laughed loudly. “So, Miss Elysia, will you accept my friendship?”

“Hee hee. I can’t beat you.” Caught up in Mina’s enthusiasm, Elysia smiled, albeit a bit sheepishly.

At the same time, though, she thought to herself that she really did like Mina. And strangely enough, at the same time, she felt her resentment toward her great-grandmother begin to fade. She could finally forgive her.

***

That evening, Zen sat down at the dining table with Elysia and Mina. They all chatted about what they’d done that day, with Zen first listening to the girls’ stories and then sharing what had happened at the fishing spot he’d gone to with Keel (leaving out the embarrassing failures, of course!).

After he mentioned what he'd learned about the hunters they'd seen, Elysia spoke up. "In short, you dislike everything about Sir Stoga's administration?"

"Well, yeah." She wasn't wrong, though he felt her wording was a little unpleasant.

"What's wrong with His Excellency Stoga? Indeed, we witnessed the other day how much law and order has degraded in some respects, which is unacceptable, but it seems he has an excellent reputation with the citizens," Mina pressed Zen, definitely wanting to learn more for the future. It was no problem for knights in other countries to keep their distance from politics, but Mina's attitude was admirable, befitting a military officer of the empire.

Zen was happy to oblige with a lecture. "If His Excellency Stoga became popular with the citizens through carrying out good politics, then that would be all well and good. But it's not admirable to put irrelevant policies in place just to win the people's favor."

Now, what specifically was wrong in this case?

"First, his tax reductions. I can't think of any reason he'd do that except to gain popularity."

"Oh yes, the employees yesterday were very happy about the lower taxes," said Mina.

"Back then, you looked like you had something to say, father," Elysia said. "I guess it really wasn't my imagination."

Zen nodded. "Of course, all policymakers should strive to reduce taxes."

Tax reductions could always be relied on to stimulate the market. When the economy was good, you could reduce taxes and still receive more than enough money back in increased tax revenue. On the opposite end, when the economy was doing poorly, you had to reduce taxes to forcibly stimulate the economy, otherwise the country would keep declining.

Feeling enlightened, Mina said, "Either way, it's worth doing."

"In spite of that, historically, many statesmen have actually been overzealous about increasing taxes."

"Why is that?"

"There are many reasons. It might simply be financial illiteracy, or

just wanting to live a life of extravagance by bleeding the citizens dry."

There were a lot of other reasons, like starting a war of aggression to expand their territories only for it to not go as they'd hoped, or if they were being invaded by another territory and had to strengthen their forces to protect themselves. Either way, if their military expenses kept increasing without making money back, they might feel forced to increase taxes to make up for the financial loss. There was nothing more foolish than that.

Even as Zen directed his lecture at Mina, who sat across from him at the table, his words were for the future empress sitting next to him.

"When a policymaker is in power, if they can reduce taxes even twice while keeping the public finances under control, they'll almost certainly be praised as a wise leader for generations to come. The reverse is also true. No matter the reason and circumstances, if a policymaker *increases* taxes twice, they will definitely be criticized as a foolish ruler. Their other virtues or achievements won't even matter." Anybody reasonably versed in history would agree that this was how things went.

Elysia, after carefully digesting his words, swallowed the bread she was eating and said, "But father, isn't that necessity valid in the event of an invasion?"

Zen gently shook his head. "The citizens will assume the invasion is still those policymakers' fault in some way. The ones in charge can't say they had nothing to do with it."

While having an extensive military to protect itself was the foundation of a country, if they had strong neighboring countries that were impossible to contend with by force, those smaller countries had to take full advantage of strategy and diplomacy.

It was a typical case of "easier said than done," but if they couldn't pull it off, then they had no right to be policymakers in the first place.

"But, Sir Zen..." Mina started. "Given everything you've said, is it not appropriate to praise His Excellency Stoga for lowering the taxes?"

"Everything has a limit. It would be putting the cart before the horse if, by recklessly lowering taxes, it causes a tax revenue shortfall and public finances to collapse."

He gave another supplementary explanation. "Before I came to Cylin, I was in the Tax Bureau in the Financial Affairs Agency. I have a decent grasp of Alona Prefecture's tax revenue and public finances, and for the past two years, the numbers have been abysmal. Frankly, it's to the level that they're receiving subsidies from the national treasury to even just barely make ends meet." However, the Tax Bureau only dealt with the numbers as they were. It wasn't their job to look into reasons or find ways to improve them.

That job belonged to the Budget Bureau, a related but separate branch of the Financial Affairs Agency.

Zen continued. "But since His Excellency Stoga hasn't received any criticism despite how dire Alona's finances are, then there's probably a reason. I can't say what it is, though, since I was never a Budget Bureau clerk."

"You mean like that money might be being used to develop the prefecture, for example?" asked Elysia.

"Yes. We'll be getting into annual expenditures now instead of tax yields, but if His Excellency Stoga's put out a prefectural reform proposal and had the Budget Bureau approve it, then there's no problem if Alona continues to receive subsidies from the national treasury until the plan is finished, even if they remain in a budget deficit."

Actually, twenty years ago, the state governor of Cylin had invested a large amount of public funds while also taking some funds from the central government in order to promote large-scale grape cultivation and the wine industry within the state. The Budget Bureau approved of it as an effective policy and allowed the state to operate for ten years while in a budget deficit. Given Cylin's development since then, you had to acknowledge that the state governor's policy had completely hit the mark.

"But from what I can tell, all His Excellency Stoga is doing is promoting hunting," Zen said.

"Does it not benefit the region's development to increase hunting

and festivities? Is it different from encouraging the cultivation of grapes?" Mina asked.

"First of all, whether it's a national or a local government, the most important thing is developing the economy," Zen thoroughly explained to her. "If you have money, you can do anything. If you don't, your hands are pretty much tied."

Even if you wanted a military that surpassed those of foreign countries, you couldn't expand it without enough economic strength. You couldn't fight on an empty stomach, and you couldn't win wars with wit and bravery alone. And without a superior military, it was hard to reign supreme in diplomacy.

When a great country was put against a small country, it could make as many demands (or threats) as it pleased. Of course there had been times when a weak country used its resourcefulness to beat a strong country, or used wit to gain the upper hand in negotiations. But those were rare cases. It was nonsense to try and build a country under the assumption that you'd get that kind of miracle.

"Therefore, out of the three pillars that make up a nation, which are the economy, military, and diplomacy, the most important thing is the economy." However, even if you understood that, it was the nature of economic development for it to not go as planned anyway.

There were simply countless cultural and geopolitical limitations that could prevent trade, such as poor location, the absence of nearby harbors or main roads, a low population, a civilization and education that were behind the times, or the inability to cultivate local specialties for export. "That's why there are times when, even with hard work, it's close to impossible to successfully spur economic development in small countries and rural towns."

"What should you do in those cases, then, Sir Zen...?" asked Mina.

"It's good to focus on agriculture in the short term while keeping the long term in mind." Unless the land was especially barren, for as much work as you put into farming, you'd have the results to show for it. Public order would improve if people could satisfy their hunger, the population would increase, and then their military forces would

follow suit. They could also earn money if they sold the leftover crops.

"Would that not be considered economic development?"

"Indeed it would; however, it's negligible compared to boosting trade. Money doesn't rot, so you can save as much as you want, and you can invest that immense amount of money into an even greater business. But that doesn't work with agriculture. Even with an abundant harvest, whatever is leftover that you can't eat will just spoil. It's also difficult to transport and sell farther away."

"I see... So the state governor took that into account, realizing it'd be difficult to suddenly grow the trade business of a remote region like Cylin, and decided to focus on agriculture first?"

"You catch on quick, Lady Mina!" Like a teacher who'd just gained a brilliant student, Zen smiled broadly. He'd already known she had a sharp mind from when they were on the extermination mission for the twintail fox together; it was just that he hadn't really seen her have an interest in academics until now.

Having listened to Zen's explanation until this point, Mina came to her own conclusion. "In that case, in terms of economic development, the effects of hunting are even more negligible than agriculture, even when it's thriving?"

"That's right," Zen said. "The more money you make and the more farmland you create all work to expand production, but game is just much too limited a resource. You can't just increase hunters and catch more game exponentially. If you're careless, you'll only hunt the animals to extinction. Like the blue cranes."

Of course Zen had no intention of degrading the hunting occupation itself. In short, this was a matter of societal structure—the balance of practitioners within a population. For example, no matter how valuable they were, a society full of only doctors was not viable.

Elysia chimed in. "Sir Stoga isn't looking at the long term, and if Alona Prefecture isn't expected to develop, then all that means is that even with tax reductions, Alona will continue to be in a financial deficit..."

"Indeed, Elysia. That's why this just feels like a popularity stunt to

me.”

Elysia also understood why Zen didn’t like Stoga’s administration.

No, it was more than just a personal feeling. Zen didn’t understand what the Budget Bureau could be thinking. How could the central government still not view the state of Alona’s finances as a problem?

Although I suspect no matter how much the Budget Bureau views it as an issue, His Majesty and the prime minister have the final say, and His Excellency Stoga probably won’t be punished. It really was just a suspicion, and one he was still embarrassed to voice aloud. It was entirely possible that his guess was warped by his own prejudice, so he had to both be self-aware of that and chastise himself for it.

Well then... I suppose I’ll look forward to finding out who he really is at the party. Not that I really want to. Zen remembered he was in the middle of dinner, and with a fork, he poked at his eel simmered in grape wine, which had long since gone cold.

Chapter 5: The Day of the Party

He'd had that dream again.

That demonic sword was approaching him. It was swinging down, a clear diagonal strike before it suddenly warped. Zen couldn't react at all to its change in trajectory, which defied common sense.

Unable to stop the blow with his sword, he was completely cut down, falling over into a pool of his own blood.

Ugh... So this is a dream, he thought bitterly to himself. The ending was different from what he'd remembered.

The monster had let him go that night. He'd spared Zen's life.

But Zen did think to himself that if the monster hadn't had that impulse that day—if he hadn't said to Zen, "Starting today, you'll be my pupil"—Zen definitely would've met that fate.

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"Father! Wake up please, father!"

"H-Hmm...?" Elysia had shaken Zen awake, and he woke up in bed. "Where am I? What day is it?"

"You're in our room at the inn, and today's the birthday party. You just weren't waking up. Breakfast has already ended." Elysia smiled at how he was still half asleep. "Are you tired?"

"A bit..." Sitting upright, he shook his head, still fuzzy with drowsiness. He'd gone fishing two days ago, and yesterday Elysia and Mina had dragged him around to go sightseeing and spend time at the festival. The journey itself to Alona City had been tiring too.

"You were crying out a lot in your sleep too."

"Yeah, I...was having a bit of a nightmare." And in the short amount of time since their departure, he'd had that nightmare twice. He knew there was no point in looking for meaning in his dreams, yet he couldn't help reading into them anyway.

These dreams aren't foreshadowing something, are they? he thought nervously, shuddering. If he happened upon that monster again, it'd probably be the end of the line. Ten years had passed since that night, but he still couldn't imagine he'd win. No matter how many times they fought, Zen would die every time.

"What's the matter, father? You look so pale," Elysia said.

"Ah, I'm fine. I'm just really hungry."

"Hee hee. You ate so much at dinner yesterday, though." Elysia believed the lie Zen had whipped up and giggled to herself in relief. "Don't worry, father. Your breakfast has been set aside for you."

"Whew, I'm glad." He honestly didn't have an appetite, but he couldn't say that now.

He got out of bed and stood by the window that Elysia had opened. "It's such a nice day out today."

He decided he'd put these anxious feelings behind him. Tonight was Stoga's birthday party, the actual event they'd come to Alona City for.

"You don't have anything particularly special that you need to do, though." Mina politely informed him.

The wind was knocked out of Zen's sails. "Ah. I see."

"All we have to do is greet His Excellency Stoga and congratulate him, which I'll take care of." As Mina explained to him, she soaked the extremely hard baked good she was eating, one of Cylin's traditional desserts, in milky black tea.

What manners were appropriate changed depending on where you were. This was how you traditionally ate this sweet in Cylin, but if you did this in the imperial capital, you'd be scolded for being childish or having bad manners. Unless you were at a particularly formal meal, even an adult normally followed this custom in Cylin.

Elysia had made the tea, and the tea snacks had come with the room. Zen was having a late breakfast in the dining room of their suite, but Elysia and Mina had made tea to keep him company. (They did invite Keel as well, but he flatly turned them down, saying he was sleepy.)

"You can just enjoy the food and drink at the party, and get

acquainted with the other guests. There were also people playing cards in the back last year. I-If you'd like, we can dance for a song too..." At the end, Mina suddenly blushed and faltered.

Meanwhile, Elysia leaped in. "That's a great idea, father! Please dance with me too!"

"He's my partner tonight, though."

Mina tried to ward off Elysia, but Elysia didn't back off at all.

