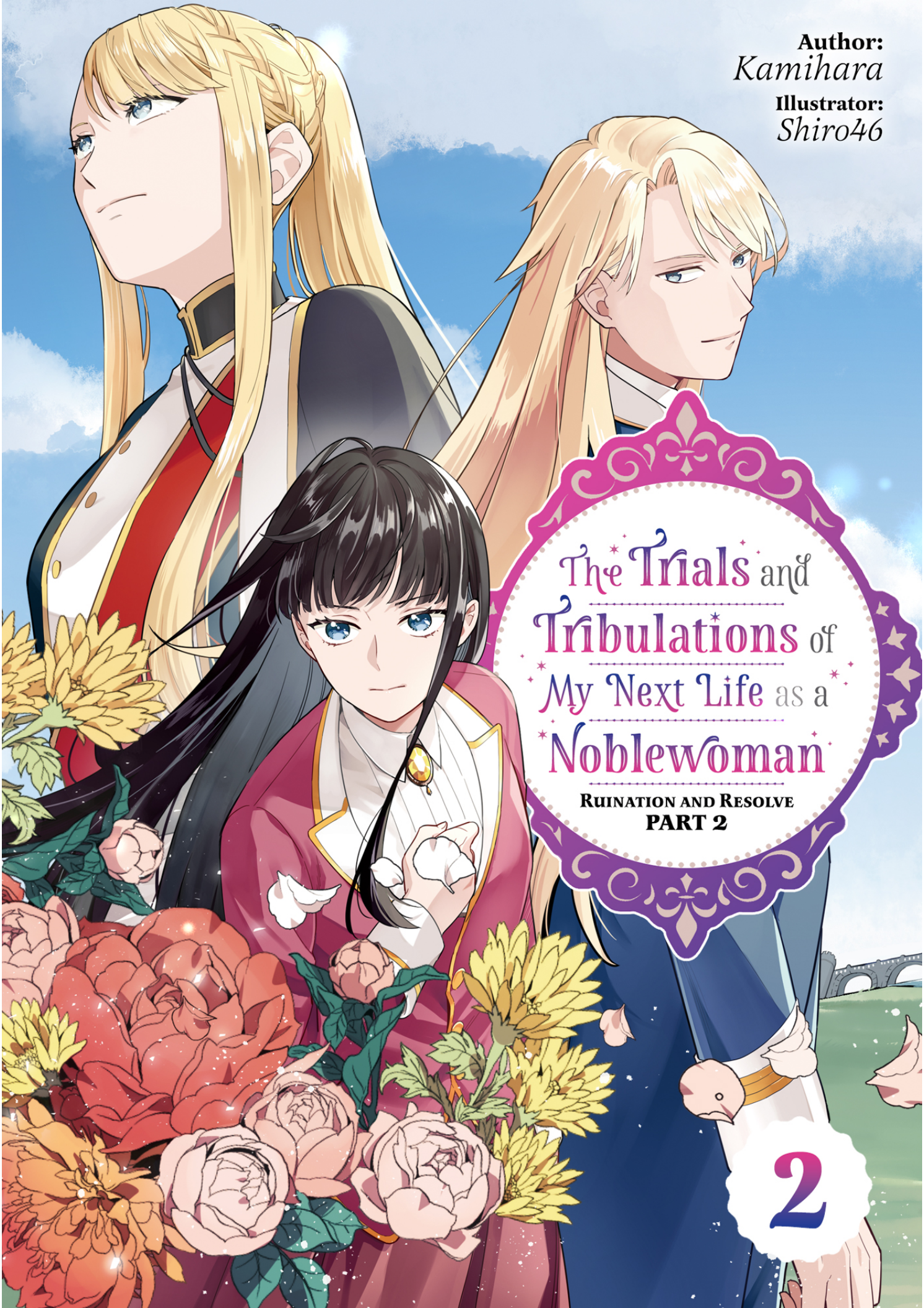
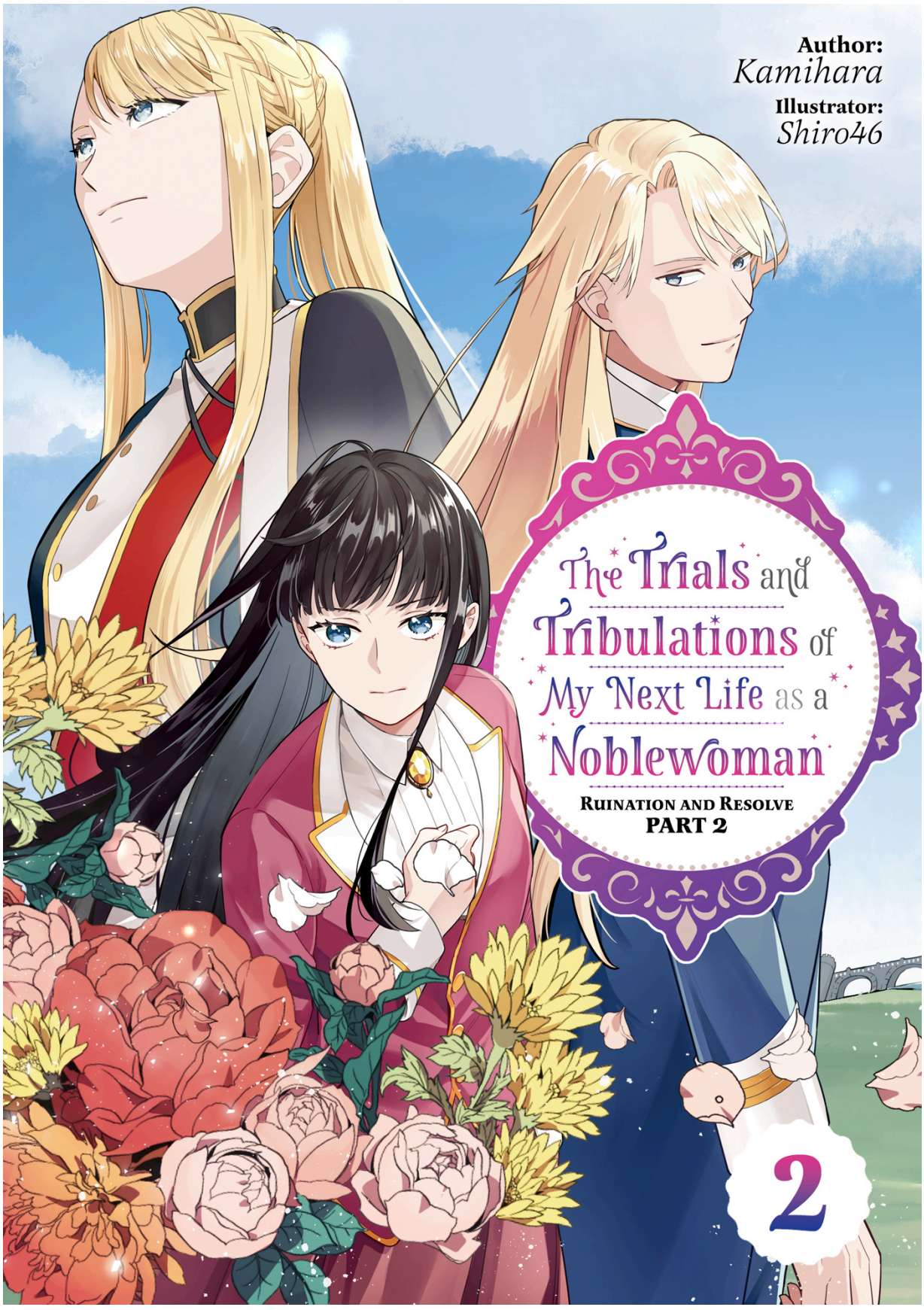
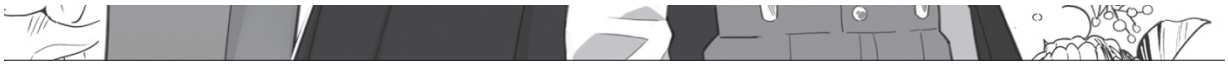