"But isn't it tasteless to only dance with your partner and no one else?"

"But you already danced plenty with your father at the New Year's festival this year, right?"

"Those are two different things. Wearing a beautiful dress while you dance is a different experience."

Even after Zen told her, "You can stop already," Elysia didn't budge an inch.

And yet Mina voiced her agreement. "It's just as Miss Elysia said. Even a woman like me yearns to wear a dress in a gorgeous venue and dance. Chances like this seldom come, so please dance with me."

"Yes, exactly," Elysia agreed.

The two girls fell into sync, making it so Zen couldn't say another word about it. Ever since they'd gone to rent dresses together, he could see how they'd grown closer.

Or at least that's what he thought, but they abruptly started bickering again.

"Then you can have your turn after Sir Zen and I dance," said Mina.

"Wouldn't it be better if I go first, and then you after me, Miss Mina?"

"But I'm his partner at this event."

"And I'm his daughter!"

"Honestly, if you really think about it, isn't it strange for a parent and child to dance together?"

"Oh, didn't you know? It's common sense for a father to teach his daughter the basics of socializing when she doesn't have a partner."

"I've never heard of that before..." Zen said.

"Don't butt in, please, father!" Elysia cried, flat-out refusing to let him get a word in. Zen hung his head.

"I understand," said Mina. "I'll let you have him first. I'll dance with him for two songs after that."

"Then I'll dance for three!"

"Let's just take turns, then. I'll dance for an extra song."

"I understand. We're taking turns, yes? I'll let you go first, so I'll take the extra dance."

I'd like them to consider my stamina... Zen thought glumly. It was looking like tonight would be hectic, and he was already resigning himself to his fate.

Well, he could understand their feelings. Even some guys out there wanted to dance at parties too, and finding a lover or a fiancée to be your partner was a high hurdle to overcome.

I guess I'll just have to be a standin partner for both of them. If anything, I should consider it an honor. Besides, this was definitely a hundred times better than if Elysia had wanted to dance with some shady man.

It was now past noon, and Mina and Elysia had finally changed into their dresses. There was a dressing room on the inn's fifth floor, where they could call for employees to assist them if they needed it.

Mina had rented a yellow dress reminiscent of a large marigold. The striking design and color would probably look even more lustrous under candlelight once the sun set. For a woman, Mina was tall with broad shoulders, so she could wear such a flashy dress like this with style.

"It really suits you," Zen said, praising her honestly. "You look very pretty."

"E-Elysia picked it for me. I couldn't have chosen this on my own..." Mina mumbled, embarrassed. Had Zen said something that warranted this kind of reaction?

Meanwhile, Elysia had rented a graceful dress that closer resembled a white lily. The mature design, accented with more modest embroidery and lacing, made her look quite grown up. For an instant—only a mere second—Zen mistook her for Aness from

when they'd first met.

As Zen was left speechless, Elysia appealed to him with a look that indicated she wanted praise too.

"Y-You're beautiful no matter what you wear, Elysia."

"Why do you sound like you're forcing it...?"

As a father, he'd intended to praise her as he should, but she looked unsatisfied. She was sulking, staring pointedly at him.

What am I supposed to say? If she were in the inner palace, she'd be wearing dresses worlds more elaborate and beautiful than this. I just find it so sad. I can't come out and lie that it suits her.

He couldn't reveal his true feelings in front of Mina, so he'd patch things up with Elysia later.

In any case, they were all ready. Mina and Elysia had transformed into two elegant ladies who would fit in perfectly at any fine function, sure to garner attention.

"Okay, we can leave at any time."

"What?" Mina and Elysia both cried.

All Zen had done was voice his idle thought aloud, but the two girls reacted as if to say, *Of course not!*

"Huh?"

"Are you going to attend the party looking like that, Sir Zen?" Mina asked incredulously.

"That's the uniform you always wear!"

Indeed, Zen was the only one who wasn't dressed up at all. He was wearing the uniform he wore every day at the village town hall.

"These are the fine clothes that the empire supplies its bureaucrats all across the nation," Zen defended himself. "They're considered a proper dress suit."

"I suppose you do participate in ceremonies with that outfit, so it *is* technically treated as formal dress..."

"I've never seen someone wear that at a party, though..."

Zen panicked. It was as if they were in disbelief. "But you know, isn't it more convenient for you if I dress this way?! It's more fitting for someone working as your partner, right, Lady Mina?! This way, it's obvious I'm only here for official business! No one will get the wrong idea and think we have a more intimate relationship!"

"I-I don't particularly mind if they do misunderstand..." Mina mumbled, trailing off.

"I think a man dancing in a uniform would only be an eyesore," Elysia said. As always, she'd struck without mercy.

"I-I thought this was what was expected... I guess I should've brought a normal dress suit..." He had one suit he'd brought from his parents' house just in case, but he'd left it behind in Todd Village. It turned out this might've been one of those "just in case" moments after all.

"Hee hee. You really aren't sensible when it comes to things outside of work," Elysia giggled, speaking in a tone that seemed to say, *It's cute how hopeless you are.*

"Take it easy on me, please..." Zen hung his head, depressed. He didn't know who the real parent here was.

The sun was beginning to sink, and the city's bell tower informed them that it was three in the afternoon.

In the end, Zen remained in his uniform, escorting Elysia and Mina into the carriage.

Incidentally, Keel stayed behind in the room. He was snoozing away in front of the living room fireplace.

The carriage moved at a leisurely pace through the streets, which were alive with the festival continuing day after day.

Stoga didn't use the government housing that was normally provided for officials, instead having purchased a mansion to be his own private residence. It was located at the city outskirts, but thanks to that, the garden was spacious, and the building was big too. It was even grander than the inn they were staying in. Zen thought it was too indulgent for an unmarried man to have all to himself.

It must take more than twenty employees to manage a mansion and garden like this. Where was he getting the funds to pay them? His prefectural governor's salary? His allowance from his wealthy merchant father? He wasn't treating it as a public expense, was he?

When they disembarked the carriage and went to the reception desk at the entrance, he could see there were already a lot of

guests. That meant there were just that many people who'd wanted to hurry here to leave a good impression on Stoga. He was a mere prefectural governor in the countryside who'd been in office for only two years, but this was one indicator of the great influence he held.

"I want us to hurry up and get our greetings done with, but...he's extremely popular." Mina smiled wryly.

There was a grand dance hall inside the mansion, and past the swath of arriving guests, they could see Stoga surrounded by a large number of people, so Zen and Mina gave up on greeting him for a while. As Cummel's representatives, the need to flatter Stoga wasn't so urgent that it warranted wedging their way into that crowd, and they didn't want to leave a poor impression on the other guests.

At any rate, even if they'd wanted to have an audience with the Alona prefectural governor, they could hardly see him through all the people.

"We might as well get some food first," said Mina.

"We did skip lunch."

As the three of them talked, they went looking for the party dishes that were currently being served close to the wall.

There were mostly small refreshments that could be eaten while standing. Upon the waiter's explanation, they learned that many of them used Alona's famous products, especially blue crane.

On the other hand, dishes that used marine products also stood out, like the smoked salmon canapés. Such seafood wouldn't have been odd in Nazalf Prefecture, which faced the Giovanni Sea, but it must have been brought from quite far away to be enjoyed here in Alona. You could also tell with just a sip that the grape wine that was being freely distributed was a particularly old vintage.

This had to have cost an unreasonable amount of money. Since Zen's brain was that of a government official, it immediately launched into calculations, and he just couldn't buy that Stoga could supply all of this with the salary of one prefectural governor. Was that just how much his family was supporting him? At this point, Zen wanted to suspect that he was doing something underhanded, like embezzling public funds or taking bribes.

Even Palk, who was at the top of South Talum's town hall, was

misbehaving so brazenly. Zen couldn't help eyeing the prefectural governor with suspicion.

The food is good but it's a little hard to enjoy... While it was also a little obnoxious to be too hung up on morals, there was nothing he could do if he didn't have an appetite.

Well, this might actually be a good thing. Elysia and Mina didn't want their stomachs to stick out in their dresses, so they were nibbling delicately. It would've been awkward if Zen were the only one greedily stuffing his face.

Then, with more guests around now, the orchestra started playing a waltz.

The moment they did, several pairs of men and women stepped into the center of the dance hall as if they knew what to do and started to show off their ballroom dancing. Judging by the sheer fact that they'd taken the initiative, those pairs must've felt confident in their abilities. And indeed, they couldn't be written off just because they were from the countryside. They were skilled enough that, if they participated in the balls held at the Goldragon Palace, not a soul would look down on them.

"Now then, my lady, may I have this dance?" Just as Zen had promised, he extended his right hand to Mina with a bow.

"Huh...?" They'd already agreed to dance together, but she remained stiff without taking his hand.

"What's the matter?"

"I-I'm a little hesitant to dance among those people..." she answered awkwardly, looking at the skilled dancers.

"In that case, shall I dance with him first?" Elysia suggested.

"Oogh..." Mina once again stiffened before making up her mind. "N-No, that's all right! If I go after you, I think I'll freeze up even more..." She knew that Elysia had proposed the idea from a good place, but at the same time, she also sensed the younger girl's confidence in dancing. Mina decided it'd be better to have her turn first.

Zen knew that Elysia was, in fact, an imperial princess, and she'd been trained by the Chancellor of Rites's wife, who was known as a master among masters in the art of dance. Elysia's skill far surpassed

anyone's on the dance floor right now. If that was going to pressure Mina, then indeed, she shouldn't witness Elysia's dancing first.

"Aren't you supposed to throw all your shame to the wind when you're on a trip? Let's be laughed at together." Zen purposefully extended his hand to her in an even more grandiose way. It wasn't like they absolutely had to dance right this second, but during lunch, Mina had really wanted this. He wanted to grant her wish.

There were probably plenty of other people who wanted to dance too but lacked the confidence. Supposing Mina couldn't dance all that well, it was highly plausible that her attempt would prompt those people to feel confident enough to join in.

"I-I understand. If you insist, Sir Zen..." Mina summoned her courage and took Zen's hand.

With a slight bow toward Elysia to let her know they'd be off, the two headed to the dance floor in the center of the room and entered the ring of waltzers.

Mina held Zen awkwardly, and as Zen thought of how cute she was, he began to lead the way.

"I-I actually started taking dance lessons because you agreed to be my partner," she confessed as she took floundering steps.

"Huh? But that was really not that long ago."

"I've never been interested in girlish things, so... I'm embarrassed..."

Mina had started to shrink her shoulders, so with a deft hand, Zen straightened her up, raising her face.

So she only practiced for about four days. If she can dance this well with only a surface-level grasp of it, that's pretty amazing! he thought honestly to himself as he smiled, moving out of the way every time Mina was about to step on him.

She had good athletic ability and no doubt excelled at martial arts and horsemanship as well, although he hadn't actually witnessed her demonstrate those skills in person. If she didn't, then niece or not, there was no way Cummel would've employed her as his guard.

"It seems *you're* skilled at dancing, though, Sir Zen."

"Is that surprising?"

"I-I didn't mean for it to come off that way."

"I was kidding." Zen smiled mischievously as he easily pulled Mina, who wasn't looking around her, along and evaded the other dancing pairs who nearly collided with them.





"I also spent time in the Baron Ambassador Bureau in the Foreign Affairs Agency before. I was only an office worker, but if I'd been promoted, I would've had to accompany His Excellency the ambassador and dance at other imperial courts. I frantically learned how to dance as my sister kicked me around. In the end, instead of getting a promotion, I was transferred in half a year." He explained the same thing he had to Elysia once before.

"You'll quickly improve with practice," he assured Mina and started leading her in a way that more proactively guided her. He slowed down their tempo, bringing the triple-time melody the orchestra played down to a half-time duple meter.

Thanks to their slow stepping, Mina's footwork was starting to shape up. She really did have good coordination. She picked up the basics fast.

At this point, the number of participants in the waltz had doubled, and there were many pairs who weren't very skilled at dancing (it seemed Mina's bravery really had encouraged them to join). And Mina immediately improved more than those girls.

There was no need to slow down anymore. Mina herself looked like she couldn't believe how much better she was already doing. "I-I feel like I've become a princess, although that doesn't suit me..."

"Ha ha, what's wrong with that? Let's say you're a princess just for today."

"Th-Then just for now, you're my prin—a knight, I mean."

"Nah, I could never pretend that in front of a real knight," he joked. Meanwhile, he thought of how Mina always claimed she wasn't girlish, but deep down, she actually did have the heart of a maiden. He pretended he didn't hear Mina almost call him "her prince."

They were supposed to switch with Elysia every song, but they continued dancing for another three. Zen caught a fleeting glimpse of Elysia outside the ring of waltzers, gesturing for them to continue. She'd probably seen Mina finally get the hang of dancing and didn't want to ruin that for her.

Elysia has grown up to be so kind! he thought to himself like a proud father.

In the end, they danced continuously through five of those fairly long waltzes. It was a breeze since Zen and Mina were both physically fit. By the time the fifth song was winding down, Mina seemed like she was having more fun instead of feeling nervous. Even after the orchestra stopped playing, she gazed up at Zen's face.

"Shall we go for one more?" Zen suggested.

Mina came to her senses and replied, panicked, "Oh, no! We've made Miss Elysia wait long enough."

Zen wanted to let her soak in the afterglow for a bit longer, but he could see the orchestra getting ready to play their next song. The two hurriedly left the floor.

"I'll go dance for five songs with Elysia too."

"I-I'm sorry for keeping you to myself..."

"Don't worry. Just laugh it off and say, 'Oh, how hard it must be to be a father.'" Zen cracked jokes as they headed back to where Elysia was waiting. Mina still hadn't let go of his hand.

"You danced pretty well at the end, Lord Mina," a voice called out to them from the side. The two of them paused and looked in that direction.

"Your Excellency Stoga! I apologize that we're offering our greetings so late." Mina realized who had spoken to her and responded reflexively with a soldierlike bow instead of that of a lady.

"I don't mind. The waves of people who've come to greet me have finally died down. Oh, it's just not easy to be so popular."

It seemed that the man who'd said this—without a hint of irony—was the Alona prefectural governor. He'd just turned twenty-nine today and had a face that was appropriate for his age. On the other hand, he wore conspicuous, excessively showy clothes more suited to a noble's preferences, as if to hide his lanky, unimpressive body.

Now that Zen thought about it, the fact that he'd gone out of his way to call Mina "lord" might not have been to excessively flatter her like Chief Tomon did, but was rather part of his aristocratic affectation.

"I've come as His Excellency Cummel's representative today. I offer you a heartfelt congratulations on the anniversary of your day

of birth.”

“I’m greatly obliged. Please pass my thanks to His Excellency Cummel. Incidentally, is he in good health as always?”

“As usual, those around him, including myself, are worried he’ll one day collapse from overwork.”

“Oh my, that won’t do. He should take a leaf out of my book and focus on enjoying life more.”

Mina and Stoga exchanged the customary pleasantries. During that time, Stoga didn’t spare Zen a glance, let alone a bow. Since Zen had come in uniform, Stoga had probably concluded that he was a minor bureaucrat who wasn’t worth talking to.

Hmm, he’s really thorough about playing the part of an aristocrat. This behavior was very typical of a noble who truly didn’t see commoners as fellow humans, which was a mentality not uncommon among the nobility of other countries. Was Stoga imitating that too?

Mina was also clearly at a loss, unsure of when she should introduce Zen.

If he were a true noble, then it’d be acceptable for him to arrogantly disregard people, but is he really fit for the role of a prefectural governor like this?

Zen didn’t know who all had been invited to this party, but with Mina having come as Cummel’s representative, she must be a particularly privileged guest. That was why Stoga had called out to her.

Yet although Stoga understood that Mina had brought Zen along as a partner, Stoga blatantly ignored him.

Did he not give his subordinates a proper audience either? For a position of high responsibility like a prefectural governor, knowing your subordinates all the way from the top to the bottom rungs and assigning them to the right places determined how capable you were.

In a war, a general who led ten thousand soldiers didn’t need to know every one of them, but it was unfathomable for a centurion to not know the names of each one of their hundred soldiers.

“Now then, Your Excellency Stoga, we shall excuse ourselves.” Sensing that there were once again others waiting their turn to greet

the prefectural general, Mina bowed in a more ladylike way this time, awkwardly lifting the hem of her skirt.

"Understood. Enjoy yourself tonight." Stoga moved on to attend to his other guests, and Zen and Mina hurriedly left. In the end, Stoga hadn't acknowledged Zen at all.

"I apologize. I couldn't find the right timing to introduce you," Mina said glumly.

"No, it's not your fault."

As they talked, they finally returned to Elysia.

She'd probably been watching them from afar. "Did that guy completely ignore you, father?" She was totally offended.

"I don't think you should refer to His Excellency the Prefectural Governor as 'that guy.'" Zen smiled wryly. His daughter was unexpectedly feisty.

Well, I had a bad impression of him to begin with, and he did a great job of not proving me wrong.

Of course, he was Alona's prefectural governor, not Nazalf's. While Stoga irritated him, it was unlikely that he would directly affect Zen and the others.

While Zen had a renewed appreciation for the rare gem that was Cummel standing at the top of Nazalf, he wanted to just move on from the subject.

However, Elysia was still ruffled. "Let's dance, father! We must forget our troubles!"

"I think she's only going to vent her anger on me..." Zen's smile grew even more troubled as Elysia pulled him by the hand. He felt like she was really going to swing him around.

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As expected, even as Zen tried his best to keep up, he wound up being the one led around by his partner all across the dance floor. Nevertheless, he dutifully stuck with Elysia for five songs before they headed back to Mina.

"You're already breathing so heavily. I think you're rusty," Elysia teased.

"I was dancing with Lady Mina before you. My exhaustion was holding me back." Although Zen knew Elysia was joking, he tried to protect his honor as a father. It was yet another episode in a man's miserable saga.

Meanwhile, Mina had been waiting with her eyes sparkling. "You were amazing, Miss Elysia! I didn't know you could dance so well!"

"My strict aunt taught my father and me," Elysia lied. She couldn't say it was because of her etiquette lessons as an imperial princess. Zen felt that she was painting Sharla in too good a light, but he kept that thought to himself.

"I was anxious that I'd lose my dignity if it turned out you were good at dancing, but I see now that I shouldn't have hesitated! I only felt moved that I was treated to something so splendid!" Mina must've been very excited. She rambled on and on about her honest impressions to this girl, who was eleven years younger than her.

"You were wonderful as well, Sir Zen!" Mina exclaimed. "So that's how skilled you really are!"

"It's only thanks to Elysia making me look good too." If Zen looked at it objectively, his dance skills at the balls held at the imperial capital were firmly in the middle range, or upper middle at best. If Mina had seen his skills as amazing, that was because of Elysia's splendid performance.

"I really am tired now," Zen sighed. "Please allow me to rest for a bit."

"Then let's go over there." There was a spacious room adjacent to the dance hall, and there were many sofas there so guests could chat and rest. Apparently, if they called for a waiter, they'd bring over food and drinks from the party.

The seats were already seventy percent full. There were people soaked in nostalgia as they caught up with old acquaintances, others who were limp and exhausted from dancing, and those who had tired of dancing and were amusing themselves with card games.

Zen and the others had the waiter prepare them seats and bring them some refreshments since they'd become a bit peckish.

"Now what shall we do after this? Fortunately, I've successfully fulfilled my role as His Excellency Cummel's representative. We could

go home, or we could stay and have some more fun."

"Do you think Keel's getting lonely about now, father?" Elysia asked.

"Definitely not. At this hour, he'll sleep like a log for as long as you let him." That was how the divine beast vanargands, who were immortal, behaved. Keel was still immature, but once he became an adult, he'd grow bored of his eternity of time and sleep for many years and decades.

"Chances like this don't come by often, so how about you dance for a bit longer, Miss Mina?" Elysia looked like she was already satisfied, but she'd probably suggested this upon considering how Mina's eyes had opened to the joys of dancing.

"I-If Sir Zen is okay with it..." With Mina's hopeful glances toward him, Zen couldn't refuse.

He at least took a rest, and the three enjoyed some pleasant conversation for a while.

However, something unexpected happened.

Stoga entered the lounge from the dance hall, crossing the room to walk farther inside the mansion. He wasn't alone, bringing along a young man in his late twenties, who was plain but wearing a well-tailored dress suit. With a meek expression, that young man spoke to Stoga, and Stoga nodded many times, satisfied.

Everyone in the lounge watched Stoga pass; the main man of the night had appeared, after all. Nobody paid attention to the young man next to him. However, Zen was the only one who couldn't tear his eyes from his face.

No way... Why is he here? As Zen focused intensely on the young man, he checked several times to make sure he wasn't mistaking him for someone else. Even after the pair was completely out of sight, Zen's face remained stiff.

Elysia noticed. "What's the matter? Your face looks so serious."

Zen lowered his voice and answered. "The man that His Excellency Stoga took with him is a noble from Baron."

Publicly, Baron was a friendly nation whose territory was adjacent to the empire's south. Its history was fifty years older than Catalan's, and immediately following the empire's founding, the two countries

had gotten into their fair number of skirmishes.

After that turbulent period, they'd never once warred with each other, and until now, they remained on good terms as their main trade partners.

However, there was no telling when Baron would invade the empire if the empire showed any weakness, and vice versa. There'd always been tension between the two nations in that regard.

Mina also lowered her voice and asked, "Is there a problem with a noble from Baron being here?" Her face indicated she hadn't caught on yet.

"Although this is a simple birthday party, once you invite an important person from a foreign country, it now becomes a matter of diplomacy. This isn't something a prefectural governor should be doing on his own. Stoga could even fall under suspicion of selling out his country or instigating foreign aggression." Sensing something unusual was brewing behind the scenes, Zen finally dropped Stoga's "His Excellency" title.

"Umm... Is it possible that His Excellency Stoga received permission to invite him from the state government office or the imperial capital?"

"In that case, officials from the Foreign Affairs Agency should've come flying in, jumping over Stoga to entertain the young man."

"I see..."

To begin with, it was beyond rude to invite an important figure from a foreign country without making a big show of introducing them to everyone. Since Stoga hadn't done that, that meant he was doing something shady. It meant he was secretly scheming something.

"There's...no way you mistook him for someone else, I suppose," said Elysia.

"I was in the Baron Ambassador Bureau for a bit," Zen explained. There was a Baron Embassy in the imperial capital, and Zen had been entrusted with odd jobs despite only being an office worker, often being sent there on errands. That was where he'd spotted the young man before.

He was Emile, the Earl of Tus and son of Marquess Ron, a leading

figure in Baron. Emile was his heir and holder of the courtesy title of earl.

When Zen had spotted him at the imperial capital, Emile had been there only to accompany the goodwill ambassador from Baron, but Emile was a great noble who would eventually take up an important position in his country.

I wish I hadn't seen this... Zen leaned his forehead against his fist. His mind was stuck going round in thought, guessing at what Stoga and Emile could be doing together. Zen wasn't a central bureaucrat anymore. He was only a minor official who'd been demoted to the countryside, but he couldn't help thinking about it.

"This is the first time someone has stood before me because they couldn't turn a blind eye."

That monster's voice from that night burrowed into his ears and wouldn't leave. Once again, he felt like that man was still laughing at him.

But Zen continued to contemplate. *At best, what he's up to is still within the scope of the prefectural governor's power, and they're pushing toward a favorable business transaction that'll benefit both territories. At worst, Stoga is guiding Baron's army to help them with an invasion. I don't know what Stoga would be getting as a reward, but it'd be a nightmare if it's the latter scenario.*

If that worst case came to fruition, Nazalf Prefecture would be dragged into war. His older brother Yohia had gone out of his way to prepare it as a refuge to shelter Elysia. Zen already deeply loved his next-door neighbors Donna and Kulzawa, his coworkers at the village town hall, Cummel, and Mina, and a war would affect them. He couldn't possibly turn a blind eye!

"I wonder where the Earl of Tus is staying?" If he thought about it rationally, the young man should be staying in the finest room of the finest inn in Alona City. But that was where Zen and the others were currently staying. "Lady Mina, when did His Excellency Cummel reserve our room?"

"After last year's birthday party. At the time, he was still unsure if he'd attend again this year, but for the time being, he made reservations and went home. He's a thorough man."

So that meant although Emile was attending this year, he hadn't been able to get the best room thanks to Cummel's prior reservation.

Nobility and their pride didn't allow them to settle for second best. That was true even when they were traveling incognito.

"Then there's a high possibility he's staying in this mansion..." If Stoga personally gave the earl a warm welcome to his private residence, which was more spectacular than the city's best inn, then the earl shouldn't have a problem with it.

"Lady Mina. I must ask something of you."

"If it's something I can do, then..."

When Zen lowered his voice even further and leaned over the table, Mina and Elysia followed suit.

"The Earl of Tus is attending this party, and he's meeting with Stoga right now. If we're going to find out what they're scheming, now is the perfect chance. I'll find Stoga's study as well as the room the earl is staying in and search them."

"Sir Zen?!"

"You're going to do that, father?!"

Zen quickly covered their mouths to keep them from shouting.

Mina attempted to ask a muffled "Is that possible?" and Zen smiled vaguely. He'd learned the art of undercover investigation during his time as a tax inspector as well as when he was in the Guards Bureau. Yet he couldn't guarantee he wouldn't be caught.

"So Lady Mina, could you take Elysia and go back to the inn before me?" He didn't want anyone but himself to be put in danger. If he was caught sneaking in, it was highly likely Elysia and Mina would get caught up in it too. But if they went back to the inn, then they had Keel to rely on.