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The Trials and Tribulations of My Next Life as a Noblewoman
Ruination and Resolve
PART 2
2


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The Trials and Tribulations of My Next Life as a Noblewoman 2

Characters





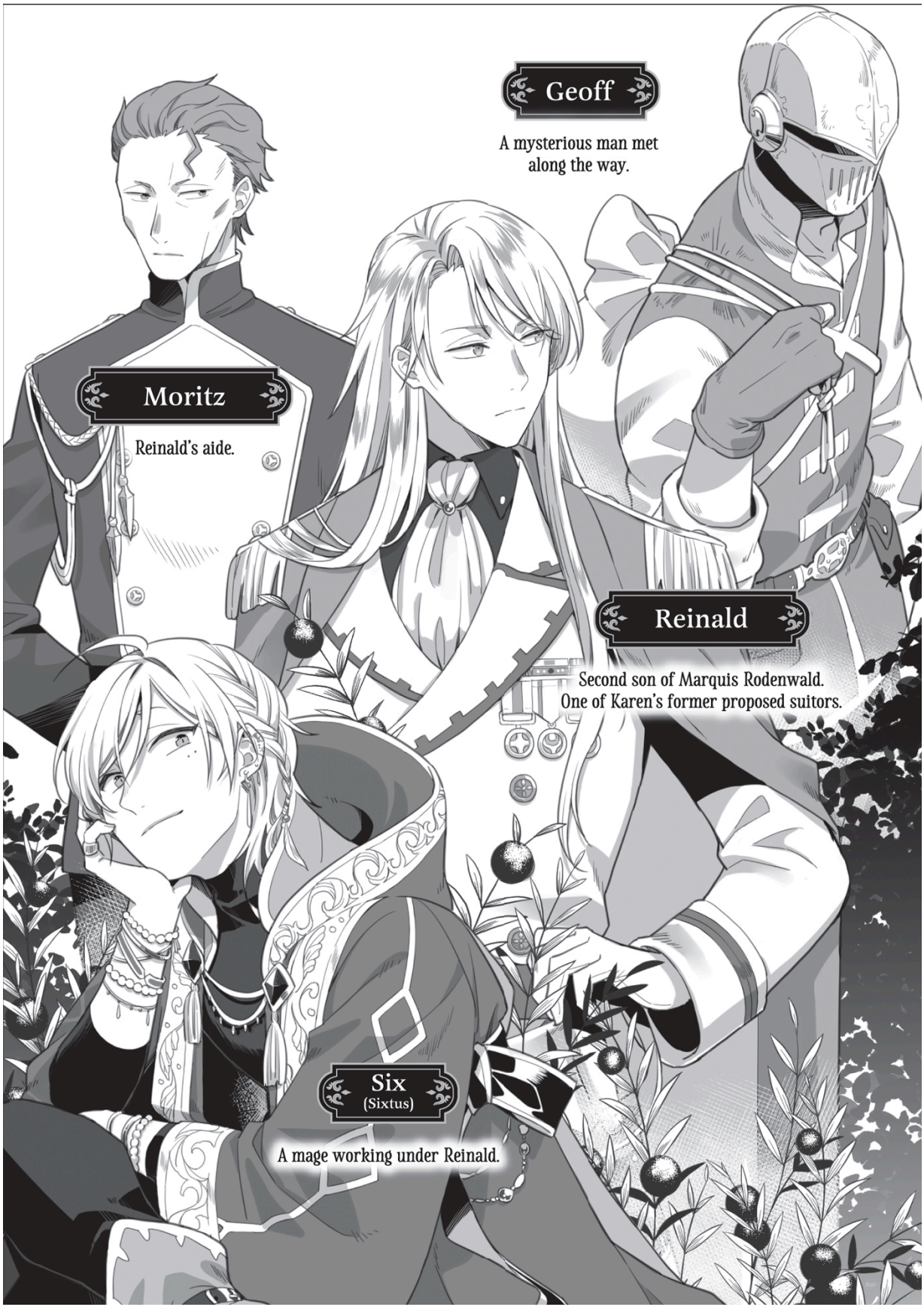

Geoff
A mysterious man met along the way.
Moritz
Reinald's aide.
Reinald
Second son of Marquis Rodenwald.
One of Karen's former proposed suitors.
Six
(Sixtus)
A mage working under Reinald.



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8: The End of a Nation

I was brought to a room in which tea was already being prepared by a young man with tanned skin, while a girl kept watch over the door. Nika arrived soon afterward. She looked flustered and apologized before putting her sword down.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "I invited you to tea only to arrive late myself."

"I only just got here," I replied. "But I'm sure you must be rushed off your feet. Are you quite sure it's okay to make time for me like this?"

"With Moritz overseeing proceedings, I doubt I'll be needed for anything pressing. More importantly, the place you call home is now practically overflowing with our people. Haring hasn't been particularly attentive, has he? I was worried that perhaps you all found yourselves under pressure."

"Oh, well... I mean, everybody was just doing their jobs..."

"I knew it. I apologize. It was completely out of my hands..."

"It's nothing for you to be apologizing about."

Nika, too, was under pressure, I could tell just by looking at her. Her shoulders seemed to shrink with her apology, and it made me feel awful.

"I'm sure it's all been quite hard on you," Nika said, "and while I'm aware it will take some time for you to *truly* be at ease, I hope you'll accept some of the food and drink we've prepared."

In the middle of the rounded table were plates of cheese and bread perfect for a light meal. Nika took a seat while tea and cutlery were placed before us.

"It'll be just the two of us," Nika said. "I'm not particularly well versed in matters of etiquette, so I do apologize in advance if I do anything unbecoming."