A divine beast couldn't get dragged into human quarrels, so Zen couldn't entrust Keel to do something as risky as fight to protect them. However, if they needed to flee and Keel let them ride on his back, then not even his vanargand parents should make a fuss.

"Can't I be of some help to you here, Sir Zen? I'll do anything. Just say the word."

"As much as I'd like to take you up on your offer, Lady Mina, are you well-versed in the art of stealth and undercover investigation?"

Regardless of if you had the guts and will, whether you could actually do the job was a different matter. No matter how bad Zen felt about it, he had to tell her she'd get in the way. And Mina was definitely not a fool.

"I understand. I'll assist you by returning to the inn with Elysia." She couldn't hide her frustration, but she understood in the end.

On the other hand, Elysia didn't approve of Zen's undercover investigation in the first place. "I'm against this. There's no reason you should go that far, father."

Mina was a military officer, so she immediately understood that this was an emergency and trusted Zen's calm demeanor in the face of the potential danger, but Elysia was only a family member, so she implored him to change his mind. "Why don't we just leave it to Sir Cummel once we go home? Or mail a letter back to the imperial capital and leave it to Yohi—I mean uncle and aunt?"

"His Excellency Cummel and the state governor cannot brazenly butt into Alona's prefectural administration. If no evidence turns up, those two will be put in an extremely difficult position. That's why they can't recklessly get involved. The same goes for my brother and sister. No matter how much they believe my claims and how high up the ranks they are, this matter doesn't concern their official duties. They can't use any high-handed tactics. And so long as that remains true, Yohia and Sharla will be cautious. They don't make the mistake of putting themselves in compromising political situations. That's how they acquired their posts at such young ages."

"B-But..."

"However," Zen continued, "if I can gather physical evidence, then that's a totally different story. I'm sure Yohia and Sharla would use it to get the Director General of the Police Agency to act. And there's an extremely low possibility I'll be able to actually gather real evidence if I miss this opportunity."

"Ngh..." Elysia was a smart girl. With how thoroughly Zen explained it, she had to understand. "B-But..."

Elysia was conflicted both as an imperial princess and as his daughter. Zen took both of her hands and looked straight into her eyes. "Leave this to your father," he told her. He spoke not as a petty

government official, but as a father. It was just like when the assassin of the Vajra Temple had sought her life.

In the end, Elysia reluctantly relented. "I always think how unfair it is when you say that," she said sulkily. Her stiff hands suddenly loosened.

Zen also let go of Elysia's hands and said casually, "I'll get going, then. Take care of Elysia for me, Lady Mina."

He left the party venue behind, disappearing like smoke.

***

After Stoga left the party, he invited Emile to the hanging garden on the rooftop.

It was a cloudless night, and the moon and stars shone beautifully. Stoga, who was much too self-absorbed, firmly believed that the heavens were celebrating his birth too. The wintry night breeze was cold, but the many bonfires set up around the square gazebo and the thirty-one-year-old amber wine they sipped on warmed their bodies. These were luxuries that commoners could never get a taste of.

"I apologize for keeping you waiting, Earl of Tus. We can take it easy and chat now."

"Oh, it's quite all right. There were simply so many guests here eager to celebrate your birthday, and they were terribly excited to greet you for as long as they could."

"Ha ha ha! It's so difficult to be popular," Stoga laughed, completely serious. Emile also nodded with a smile.

"Similarly, I wanted to come and congratulate you as well. That's why I requested you invite me here."

Stoga didn't even have the awareness to tell that Emile was giving him fake smiles and flattery. They'd been frequently communicating through letters, but this was the first time in half a year that they'd seen each other face-to-face.

They amused themselves in trifling conversation for a short while, and when their glasses were half empty, they delved into the main topic.

"You made sure we're alone?" Stoga spoke to the figures around them. Aside from himself and Emile in the hanging garden, there were twenty guards. Five of them were Emile's knights that he'd brought from Baron. The rest were military officers under Stoga's direct command.

Baron's knights were dressed impeccably in suits that hid their affiliation and were on alert, standing at attention. Stoga's subordinates, in contrast, were slouching, sloppily wearing the military uniforms the empire provided. You could even hear some of them whispering a bit farther away, chatting among themselves.

However, Stoga didn't mind. It was because he knew they were all capable people.

Formally, they were appointed as military officers of the prefectural government, but they were actually mercenaries deployed by his father. They were a group of master swordsmen, which meant they desired to fight even more than they wanted to make money. No matter where Stoga went and what he did, he always had them by his side.

On the other hand, he couldn't trust the military officers who'd been appointed prior to his inauguration. It wasn't that Stoga doubted their abilities. It was that they might report him if they knew he was selling out the country to the enemy.

Of course, he'd been working on winning over the military officers and government officials within the prefecture. He first weakened the officials' sense of discipline by overlooking injustices and corruption. He wanted them to grow overconfident, and the more they tasted success, the less devoted they'd feel to their country, adhering to Stoga himself instead.

Even so, there was always a wolf in sheep's clothing somewhere. It was too soon to reveal his true intentions just yet.

"At any rate, everything's going according to plan, especially regarding the hunters we have now. Their numbers have exponentially grown," Stoga declared as if to brag about his capabilities.

"Excellent." Emile once again smiled. Stoga of course wasn't encouraging hunting to promote the prefecture's growth. Even he

understood that promoting something like hunting, unlike trade and agriculture, wouldn't lead anywhere. He was a legitimate bureaucrat who'd made it over the high hurdle that was the General Civil Service Exam.

So why did he want more hunters?

"Our country believes in your capabilities, Your Excellency Stoga, and we're steadily preparing ourselves for the invasion," Emile said smoothly with a smile still on his face. He said something so frightening as if it were nothing.

But it was true that Baron was planning to invade the empire's territory. Stoga was using his position as the Alona prefectural governor to collude with the earl, giving him assistance. They'd also decided that when that time came, Stoga would lead his prefectural army and revolt, and the two factions would attack the empire together. That was why they were currently growing their militaries in preparation.

Obviously the central government wouldn't permit Alona's prefectural army to expand for no good reason. They'd wind up suspecting that Stoga was setting up a military clique or planning an insurrection. Ever since the Pandelsen Revolt nine years ago, the empire was particularly high-strung about the armies in the countryside.

That was why Stoga had devised a plan to increase the population of hunters within the prefecture. In this era, during temporary crises, it was standard protocol to incorporate hunters into the normal army as rangers. They might not be as reliable as a regular army, but you couldn't belittle their archery skills.

To effectively disguise the fact that he was actually reinforcing their army, Stoga advertised his encouragement of hunters as a measure to facilitate the prefecture's development. Drastically lowering taxes, meanwhile, was solely to gain popularity. It'd ruin Stoga's scheme if none of the citizens joined in when he instigated the uprising, including the hunters. He was impressed with himself for how meticulous he was to evade such a tragedy before it happened.

"Our king expects much from your resourceful nature, Your

Excellency Stoga.” Emile’s smile further stroked Stoga’s ego. “Just as we promised, His Majesty has given his approval for you to remain in charge of your current territory once Cylin has been separated from Catalan. He can grant you the title of margrave.”

“Oh my... I’m truly grateful!” Stoga had decided to collude with the country of Baron for that very reward. He remembered that in Baron, a margrave was of a higher status than a marquess. It wasn’t a bad deal.

As a future marquess, Emile knew that Stoga would eventually stand above him. That was probably why he’d come all this way to celebrate Stoga’s birthday.

Stoga had been born the fifth son of a wealthy merchant, a big figure even in the imperial capital. His father was a self-proclaimed meritocrat, and he intended to have the most brilliant of his children succeed him. So when Stoga turned fifteen, his father gave him a store to manage, just as he had his older brothers. He put Stoga to the test, telling him to make his business flourish.

That’s how I demonstrated my talent for using people, Stoga reminisced.

Without him having to barely lift a finger, the supervisors under Stoga earned them more and more money. Naturally, he’d been set to become his father’s successor.

However, a small incident threw a wrench into his future. It was discovered that the most insignificant of the supervisors had been pocketing the store’s money.

Now what on earth did I *do?! That was just a bout of misfortune!* Even now, thinking back on it made the fury bubble up inside him.

At any rate, although that supervisor had been the wrongdoer and Stoga’s hands were clean, his father berated Stoga as incompetent.

Then, all of a sudden, his father said, “I no longer have any expectations of you. From now on, study to become a bureaucrat. Try to at least gain our family a benefit or two—it doesn’t matter what.”

His father was like an absolute monarch within the family, and Stoga could raise no objection to his demand.

Well, with my brains, father probably knew this wasn't too unreasonable to ask of me.

He studied hard for five years and went to take the exam at the capital. At the bare minimum, his father had wanted Stoga to pass the Intermediate Civil Service Exam, but that ended up being impossible.

For some nonsense reason, the empire wanted you to know how to wield swords and spears and know archery in order to become a civil servant. Tests on these skills were included in the exam.

However, Stoga had never held anything heavier than a lover, and he had no experience with physical labor. He was a man who'd even get exhausted during sex.

I can't deny that, objectively, I was spoiled by a good upbringing. So with no other options, he decided to take advantage of his outstanding education to cover for his weaknesses and challenged the General Civil Service Exam instead.

After three tries, he passed.

That was the only time that unsympathetic father of mine praised me. In addition, his father passed out bribes here and there to arrange Stoga's first position for him.

Although it was far from the imperial capital, it was a decent position as the assistant department chief of the Commerce and Industry Department at the state government office in a somewhat metropolitan area. His father had actually wanted to buy him a post in the imperial capital head offices, but it had been impossible under Emperor Heinri's rule. Catalan's central offices were full of annoying hypocrites who acted like a bunch of do-gooders.

That changed with the onset of Emperor Jemma II's rule after Emperor Heinri died in the northern backcountry. The foolish new emperor and the prime minister pestered Stoga's father for a hefty sum of money, and in exchange promised to grant Stoga the position of Alona's prefectural governor. There was no mistaking that Stoga was a bought official. Truly, this was how deep the empire's foolishness went.

However, neither Stoga nor his father cared how far the empire corrupted. His father was pleased that Stoga could abuse his

authority as prefectural governor and expand their family's business to the empire's south, which he had yet to tap into by that point. Stoga himself had been thinking about how he should use his position.

That was when Emile secretly came into contact with Stoga, and the two immediately hit it off.

Birds of a feather do flock together. I was deeply moved that a real noble immediately recognized my innate, truly refined character.

But how about everyone else? His father didn't recognize Stoga's talents. The empire's nonsense exam had cast aside his potential. Only Baron recognized his true worth.

That's why I'm abandoning my foolish father and the empire. Baron is a great country that suits me, and I can obtain a befitting position through them. I won't say I'm doing something so pathetic as taking revenge—this is merely one of society's absurdities being corrected. The heavens have granted me justice; that's all.

As he rocked his glass filled with amber wine, the corners of his lips curled up. He had yet to realize it himself, but his intrinsic spinelessness was on full display in his expression.

That imbecile Jemma II is continuing to support my nonsense policies, blissfully unaware of my plan to invite foreign aggression. And to ensure that he keeps supporting me, my foolish father is diligently feeding him bribes. I'm grateful. Thanks to you fools, wise men like me can get their lucky breaks.

Emile and Stoga raised their glasses.

"Long live the king."

"Long live the king."

Stoga cheered for the true wise ruler who deemed him worthy of nobility.

***

"Long live the king."

Stoga's and Emile's cheers reached the ears of the unruly military officers who were guarding the entrance to the hanging garden.

"If you're telling us to keep people away, the least you can do is

keep it down."

"For real."

They quietly snickered as they talked behind Stoga's back. Not a single one of the master swordsmen who served the prefectural governor respected him. They had carried that sentiment for a while now too.

There was someone who scolded them, though. "But a dunce like that is our master. He'll start a war and give us somewhere to fight. We must pretend to be loyal dogs until we can brandish our skills to our hearts' content."

Out of this group of slouching officers, he was a man who was particularly lax at his post. He was drinking on the job, seated on the grass as he leaned against the stone wall. He drank straight from the amber bottle and relished the burn it left in his stomach. The man was a little past the age of fifty, but the sharp glint in his eyes was just like a fine blade.

"Understood, master."

"I apologize, master."

The officers all apologized to him at once. They were all disciples who greatly admired the man's excellence with the sword. That was to say that this man was the backbone of this group of master swordsmen.

"The moon is beautiful tonight. It really makes you wanna test your blade on some folks." He gulped down the amber wine from the bottle while admiring the moon, red as blood.

He particularly stood out among the other officers in their messy uniforms. The man's left sleeve had been cut clean off, and on his exposed shoulder was a tattoo of the three-eyed dragon.

Chapter 6: Two of a Kind

I didn't think I'd find this much evidence this easily... This is kind of...

Zen's thought trailed off as he heaved a sigh in the face of the large quantity of letters spread out on the desk in front of him. He was in Stoga's study, which he'd found on the fifth floor. Most of the letters were from Emile. They still had their envelopes, complete with seals engraved with the earl's crest.

You're supposed to burn these after reading, but I guess he didn't even consider doing that. Or did he keep these as physical proof so the Earl of Tus won't betray him? You shouldn't get so carried away trying to act smart. They say the crafty schemer drowns in his own schemes, but I can't even give him that much credit.

He should've been pleased, but this was so anticlimactic, he was grumbling to himself anyway.

He had something to say about how he'd infiltrated the study too. In truth, he had struggled at first. Stoga's chatty military officers had been roaming about in their sloppy uniforms, acting as the mansion's defense.

But they were a dangerous bunch. When Zen saw how they centered their balance as they walked, he understood that they were capable.

He worked hard to keep out of their sight, occasionally taking cover and holding his breath, sometimes peering around the bend of a corridor, sometimes giving up and retreating. He repeated those actions over and over again.

His persistence paid off, though. He first found the bedroom that Emile had been provided. However, he decided to pass on it for the time being. There were four men who were probably Baron knights standing in front of the door. They were so serious about their

boring sentry job that they were controlling how often they blinked.

He figured it'd be a long shot for him to launch a surprise attack and incapacitate all four of them before they could shout, especially while unarmed. He also determined it was too soon to try.

I'll look for Stoga's study first.

He once again searched the premises and discovered a room in a corner of the fifth floor that might fit the bill.

There was one of Stoga's military officers on watch, standing—no, crouched down and fast asleep—in front of the door. A small wine bottle was tipped over next to him. He'd probably been jealous since you could hear the cheerful noise of the party from up here. It was likely he'd just succumbed to temptation. It didn't matter how capable he was with a sword; this meant that that talent was wasted on him.

See, this is what happens when you don't watch your subordinates and keep them in line.

Stoga was getting his just deserts.

Anyhow, Zen successfully sneaked into the study and succeeded in finding the letters of evidence. He couldn't take them all with him or Stoga would definitely be alerted to someone uncovering their plan, so he decided to only take two or three.

He hurriedly looked for the ones whose contents most centered around the main matters. In doing so, he grasped the full picture of Stoga and Emile's plan, including why Stoga had lowered the taxes and encouraged the surge in hunters.

You know... The Earl of Tus must be guiding him so skillfully that no matter how stupid Stoga is, he's still moving the plan forward. I'm sure Stoga thinks he came up with it himself, though.

As he scanned the letters that were filled to the brim with flowery words and flattery, he murmured to himself about how terrifying Emile was.

While Zen was disappointed, he ultimately chose two letters and tucked them into his breast pocket with their envelopes. From his experience in the Inspection Bureau, he knew these two documents would be enough physical evidence for the Police Agency to act.

Now it was time to leave. He had to hurry before the sentry outside woke up. Zen suspected it'd be trickier to stealthily exit the room than it had been to enter it, so he checked the fifth-story window to see if he could escape that way.

The camphor tree in the side yard was just close enough that it looked like he could leap to it. Now the problem here was that he couldn't close the window upon escaping, but he had a solution.

All right. I guess I should make them think a thief sneaked in to steal money and stuff.

He once again hunted around the study, pocketing many of the most vain items like the pure gold imperial seals, pure gold paperweights, and pure gold spare pen nibs. If a normal military officer had observed Zen's actions from the moment he broke in, they might shudder, saying he was too used to this.

At any rate, now he was ready to escape. Zen quietly opened the window.

However, that was when something unexpected happened. It was in the side garden that the fifth floor looked down on.

The clamor of the ball was unbelievably silent on this side of the yard, and the moonlight illuminated the deserted terrace and out-of-season flower beds. In the corner of the yard was a large horse stable, and Stoga's unruly officers were dragging a lady in a dress inside.

What's going on?! In the dead of night, Zen managed to strain his eyes—and realized that it was Mina.

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A short while before this all occurred, Mina and Elysia were heading back to the inn.

It was already completely dark, and the carriage moved agonizingly slow as the coachman relied solely on a lantern to guide him. Elysia was sitting across from Mina, her face so pale that Mina could tell even with just the moonlight. She didn't know how her own face looked right now since she had no mirror.

"Is father going to be all right...?"

They finally arrived at the inn and got out of their carriage to return to their room, but Elysia kept worrying about Zen the whole time. While Mina tried to comfort her, the truth was, she was worried about him too.

Was there really nothing I could've done to help him...? she asked herself over and over. However, it seemed worth mulling over that question, because by the time they arrived at their room, she'd found her resolve.

"Please wake up, Sir Keel." She shook Keel awake, who'd been sleeping in front of the living room fireplace.

Seeing Mina's tense expression, he immediately moved as if to say, *What's wrong?*

Mina believed that this wise wolf could understand human speech, so she gave a summary of the situation.

"I want you to protect Miss Elysia, Sir Keel," Mina said, entrusting that duty to him. Then, with conviction, she turned to Elysia and assured her, "Please feel at ease, Miss Elysia. I'll bring Sir Zen home." Mina balled her hand into a fist against her chest, making this vow as a knight.

By clearly putting her resolve to words, she steeled herself.

"What are you going to do?!"

"Even if they find out that Sir Zen has infiltrated Stoga's residence, he isn't someone who'd stand down and let them take him. I'm sure he'll do all he can to escape with his life."

As a fellow soldier, Mina knew how skilled and brave he was. She'd seen that for herself when they'd exterminated the twintail fox together.

"It's true that I wouldn't be useful in an undercover investigation, but when it comes to bulldozing through enemy territory, that's something even I can help with. If there's a disturbance in the mansion, it'll probably be because of Sir Zen. In that case, I can run to him immediately."

"B-But wait! That means you'll be heading into danger too—"

Elysia desperately tried to get Mina to stop. Elysia was truly a kind girl. But Mina couldn't let herself be swayed.

Mina had already learned the truth about Zen, who proclaimed himself a demoted petty official. He'd fight on the front lines if a monster appeared. He'd infiltrate enemy territory to obtain evidence that a powerful figure was selling out the country. Considering his position, no one would talk about him behind his back for feigning ignorance, but he was a model bureaucrat who absolutely couldn't let this slide.

Now that she knew who Zen really was, she couldn't turn a blind eye either.

She had to do something.

That was why she decided to go. And an unexpected individual sympathized with her determination—Keel.

He suddenly stood and wrapped his large body around Elysia like a prison, muffling her mouth with his fluffy coat. Then his sharp eyes told Mina, *Go.*

"I'm in your debt, Sir Keel!" she shouted and first retrieved her beloved sword from her room.

Taking off the dress would waste too much time, so she flew out of the room still wearing it. She tore the skirt, which was difficult to run in, making a rough slit.

"I need to borrow a horse!" When she made her request at the inn's front desk, an employee immediately went to supply her with one from the stables. It was good service despite it being so late at night. She was ever thankful to her uncle for arranging this top-tier inn for them.

There was no time to spare, so Mina followed the employee to the stable, and as soon as the person in charge there equipped a horse with saddle and reins, she wasted no time hopping on.

Relying on the moonlight, Mina rode through the town at night. She was heading straight back to Stoga's private residence.

Horses could see well in the dark. Naturally, you still needed the right riding techniques, but if you trusted the horse to navigate the path, you could get by without a light.

Before long, she could see the mansion's silhouette, and she rode into the front yard.

There were many carriages parked there that the guests had arrived in. The party appeared to still be in full swing, judging by all the coachmen hanging around with nothing to do as they waited for their masters to return.

At the same time, if there seemed to be no trouble afoot, then that meant Zen probably hadn't been caught yet.

After Mina got down from the horse, she bundled the reins and tied them to a nearby tree.

To avoid the main area where all the carriages were, she took a big detour as she headed for the mansion, using the edge of the grounds as a guide.

There were torches intermittently placed around the front yard, but Mina knew that even in the dark, she stood out like a sore thumb with her dress and sword at her side. It'd cause a disturbance if the coachmen saw her.

However, trouble was awaiting her at this more unpopular end of the yard.

There were two sentries. Mina immediately furrowed her brow. Although she couldn't see well in the dark, she could still tell clear as day just how unruly these officers were, sloppily clad in military uniforms. As a fellow military officer of the empire, Mina found them incredibly unsightly.

However, she hadn't come here to scold them. She lowered herself, using the shadow of a hedge that had been trimmed into a geometric pattern, and went to sneak past them.

She'd never trained for covert operations before, so she was on edge, fearing they might notice her.

After she crawled along the ground for a short while, that was when she heard some disturbing things from those unruly officers.

"If we get into a war with the empire, do you think we'll fight against the Imperial Guard?"

"I dunno. But I hope they show up."

Mina stopped moving automatically and pricked up her ears.

"The outcome of the Pandelsen Revolt was basically decided once the Imperial Guard was deployed, right? Are they strong?"

"That's how we lost, yeah. But I don't know how strong they

really were since I'd already been sent to the rear because of my injuries."

"I see. That's unfortunate."

"You're a newbie here so you probably don't know, but most of us, including our master, were assembled under General Pandelsen's flag. And we're the survivors who feel like we never got to ride that war out to the end. Our lust for battle became like glowing embers that continue to smolder in our hearts to this day."

"That's why this time, we want to fight on and on until the bitter end—until we burn out, right? I know I feel the same way!"

What's going on? What on earth are they talking about? While Mina's gut told her she couldn't ignore this, she was impatient because she just couldn't understand what they were talking about. Their voices were distant too, which added to the problem.

She supposed she should get closer to listen better.

Or maybe not. She was torn on what to do...

No, I came here to bring Sir Zen home. She set her priorities back in line. She couldn't forget Elysia's pale face as she worried about her father.

So once more, Mina started crawling along the hedge.

Unfortunately, though, for someone who had no foundation in the art of infiltration, this task was too high a hurdle.

She suddenly heard a voice.

"Where are you sneaking to with that dangerous-looking weapon, little lady?"

Another two officers were closing in on her, drawing their swords. She'd been so distracted by those first two sentries that she hadn't realized there'd been another pair approaching her.

She'd been hiding in the hedges to be in the first two sentries' blind spots, but she was in full view of this other pair.

This is where my lack of experience gets me! Holding back the urge to click her tongue, she stood up and drew her sword, no longer having any reason to hide.

"What?!"

"An enemy!"

The original two sentries also came closer, and she wound up

being completely surrounded.

"It's one woman. Don't move!"

One of the sentries blocking her path came at her with his sword. Mina repelled it with her own blade, and they fell into battle. In an instant, their weapons had already clashed ten times. *He's strong...! But...*

Determined, she fought back in her dress and dealt a powerful slash attack. With a flash of her blade like it was slicing through the moonlight, it deeply carved a diagonal red line across the sentry's chest.

"She got Mr. Raffle!"

"You sure know how to put up a fight, woman!"

"Who do you work for?!"

Normally, she'd proudly proclaim, *I'm Mina Houck, the guard of His Excellency the Nazalf Prefectural Governor Cummel!* but of course she refrained this time.

"I'll take her next!"

"No, me!"

"You two just sit back and watch!"

Rather than immediately attack her, the remaining three started bickering.

Are they underestimating me because I'm a woman? No, I don't think that's it...

If her gut was right, she sensed that they desperately wanted something to pit their full strength against—a desire that was not quite the same as chivalry. She had too little information to know it was the result of their pride as master swordsmen.

"It's on, lady!" One came to attack, and she rose to the challenge. When she flung that man's sword far away like she'd torn it from him, another man lunged at her.

She crossed blades with him, and it was a close battle. It was her third consecutive win, but these sentries were leagues tougher than her fellow knights.

But they aren't as tough as Sir Zen! That thought gave her the strength to keep her head high and fight.

However, there was always somebody out there better than you.

“The moon really is beautiful tonight. It yearns for an offering and entices me to kill.”

The instant Mina heard that voice, a chill ran up her spine. Goose bumps rose along her skin, and her courage instantly withered away, so suddenly that even she didn’t understand why.

“Wh-Who are you?!” she stammered.

“Do not ask. Do not give me your name. Only speak with your blade.” The man emerged from the darkness, appearing in front of her. His right hand loosely held his sword.

He might’ve been in his fifties. His left sleeve had been completely sliced off, and the exposed arm was extremely built. It was hard to believe he was a middle-aged man. And the tattoo of the three-eyed dragon etched onto his left shoulder was staring directly at her.

“My apologies, master! This woman got everyone else, including Mr. Raffle...”

“No matter. I was just in the mood to put some fresh prey to the test.” The tattooed man, who the officers called “master,” released a breath that reeked of alcohol.

Mina was still a distance away from him, but he smelled so strongly of booze that she screwed up her face.

Ngh... What am I hesitating for? It wasn’t like he’d shown her what he was capable of yet, but she was paralyzed. It was like her instincts refused to let her fight.

She’d never experienced this before.