"I'm not particularly comfortable in formal settings myself," I

replied, “and so I’m happy just to be able to eat casually like this.”

Having skipped breakfast, I was starving. We ate bread, sipped at tea, and quite naturally our conversation went to the topic of the empire.

“Wilhelmina is the name of the imperial princess, yes?” I said. “Today was the first time I’ve ever seen her. She cuts quite the dashing figure. Does she always dress like that?”

“She prefers the men’s uniform for comfort and ease of movement,” replied Nika. “Naturally most people are surprised when they first meet her. She’s much less about jewelry and silk, and much more about horse riding.”

Wilhelmina was twenty-three and still single. No marriage plans, and no hint of any lovers to speak of. But somehow she was never at a loss for suitors, and rumor had it they were always sending her gifts. One of the more interesting of these rumors concerned comments she’d made upon receiving jewelry from an imperial noble seeking her good graces. The noble had given the princess diamonds of considerable size, and the princess had accepted them with thanks. The noble was overjoyed. He felt he’d made a good investment in future developments only to discover a distressing truth some months later.

“The story goes that the nobleman discovered that the diamonds he’d given to the princess had ended up in the hands of a jewelry merchant,” explained Nik, “who had bought them for quite a considerable amount of coin. The princess had taken the proceedings and funneled it straight into the salaries of her personal guard.”

“Oh... So that’s how she deals with gifts, is it?”

“A few days later the nobleman approached the princess to complain about her behavior, at which point she promptly told him that a gift received was a gift to use as she liked. He was then summarily dumped.”

Given her entrance, I hadn’t imagined for a second that Wilhelmina was a noblewoman of the silver-spoon-in-mouth variety. In fact, I was somewhat envious of what appeared to be an indomitable spirit.

"I suppose her stalwart nature is a given seeing as she's the only heir to the imperial throne, though...I can't help thinking that she'd be exactly the same regardless of that fact," commented Nika.

"She's quite the woman, then, I take it."

"Indeed. She leads by example when it comes to pushing for governmental reform, and she's very popular among women too. Given her own extensive military experience, she's well aware of the hardships women suffer in the military. Her work has been a blessing to all of us."

I could tell by the way she spoke that Nika didn't despise the princess. This surprised me somewhat, and it gave me the courage to ask a more pointed question.

"Just to be clear, the princess did call Reinald 'brother' earlier, yes?"

"She did, and that's something I thought I'd talk to you about."

"Are you sure? It isn't a matter of the state?"

"But you want to know, don't you? That's why I called you for tea today."

"How perceptive of you. By all means, then; I'm all ears."

Nika placed some ham and cheese between slices of bread and put it on her plate. I couldn't put my finger on exactly how, but Nika was at ease here in a way I'd never seen before. I'd always known her to be the sort of person to be perennially tense; always on guard.

"But assuming that I wasn't imagining things," I said, "when Princess Wilhelmina referred to Sir Reinald as brother, it left everybody shocked. What was that, exactly?"

"How perceptive of *you*, Miss Karen."

"It was difficult to ignore... You all looked so happy."

"I tried to hide that," Nika replied. "I must assume that we all failed."

She smiled in a way that struck me as bashful. Nika was truly at ease now, and it was then that she relayed to me the facts concerning not just Falkrum but the empire as well.

"Until now, as far as the empire is concerned, Princess Wilhelmina was the only heir to the emperor. However, in capturing Falkrum, His

Excellency—no, I suppose I should call him His Highness now—earned himself the right to succession."

"The princess *did* say he'd brought about exactly what the emperor wished for, didn't she?"

"Yes, but before I get into that... How much do you know of the situation with regards to the emperor's successors?"

"Next to nothing, I'm afraid."

I had to admit it. Nika, however, did not laugh or smirk, and instead she simply nodded.

"Though Wilhelmina has been the emperor's only heir until now, the truth is that the emperor has numerous other children."

"Aside from Sir Reinald, you mean?"

"Yes. Even in his old age the emperor is...sprightly, and he boasts some twenty consorts at present."

Wilhelmina was the daughter of the queen. She was the only child born between the emperor and empress, but the emperor was a man of many tastes, and as such he took many lovers. It was not uncommon for these women to, for reasons unclear, meet with miscarriages. And yet, some of the children of such relationships—Reinald one of them—survived and were raised to adulthood.

I realized then that what I'd heard from Whateley was not rumor at all, but in fact truth. The emperor was a womanizer and a hedonist, and to his children he'd declared the following:

"If it is my attention you seek, then earn it with achievements worthy of my gaze. If you wish for heirship, then so be it; but bring me an offering of the size of an entire nation. Achieve such heights and I will recognize you as my own and grant you a place among my family."

Reinald, too, had of course heard these words. As for when Reinald could have met with the emperor, he had apparently gone in secret during military exercises and similar expeditions. It seemed that he had a certain worth—or at least a usefulness—to the emperor, who had given up on Falkrum some thirty-odd years ago. Reinald was, in essence, a spy for his father.

"It was my understanding that it was the emperor who granted heirship," said Nika, "but Wilhelmina herself referred to Reinald as a

sibling. If she has already decided that they stand on even ground, then the emperor will not deny her that judgment."

"So that was the first time she had ever called Reinald that?"

"Indeed. She usually refers to her half-siblings by their names only. In calling His Highness 'brother,' she was acknowledging his achievement."

With a single world, Wilhelmina had made Reinald an official member of the imperial family. In that sense, it was no surprise that shock was the order of the day, and yet there was more to everyone's reaction than just shock alone.