“You aren’t coming? I’ll give you the first shot, woman.”

She didn’t respond.

“I see.” The tattooed man didn’t assume any sort of proper stance and casually came at her with a slash. He was going to take the large sword he held in both hands and swing it down diagonally from overhead, leaving himself open.

Mina felt he was underestimating her too much. She thought she clearly saw through his sharp sword technique. She thought she’d evade it, throw off his balance, and launch a counterstrike against him.

With that thought in mind, her body moved.

"Hah!" Determined, she maneuvered her sword and went to intercept him.

However, at that moment, the muscles in the man's exposed left arm swelled so much as he swung downward that it looked like they'd doubled in size. At that same time, the sword's path was suddenly diverted.

Mina couldn't understand what had happened. In the world of her common sense, making a wide stroke, then having your blade abruptly change trajectory midway was impossible. This was certainly a demonic sword.

She couldn't move in time to receive the attack well, and she sustained a blow to her right shoulder.

Shock and pain exploded from the wound, and her grip went slack, sword dropping from her hand. Her right collarbone and shoulder blade and the bones around her shoulder were all broken.

However, that was as far as it went. He could've easily cut her down, but he stopped right as the blade shallowly bit into her shoulder.

"It's too bad," he said with a sobered face. "I thought you were a spirited woman...but it's not worth killing someone who can't speak on my level."

The tattooed man then turned on his heel. His back was defenseless, but she couldn't pick up her sword again. Her will to fight had been shattered.

"Hold her captive in the stables. No one will hear her no matter how much she screams and cries. I'll have Stoga judge later whether to have her confess who'd sent her or kill her without bothering."

"Yes, master!"

The tattooed man gave his orders and left. Then the other officers came in one after another.

Before she knew it, she was surrounded by a crowd of people. She'd been so overwhelmed by this darkness and the tattooed man's might that she hadn't realized so many more had arrived. Now that things had come to this, she didn't have the means to fight back anymore.

Holding her injured right shoulder, she solemnly hung her head as

they took her away just like the man had ordered. To ensure she wouldn't escape, four men boxed her in on all sides as they walked with her, and even more military officers surrounded them.

That was when the officer walking to her right mumbled, "Mr. Raffle wasn't that strong for a veteran, but he was a good boss man who looked after folks. Everyone's gotten his help at least once, and I've always respected him." He hadn't been among the first four she fought with.

With an expression darker than the dead of night, he continued to murmur his curses. "I won't ever forgive you for killing him."

"Hey, stop it!"

"She won against Mr. Raffle fair and square."

"I'm sure Mr. Raffle's satisfied that he could have a good place to die."

Surprisingly, the other subordinates, who should've been his comrades, spoke up to defend her. She'd seen these people as nothing more than thugs, but she could finally see their pride in their swords.

However, only the man on her right maintained an attitude that told her he wouldn't let her die an easy death. "No, I won't forgive her. I won't feel right until I avenge him."

Mina's mood dropped even further. It was like she'd swallowed lead. It seemed her fate would be left in Stoga's hands, but so long as these men were around, only a merciless future awaited her no matter what path she took.

I'm a knight. I need to prepare myself. She took her hand off of her wounded shoulder and stood up straight with pride. Unfortunately, she'd been useless to the very end, but she hoped to the heavens that at least Zen had escaped safely.

And it was at that very moment that a gust of wind blew.

"Wha—?" Mina gasped, speechless.

"Huh?!" The officers were bewildered.

Of course they all were.

The four men who'd been surrounding Mina had collapsed. Struck with surprise blows on their heads, they'd lost consciousness.

Zen now stood next to Mina.

"You got your hands on something pretty nice there. I think I'll take that." He sounded so jarringly carefree before he snagged a sword from one of the fallen men.

This man had come running bare-handed from who-knows-where, blended into the dead of night, slipped past the large crowd of hoodlums, and, like a gust of wind, launched a surprise attack that rendered all four officers around Mina powerless.

"Sir Zen... What are you doing here...?" she asked in disbelief.

This time it was Zen who fell speechless. "Wh-What do you mean? I saw you were being taken away, so I came to rescue you...?" he asked cautiously as if to say, *Should I not have done that?*

"I-I look even more pathetic now..."

"But Lady Mina, you came back because you couldn't leave me on my own after all, right? You got your sword and intended to help me escape, right? But you got unlucky and were surrounded. Hindsight is twenty-twenty. I don't think you're pathetic."

"Oogh..." It was like Zen was saying, *I know and I understand.* Mina was happy that he understood what'd happened so well as if he'd witnessed it himself. That being said, she also really felt like running away. If there were a hole, she would've loved to crawl into it.

Meanwhile, the officers who had been stunned by Zen's unfathomable entrance began coming to their senses.

"Y-You!"

"Where did you come from?!"

"Never mind that! Don't let them get away!"

Around fifteen people remained, and they drew their swords one after another.

"Hey, why not let us go? None of us will have to get hurt that way. You don't look like the most loyal people to me anyway." Zen's words held no intention to fight, nor a desire to ridicule them. He was fully sincere in making that proposal.

"Shut up!" The unruly officers gradually tightened their circle around Zen and Mina. The ones who'd been vying for a one-on-one

match against her before weren't hesitating to take advantage of their numbers now. With how they held their swords with their shoulders and elbows jutting out, they were like cats with their fur standing on end.

Based on sheer numbers, it should have been Zen who trembled in fear, but instead it was the men surrounding him, overwhelmed by his quiet might.

As for Zen, he assumed a stance that was the complete opposite of theirs.

No, could this even be called a stance? All he was doing was standing there casually, loosely holding his sword, his body completely relaxed. He bore a close resemblance to that man with the three-eyed dragon tattoo who'd defeated Mina.

"Now!"

"Right!"

One after another, Zen took down the officers who came in all at once with their swords.

With a brief "Excuse me," he put his left hand around Mina's waist and held her close to his side as he wielded his sword with his right. And as he struck back against the officers, he always aimed for their right arms. Without taking their lives, he rendered them powerless by chopping off their dominant hands.

It should be easy to evade once you realize that, though, Mina thought, being a soldier herself. Once they understood that he was only coming for their arms, the officers should have been able to protect themselves accordingly.

But despite how easy it should have been, they were still being mowed down. That would have been impossible if not for a significant difference in skill.

"You monster!" One of the officers launched himself from behind with a sword. Mina couldn't react at all since the attack had come from her blind spot.

However, in a counterattack, Zen whipped around and cut off the man's right arm.

"Does he have eyes in the back of his head?!"

"Is that even possible?!"

The officers were flabbergasted. They were Mina's enemies, but she understood their reactions painfully well.

She reflected back on the battle with the twintail fox. Back then, Zen had been facing off against the monster alone as he effortlessly evaded the rain of their allies' arrows. It had been a superhuman feat that was so indescribable, you could only wonder if he had some supernatural power to see behind him.

"Why don't we stop already?" Zen asked the four officers who remained. He'd sent eleven of their comrades' hands flying and had them writhing in pain on the ground. "Shouldn't you patch them up? You're brothers, aren't you? Isn't that more important than being Stoga's loyal dogs?"

"O-Okay..."

"We surrender..."

The remaining four threw down their swords. Zen nodded once, and they rushed over to their friends, who were gasping in agony. The officers tore up their military uniforms to use as bandages and tightly bound their comrades' right arms to stop the bleeding.

"Well done, Sir Zen!" Mina exclaimed. "Let's hurry and return to the inn. Miss Elysia is waiting for us."

"I'm sorry, Lady Mina. Does your wound hurt very badly?"

"Huh?"

Zen removed his hand from her waist and examined her right shoulder. While she was perplexed at why he didn't want to go home immediately, she admitted, "To be honest, it hurts a lot. But it's not unbearable."

"I really am sorry, then. But can you hang in there a little longer?"

Mina blinked repeatedly. She found Zen's words increasingly perplexing. "I'm a knight. It's my duty to endure pain when necessary. However, what are you planning to do?"

"I was thinking about apprehending Stoga, is all."

"Whaaat?!" Mina let out a hysterical cry. His words were just so absurd. "What are you saying?! Explain this right now!"

"Um, well... Where to start..."

"I want to hear it from start to finish!"

At Mina's demand, he told her, "I understand," and, despite looking extremely awkward, began his explanation. "I made a show of how I was going to go off and obtain physical proof of Stoga's treason, but honestly, that was only if it was within the scope of something I could reasonably handle alone. As a mere minor official, I didn't think I should get involved in anything beyond that."

He's as reckless as always. Her face stiffened, probably from the pain in her shoulder.

"But I felt so moved when I saw that you came to save me, Lady Mina. Your heart truly is that of a knight, not a guard. I was deeply moved when I realized you weren't someone who could turn a blind eye."

"Um... Well..."

You're the one who can't turn a blind eye, she thought.

I saw the way you acted, and it moved me, she thought.

You're saying these things, but it's actually the other way around, she thought.

"That's why I felt I should take a page from your book and do something above and beyond my duties."

But for some reason, it made her so happy to hear those words that she burst into tears.

Somehow, she truly felt her efforts had been rewarded.

She felt seen.

For some reason, she just kept crying.

Zen scratched his cheek awkwardly. "So, instead of getting ahold of that physical evidence and leaving the rest to others, maybe I'll go and catch him myself. You'll come with me, won't you? It's definitely dangerous, but I won't tell you to go home anymore."

"Of course!" She said it with her full chest. When Zen was the one asking that of her, the pain from her shoulder just flew away.

Chapter 7: Zen's Sword

They immediately figured out that Stoga was on the rooftop. It was because when they looked at the mansion from the garden, they saw countless glowing torches, and Zen headed straight there with Mina.

Along the way, he rendered every one of Stoga's officers they came across powerless, sending their right arms flying. Then when they reached the hanging garden, they discovered Stoga and Emile drinking together in the square gazebo.

"What is the meaning of this, Lord Mina?" Stoga asked without even trying to hide his anger. Once again, he treated Zen like a nobody.

So Mina replied firmly, "I could ask you the same thing, Your Excellency Stoga. Are you aware that instigating foreign aggression is a crime that warrants capital punishment?"

"Instigating foreign aggression? I have no idea what you're talking about," Stoga insisted.

"Don't act like you don't know. In that case, how do you intend to explain the Earl of Tus sitting next to you?" Mina pressed Stoga even further, though he still refused to admit it.

Meanwhile, Emile jokingly shrugged his shoulders, played dumb, and asked, "Are you sure you aren't confusing me for someone else?"

Baron's knights and the rest of the officers still guarding Stoga sneered arrogantly at Zen and Mina.

Mina ground her teeth, but Zen was unfazed. "Let's quit the charade already." He took the two letters out from his breast pocket. "As you can see, I've seized the letters from the Earl of Tus that were sent to Mr. Traitor here. If I present these to the proper authorities, you'll be finished."

"What?!" Stoga looked at Zen for the first time. The prefectural

governor's eyes were steeped in rage and hatred. Next to him, Emile covered his face with one hand as if to say, *Oh, god...*

Zen continued, ignoring how these two scoundrels were panicking. "You wear those flashy clothes because you yearn to become a noble, right, Your Excellency Stoga? Then could you graciously come along with me? Show me that you have the dignity of a noble."

"Shut up! Shuuut uuup!" Stoga raised hell, spitting and pointing a finger at Zen. His actions didn't hold the slightest trace of elegance or refinement befitting of a noble. "Kill him! Cut down this awful man right now!"

"What unwitty comebacks."

Stoga grew even angrier at Zen's wry smile and barked, "Nabak! Times like these are precisely why I pay you a high salary! Now show me that it was worth my money!"

A middle-aged man, who was leaning against the square gazebo pillar, threw aside the amber wine bottle he'd been guzzling. His left sleeve had been cut off, his shoulder exposed. Zen couldn't ignore the three-eyed dragon tattoo etched on the man's skin.

"Be careful, Sir Zen!" Mina warned. "That man is the one who uses that demonic sword technique!"

"Understood." Zen assumed a cautious stance as he stepped forward. He held his sword in both hands, putting it in front of him in a traditional stance.

He'd purposefully held his sword loose at his side during the earlier fight in the yard because it allowed for more flexibility when surrounded. In a free-for-all, you needed to have a perfect mastery of adaptability. He'd of course learned that by imitating that swordsman he'd encountered in his teens. In exchange, he'd paid the high fee of that night haunting his dreams, leading him to cry out from the nightmares.

On the other hand, in a one-on-one fight, you were stronger if you held your weapon the traditional way. At the very least, he hadn't perfected his adaptability *that* well yet. How about that man named Nabak, though?

Nabak kept his hold on his sword loose by his side and casually

shortened the gap between them. The dragon tattoo's three eyes grew steadily closer, and the nightmares of Zen's teen years flashed across his mind.

"That woman behind you was a letdown. Now, are you qualified to speak with me?" asked Nabak.

"How about we speak with our blades instead of our mouths? Or were you being literal?"

"Shut up!" Nabak curled the ends of his mouth and casually came in with an attack. He put his blade over his head, striking down with a wide, diagonal swing.

Zen clearly saw the path it was going to take and moved to catch the blow with his sword.

However, in that instant, the muscles in Nabak's exposed arm bulged dramatically, and the sword's trajectory bent mid-swing.

But Zen had also changed his position to receive the blow. He clashed his sword against Nabak's redirected strike and easily deflected it.

"What?!"

"Judging by your tattoo, it seems you've also met that swordsman, but what was that just now? Were you trying to use that demonic sword technique? All you did was try to brute-force your sword's path into bending, right? Frankly, it'd be faster to swing it normally. You're just a paper tiger."

That swordsman's demonic sword technique was something else entirely. Its workings were way more mysterious. To this day, Zen couldn't understand or imitate it.

"I understand," Zen continued, taking the offense this time and speaking with every slash of his sword. "You can't forget that night. You see it in your nightmares even now too, right? And yet you can't help but admire him. You copied him and got his tattoo. You know, I won't laugh at your feelings."

"Sh-Shut up! What would a brat like you know?!" Nabak shouted angrily as he struck back.

"No, I get it. We're fellow pupils, after all, right? Although I don't know which one is the senior here—which of us met that swordsman first?"

“What are you talking about?!”

“Oh, you didn’t actually pass?” Zen charged in with an impressive strike. Nabak hurriedly raised his sword and managed to stop the attack a hair’s breadth away.

“He’d probably actually been testing someone else,” Zen said. “Maybe you were just watching from the sidelines, and you abandoned that person and ran?” He spoke like he had watched it play out firsthand.

“I’m telling you to shut up!” Nabak flew into a rage. It seemed Zen had hit the nail on the head.

Zen threw a few more powerful slashes. Nabak failed to divert them, and he struggled to block them too. In the end, Zen sent Nabak’s blade flying.

In a normal duel, this would mean Zen had won. But this was a battle to the death, no holds barred. And Nabak wasn’t Zen’s only opponent.

A shadow was coming at him from behind. It was an assassin dressed fully in black, their face also concealed beneath a black hood. They’d been lurking under the veil of darkness that shrouded the hanging garden, hiding their presence so well that even Mina, who’d been watching over Zen a small distance away, hadn’t sensed their approach.

This masterful assassin was neither Stoga’s subordinate nor Nabak’s pupil.

Emile quietly chuckled to himself. He knew the assassin’s true identity, so he felt at ease. They were the trump card he’d brought from Baron.

However, as Zen was facing the disarmed Nabak, he immediately spun right, swinging his sword behind him. He defended himself against the assassin’s surprise attack at the last second.





"Do you have eyes in the back of your head?!" The assassin should've silently fulfilled their duty, but they were so surprised that they had to shout.

Zen didn't overlook this opportunity. Once again tonight, he demonstrated his magnificent skill in turning his body halfway and sending his attacker's right hand flying. Zen easily beat Emile's trump card without even knowing it.

People often say I must have eyes in the back of my head, but that's totally impossible.

He was just dutifully following his sister's teachings.

It had happened one day in his teen years.

As Sharla was bullying—er, training him, she suddenly said, "You're often told vague things like 'Sense their presence' and 'Hide your presence,' right? So what do you think 'presence' is exactly?"

Sharla's saying some cryptic things again... Zen thought at the time. However, he didn't completely dismiss it and gave it some honest thought. Sharla would hit him otherwise—er, Sharla's words were often very meaningful, after all.

After a bit, he gave up. "I really don't know. Can you tell me?"

She brought her fist down on his head. "It's a person's breathing," she told him.

Zen agreed as his head throbbed from her strong blow.

"Try it on someone next time. If you hold your breath and approach them from behind, they won't notice your presence. But no one can hold their breath forever. If you pay attention to that, then you can sense *their* presence. That's even if you can't see them yourself."

Later, when he tried to sneak up on Sharla while holding his breath, she noticed and punched him.

"Not good enough. I could hear you inhaling," she scolded him.

But his attempts usually went well when he tried them on other people. It was useful during his time at the Guards Bureau and the Inspection Bureau. He just followed those teachings and incorporated them into his training.

Sharla was a prodigy in military arts, but she didn't just explain

everything away as perception and intuition. She was skilled at actually verbalizing and translating what she knew into techniques through her research and diligent studies. That was why, to Zen, Sharla was his real teacher in military arts.

Although he admired the swordsman's strength and imitated his techniques, Sharla was the only one whose teachings he kept in mind.

"Master!"

"Please use this!"

Using the opportunity as Zen cut the assassin, one of the other unruly officers tossed Nabak a replacement sword in its scabbard.

"Defeat is not in my dictionary!" the tattooed man declared, leading to his students cheering him on. He once again came forward to attack.

He sure loves talking with words, not blades. However, Zen already knew that Nabak was just putting up a front. They didn't need to cross swords even ten times before Zen gained the upper hand.

"You monster!" Nabak shrieked, his words uninspired.

"I'm a painfully mediocre commoner, though? Although I have worked hard this whole time." Nabak had actually met the real swordsman, yet if he wasn't able to tell the difference between that monster and Zen, that must mean Nabak was seriously deficient.

"But this doesn't make sense! For over forty years, I've spent all my time relentlessly studying the ways of the blade. How long have you been 'working hard'? Ten years? Twenty? It doesn't make sense!"

"I think it makes even less sense to binge-drink your way through your diligent studies." Zen couldn't help a wry smile at the stench of alcohol coming from Nabak's breath as he spat at Zen.

However, Zen wasn't a young man who was high up enough to make fun of this man's life. In the end, he faced Nabak with earnestness.

Zen held his sword over his head. "I know two real military arts prodigies." One of them was Sharla of course. The other was a

fellow colleague who'd passed the Advanced Civil Service Exam. The swordsman was an outlier. "If you'd fought against either one of those two, your head would've been sent flying the moment your eyes met."

He put his feelings into his blade and swung it down, straight as an arrow. It was the king's sword technique that Sharla had passed down directly to him.

Then he sent Nabak's right arm flying. That was what he'd been aiming for since the start.

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Stoga had already fled the square gazebo. He'd probably panicked upon seeing Zen handle Nabak too. Stoga ran away, prioritizing his own safety.

"Where are you going, Your Excellency?" Mina stood in his way. She pointed the tip of her sword at him as if to say, *You think I'd let you escape?* She still couldn't move her sword arm well thanks to Nabak's strike, but her left would be enough against this spindly man.

Meanwhile, the blade's sharpness made Stoga squeak.

"Hurry up and save me!" he screeched, vilely barking out orders at his officers. "I gave you all that money, so pay it back to me and *move*! Kill this woman!" His showy, gaudy, noble-like clothing made his wretchedness even more glaring.

But Stoga's subordinates were so absorbed in cheering for their master that nobody tried to spare a hand for their employer. Even Emile and Baron's knights were no longer going to move a finger.

"It's over..." Stoga fell to his knees.

"Stop acting like this is some kind of tragedy. You've sold out the country and are simply reaping what you've sown." Mina didn't forgive nor sympathize with him.

Soon after, Zen cut Nabak's right arm, and the man who'd lived his life off of blades and booze let out a hair-raising shriek, and the sounds of the subordinates sobbing as they witnessed their master's defeat reverberated throughout the hanging garden.

Stoga's eyes were still colored in despair. The only ones left were Emile and the five knights from Baron.

"Will you come quietly?" Zen asked Emile.

"I'm the Earl of Tus. A petty official of the empire has no right to judge me." Emile brazenly refused his request.

"You suggested earlier that we mistook you for someone else. What happened to that?"

"I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about. If you have a problem with me, put it through the embassy," Emile answered shamelessly. "Or do you intend to punish me right here? At the discretion of a mere petty official? Sure, if you would like the empire and Baron to war with each other so badly, then just try."

Emile daringly provoked Zen even while faced with his bloodstained sword. He was so bold even though Zen had just displayed how strong he was—how if he felt like it, he really could cut Emile down here and now. Emile still had the nerve to smile.

What a piece of work... Mina thought. He was different from Stoga, who was unable to keep his emotions in check and whose mask had immediately peeled off.

"I understand. Please feel free to return to your home." Swallowing back his anger, Zen released Emile, who was a master at controlling his emotions. "However, I will report you to the proper authorities. You'll likely receive a severe reprimand from the embassy later, so prepare yourself."

"If that's what you think, then so be it—that's your truth. You'll learn that a mere petty official cannot make sophisticated political judgments." Emile continued to talk back until the very end and left with his guards. He was revoltingly unashamed.

Once the Baron noble was gone, Zen looked disgusted and grumbled, "What a piece of work..."

Mina nearly burst out laughing, forgetting their situation for a moment. She hadn't expected them to be thinking the same thing about Emile.

However, she immediately pulled herself together and said, "It's a shame, Sir Zen."

"No, it's true that I had no power to push him into a corner once

he doubled down like that. I did wonder if there was a chance this atmosphere would intimidate him and he'd surrender, though. Well, I guess he isn't the type to do that," Zen said nonchalantly. It was true that while he'd proposed apprehending Stoga, he hadn't said a word about capturing the Earl of Tus too. "We carried out our purpose, and even though it wasn't a smashing success, it's still something to celebrate."

"You're right."

Zen firmly gripped Stoga, who was still crumpled on the ground, by the back of the collar, and Mina gave a big nod.

The party was probably still ongoing, and there were likely many guests left. They hoped that only the main man of the party would leave the scene, while the partygoers continued to enjoy themselves. This had been a terrible birthday for Stoga. He'd reaped what he'd sown, though.

"Now let's go home, Lady Mina."

"Yes. To where Miss Elysia and Sir Keel are waiting."

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"In all my twenty-nine years, I've never had to flee into the night before!" Emile complained inside the carriage. Even so, he looked like he was enjoying this state of affairs.

"I was on the edge of my seat. If that petty official had gotten overzealous and injured you, Sir Emile, your father would've killed me." A middle-aged knight, who was accompanying him as both his guard and conversation partner, let out his inner discontentment. "I find Stoga unbelievable too. He invited you without keeping the situation under control and put you in danger. This incompetence is beyond the pale. If I had my way, I'd like him to take responsibility and be mercilessly executed."

"You've hated that man since the beginning."

"What's there to like?" he asked. "He was born into such a privileged life, but he hasn't worked hard or cultivated his potential at all! Everything is everyone else's fault. Every achievement is thanks to him. A fool like him managed to live so long indulging in

every luxury in the book with his parents' money. It makes you question Catalan's meritocracy." The middle-aged knight was a man who had been born into a poor family and earned his current position through blood, sweat, and tears, so Stoga's spoiled nature made him want to vomit.

"Well, it's true that Stoga is a man with plenty of shortcomings, but in a sense, that might have been unavoidable. The reason he turned out that way can all be explained with one sentence."

"Which is?" The middle-aged knight was very curious about Emile's analysis, as he had a reputation for being particularly knowledgeable, resourceful, and possessing excellent political strength even among the many other young noblemen in Baron.

With a calm expression, Emile said, "Anyone who isn't born a noble is no more than a monkey." His tone of voice conveyed that this wasn't a joke nor was it sarcasm. He was serious.

For an instant, the middle-aged knight refrained from trembling. "I see. It's exactly as you say." Since he was old and wise, he managed to smile and look like he actually agreed. Although he couldn't help but feel like his sharp-witted employer saw right through him. He got the impression he was only forgiven because Emile thought that only fellow monkeys could get angry at what a monkey did.

Regardless, Emile slumped his shoulders in an exaggerated fashion and continued his complaints. "His Majesty the King truly just ordered me to become the monkey trainer this time. It was so tedious to train Stoga and get the plan running smoothly."

"B-But in the end, that monkey's incompetence got you exposed by that petty official. I can't believe Stoga kept your letters just like that! Whatever he was planning behind our backs, it was foolish."

"Oh, that's not particularly a problem. I had a maid write those letters under my direction, so the handwriting is completely different. Even the imperial seal on the sealing wax is a shoddy imitation. I'm sure someone who was trying to frame me for a crime was just impersonating me and made contact with Stoga." Even if Zen raised objections through the embassy later, there was no physical evidence that could be tied back to Emile.

Stoga hadn't doubted those letters were the real deal, never bothered to look into them, and in the end, had been keeping them for blackmailing purposes. He was simply ignorant and uneducated.

"Stoga planned to guide our troops and rise in revolt himself, but I didn't care whether it succeeded or even if it was discovered. I planned it like that."

"Even if it was discovered?!" the knight exclaimed.

"This fool, who bought his position from the current foolish emperor, was planning to instigate foreign aggression. That's a terrible scandal, isn't it? I'm sure the empire has many good, honest bureaucrats, so I'm sure they intend to slowly continue their political battle against the emperor and prime minister to drag them out of power in the next decade or so. But what will happen if the scandal that just happened gets out? What will the empire's loyal bureaucrats think?"

"They'll think they need to get the foolish emperor out of power right away or else the empire will be in trouble?"

"Precisely! They won't be able to take their time anymore. They'll up the aggression of their political battles. I'm certain the foolish emperor and prime minister will put up a more intense resistance, and Catalan's imperial court will become a mess." Emile looked like he was truly enjoying himself. One side of his mouth twisted up. Every single one of this young man's pretty smiles were fake. His true smiles made him look like a demon. The knight knew that very well after being in his employ for so long.

"So my success was decided from the very start, and I thought I had quite the boring role, but...there was one unexpected thing that came from all this."

"Which was?" The middle-aged knight asked while Emile kept his twisted smile, his delight laid bare.

"Zen Leadon," said the demon.

The knight didn't know who he was talking about. His employer didn't elaborate either.

Gazing out the window, Emile began to muse aloud. "There are plenty of rumors circulating the imperial capital about the three Leadon siblings and how the fourth one is just some tea dregs,

but...there actually is a fourth sibling—an amusing one. It has piqued my interest in Catalan a little. The older three are stuck in the imperial capital, so they just won't entertain me. But the youngest brother is in Nazalf. He's just right for a toy."

The knight kept silent. His employer had completely slipped into his own world. After knowing him for many years, the knight knew very well that he wouldn't be back for a while.

Epilogue

The oldest brother of the four Leadon siblings, Yohia, had been taking care of the work he'd brought home in his parents' study. His younger sister, Sharla, was paying him a visit, so she became his conversation partner as he took a break.

They'd always gotten along. However, there were limits. Yohia's nature made it so he was standoffish to everyone, and Sharla had an avid independent spirit. As a result, he had few memories of his sister coming over like she was now, just to hang out because she had nothing to do.

As for why she frequently showed up these days, that was probably because...

She's probably lonely too since Zen's gone, Yohia's analysis had concluded.

In that case, well, Sharla was a mother of two, so he felt she could just spend more time with her kids, but Zen was different, he supposed. She probably had an unnamed desire that could only be fulfilled by talking with her siblings.

Sharla rudely parked her shapely butt on the edge of Yohia's desk as he had his work spread across it. "Can you believe it, Yohia? After he sent back that assassin of the Vajra Temple, now he's exposed a prefectural governor's treason and has sent him to the imperial capital too. Oh, I don't know if Zen wants to act like he's a big shot or a normal guy! You feel the same way, right?"

Even now, she talked about Zen every time she opened her mouth. No, she might've just wanted to talk about him with someone that badly.

"No matter where Zen goes or what he does, he'll always get the job done. I *am* surprised that he exposed Baron's scheme and prevented it right away, though." Yohia, who considered himself an indifferent person, humored his sister's feelings. Or it might be that

he couldn’t help wanting to talk to someone else about Zen too. However, Yohia was an even bigger workaholic than Zen, so talking about his little brother always went in a pragmatic direction. “I think it was the right call to shelter the imperial princess in Cylin. And sending Zen there too was like killing two birds with one stone. It’s all thanks to your keen insight.”

“It was just a guess.” Sharla frowned. She wasn’t looking for flattery since she wasn’t terribly attached to him the way she used to be.

However, that hadn’t been his intention at all. “It’s already been around seven years since you first identified Baron as a threat. You said they might attack the empire soon.”

“That’s just the hunch I got after reading over so many reports from the Imperial Guard. I couldn’t explain my reasoning, and nobody but you would have believed me like that, so it’s nothing to brag about.”

His younger sister had always had a strangely sharp intuition. On top of that, she had the brains to verbalize and turn that intuition of hers into theories whenever possible. However, for times she couldn’t, she also was daring and pragmatic enough to move based off of those hunches.

While Yohia didn’t believe that his thinking skills necessarily paled in comparison, when you took intuition into account, there were times he felt useless, wondering whose brain the empire actually needed.

So Yohia said, “Boast as much as you want, Sharla. After seven years, you’ve proven in the end just how crafty Baron’s territorial treachery toward the empire is.”

“Thanks to our youngest brother!” Sharla freely smacked Yohia’s shoulder as if to say she was way prouder of Zen than herself and that she wanted to share this delight.

Then she poked his forehead. “And if you’re going to talk about bragging rights, I think you have that right too. You were the one who heard out my uncertain anxieties and suggested we move Zen to the Baron Ambassador Bureau. You were also the one who proposed sending Her Highness Elysia to Cylin with him. Those

strategies both paid off and led to Stoga's arrest today. Oh, your planning and conceptual abilities are so admirable! I wouldn't have been able to make it happen by myself. I would've just fretted endlessly about the risks," she praised him. She must have been in particularly good spirits today.

Yohia had had no idea she looked at him that way. *We greedily yearn for something we don't have. Or maybe our family is stable thanks to how we complement each other.* Yohia, who seldom smiled, couldn't help a bitter quirk of his lips.

However, he said, "I want Zen to remain in Cylin as a preventative measure against Baron."

"Yeah. He suits being worked to the bone like a donkey."

The two siblings could make fun of Zen because they loved their brother. No matter how strategic they were, there were limits to how much they could keep Baron, far from the imperial capital as it was, and its schemes in check. It was reassuring to have Zen there in their stead.

***

However, Zen had no idea what his siblings were thinking.

"Todd Village really does put me at ease."

"There's truly no place like home."

"*Man, it makes me sleepy...*"

Zen, Elysia, and Keel were all relaxing. It was the day they'd returned from Alona City.

Zen and Elysia were wrapped up in Keel, who was curled up in front of the living room fireplace. It was warm and fluffy.

March was already just around the corner. Zen wanted to stay like this and take it easy until spring, though he knew that was wishful thinking.

"Ms. Donna was thoughtful as always."

"Mr. Kulzawa's fish were delicious too."

Keel only yawned.

Zen and Elysia were both full, and they started dozing off a bit, lured in by Keel's drowsiness.

Mina had brought them home by carriage, and they'd reached Todd Village past noon. The house had been empty for several days, so naturally, the fireplace and stove were unlit. Zen thought it'd be a bit of a pain to start going around relighting everything.

That was when Donna and Kulzawa from next door had paid them a visit.

"We saw that you're back, Mr. Zen? I bet you're having trouble since you don't got any fires going. I brought a stick of smoldering charcoal."

"You haven't had lunch yet either, I bet. We stewed some fish, so how about you have some?"

They were incredibly kind and thoughtful. Starting a fire from scratch using a tinderbox was hard work, so Zen really appreciated not having to do that.

The carp, caught by Kulzawa and prepared by Donna, was delicious. Zen had thoroughly enjoyed the Alona carp he'd eaten on their trip, but once he had a taste of the carp from the old familiar Anett River tributary, he couldn't help exclaiming, "Yes, this is the stuff!"

It hadn't even been half a year since they'd come to Todd Village, but in his heart, he already considered it his second home.

"We returned one day earlier than planned, but that might've actually been for the better," Zen said. They were originally supposed to have done more sightseeing in Alona City the day after the birthday party, but since they'd arrested Stoga and needed to hand him over to Cummel, they'd been forced to cut their trip short.

On the way home in the carriage, Zen, Elysia, and Mina took turns whining about how it was such a shame they couldn't do more sightseeing.

However, Elysia, being someone who was good at finding the positives, said something quite deep. "Well, we already enjoyed it enough. It may be better to treat traveling the same as eating—stop before you're completely full."

"Fishing for Alona carp was fun..." Zen sighed.

"And it was fun to wear a dress and dance with you, father."

As they looked back on their trip while relaxing at home, their

cheerful conversations were also kind of nice.

And while he remained in that happy mood, Zen departed to the world of dreams with Elysia.

"Mr. Zen, I heard you're back?!"

"Please help us!"

"The chief collapsed, and we haven't been able to do anything around here!"

The sudden sound of knocking and the sad cries on the other side of the door woke Zen up. This was a complete surprise.

"Okay, what is going on...?" Zen couldn't ignore it, so he headed to the front door. Of course he was greeted by his three coworkers, Max, Anna, and Namnam.

"We all calculated and recorded the estimates for the potato harvest this year in the account books, right?"

"However, right after you went to Alona, we discovered a serious error!"

"I'm sorry! It was my fault! I made a huge miscalculation!"

"At the chief's instruction, we immediately went to rewrite the account books, but that led to all of us doing overtime every day."

"The chief was so busy that it made him dizzy, and he collapsed from overwork."

"He took the responsibility of cleaning up after my mistake, saying it happened because he hadn't done his job as supervisor well enough, but he pushed himself too far!"

"We lost even more manpower, so we have no idea what to do anymore!"

"We know you're supposed to still be off tomorrow, so we feel bad, but could you please help us?"

"I'm sorry, I'll make up for it sometime!"

"We'll work hard too!"

"It'd be super helpful if you could give us instructions in the chief's place too. You can do that, right, Mr. Zen?"

The three of them took turns explaining, and Zen got an understanding of the situation.

"Oh my, it sounds like they really need you, father." Elysia, who'd

come to the entrance behind him, was smiling proudly. Those words and this situation somehow gave him déjà vu. Something like this had happened when they'd redone the New Year's festival too.

Just as he thought that, he heard another voice.

"I'm sorry, Sir Zen. Could you assist me at once? It's urgent!" Mina abruptly rode into the yard on horseback, her sorrowful cries reaching his ears. She was supposed to have returned to Nazalf City with the carriage and coachman after dropping Zen and the others off at home. That meant something must have happened that sent her immediately back to Todd Village alone.

"Did something happen in Nazalf City?" Zen asked.

"While I was away, my father was setting me up for marriage without asking me!"

"That's something you should handle yourself!"

"Please don't be so cold! He looked really menacing and told me, 'I haven't said anything about the way you've been living your life, but I need you to get married this year.' I don't know what to do!"

"I mean, it's not like I don't get how you feel, but—!" Zen didn't know what to do either!

As Zen was at a loss, Elysia said, "She's a friend we just took a trip together with. What's wrong with helping her? However, please don't do something so cliché like pretending to be her boyfriend." It was hard to tell whether she was really supporting Mina, or if she was actually smiling.

However, in truth, Zen couldn't be heartless. It was hard to ignore a problem in front of him.

"Help us, Mr. Zen!"

"Please help me, Sir Zen!"

"Ugh, fine, I understand! Organize everything that needs to be done and order them by priority. We'll clear up the most urgent matters first!"

Once again, everyone was depending on Zen.





Afterword

It's been a while, everyone. This is Akamitsu Awamura. Thank you very much for picking up volume 2 as well. If you had fun reading about Zen and the others' little travel story, then that makes me happy!

Meanwhile, I myself seldom travel, but last year, I went with my friends Senri Akatsuki (author of *Undefeated Bahamut Chronicle*. It's great!) and Riku Misora (author of *Chivalry of a Failed Knight*. It's also great!) to Jozankei Onsen in Hokkaido.

We'd never seen that much snow at once before, so we planned six months in advance and went at the end of January hoping to see it. However, right before we went, the news said that Hokkaido was experiencing a mild winter. We were all complaining about our luck and how we'd have to just give up on seeing snow.

However, when we actually arrived there, there was so much snow that it looked like there were geographical layers. We didn't have anything to worry about! When we talked about this everywhere we went, the Hokkaido residents went, "There's no way we wouldn't have snow," and laughed at us.

In this society, we have information at our fingertips, but there are many times when you don't really get it until you experience it for yourself. That's one of the real pleasures of traveling.

And so(?), it's now time for my special thank-you corner!

First, I thank my illustrator, Tapioca-sama, who vividly captured the group and fun atmosphere of Alona City. In particular, the imperial princess on the front cover looks so happy, it reinvigorated me to write about Elysia's slow life while she's released from the shackles of her position! Also, this has nothing to do with Alona City's vibes, but I really laughed at how you drew Keel shaking his whole body so intensely to fling off all that muddy water. Thank you very much!

I thank my editor, Abe-sama, who once again supported me with all he had for this volume. And I also thank the editor in chief, Obara-sama, who supported Abe-sama. I'm incredibly sorry that my manuscript submission didn't go smoothly, and in the end, you both gave me tremendous help and support throughout the process.

I thank my close friend of many years, Tsucchi. I realized I've been an author for over fifteen years now too. It's thanks to you for supporting me since before my debut. Please continue to watch over me.

And, of course, I thank each and every one of my readers who picked up this work. I'm sending you all the utmost love from Hiroshima. Thank you very much!

I hope from the bottom of my heart that I can eventually present volume 3 to you all.

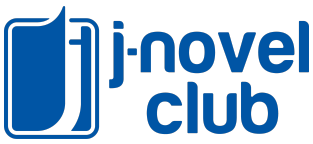












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Take These Talents Elsewhere: A Delightful Demotion to the Countryside Volume 2
by Akamitsu Awamura

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