"But is it really possible for the princess to simply accept an older sibling like that, when until now she has been the one and *only* heir to the throne? I can't imagine her taking such news so placidly..."

"You raise an excellent point, and ordinarily, you'd be right. It is the whim of the emperor that allows such a thing."

Whim?

But there was no doubting it; it was indeed the word she used.

"I told you that the emperor will recognize his children as his heirs, and true to his word, His Highness will be placed among the emperor's successors. However, this alone does not make him first in line."

"You mean to say that Sir Reinald has only earned the right to compete with the princess for the throne?"

"Yes. In terms of age, Reinald comes first, but Princess Wilhelmina has her lineage behind her."

"And lineage trumps all?"

"Correct. The princess cannot be defeated in this regard. Reinald has been mostly helpless until now, but the circumstances have shifted."

I see. That explains Nika's joy; it was the relief of one who has struggled for many long years.

"He brought Falkrum into the empire's fold with minimal casualties," continued Nika. "It is an astounding achievement, and many are sure to acknowledge his value. Some will even see this moment as the birth of a new imperial prince."

"Oh, I see. So it's like the feats of a great mage, as far as the

empire is concerned?”

“How convenient it would have been were he actually able to use magic.”

The word “magic” seemed to bring a cringe out of the woman, and I wondered if I’d touched on something unintentionally. In any case, at the arrival of a new competitor, Wilhelmina had simply stated that “the whole thing was horrendous.” And perhaps this was the very reason that Reinald had wanted to take Falkrum himself—he knew that by bringing about Falkrum’s downfall, and doing it by his own hand, he would insert himself into any conversation concerning the imperial throne. With the background now clearer to me, including the Latorian incident, Moritz’s words felt all the heavier.

“So Falkrum faced invasion even if Reinald never did a thing,” I said.

Nika’s expression spoke more clearly than her words ever possibly could.

“But why was Latoria involved?” I asked.

“The answer to that is unclear to me also,” replied Nika. “All I can say is that either the emperor or the princess was in talks with them.”

She was far more open to answering my questions than I’d expected. I decided to ask her something I’d already asked Reinald himself.

“If Sir Reinald had known about the attack on Conrad, he wouldn’t have joined, would he?”

“We heard about it far too late. All I know is that things were in motion far before he could consider any such options.”

“And what do *you* think of it, Nika?”

“I’m a soldier, and so answering this way feels somehow cowardly, but...I did not feel very good about the attack on Conrad.”

I saw a flash of sorrow in her eyes. I knew she was not the sort of person to put on airs, and so I did not believe that she was lying.

I see. So there really wasn’t any time.

Until recently, Reinald was simply a part of one group in the empire. The nation was not a unified front, as I have mentioned

previously. But with a Reinald versus Wilhelmina dynamic taking shape, things would change.

The invasion of Falkrum was inevitable, but the leader of the invading forces should have been Wilhelmina. She had joined forces with Latoria to ensure the territory came under imperial control.

Did that make Conrad nothing more than a cover for smuggling in the invading troops?

To do anything else would have raised suspicion, and yet, the movements of Latoria were still unclear. I decided to put it off until later. Even if they had taken Falkrum as they'd originally planned, it would have been a mess. When I said as much to Nika, she did not disagree.

On the other hand, for Reinald—whose aim was to enter the succession race—having his sister succeed would only cause him trouble. Even if it took some forcing the issue on his part, it was essential that he bring about Falkrum's collapse *before* Wilhelmina's arrival so he could meet her at the door, so to speak.

It was all about leaving a strong impression.

"I hope you won't take this the wrong way, but you seem to be quite fond of Princess Wilhelmina," I said. "And yet you remain in Reinald's camp?"

Nika did not take any offense.

"He saved my life. Hasanain's too."

Hasanain was the tanned young man who'd served us tea. At the mention of his name, he gave us a neat forty-five-degree bow. Nika twirled her red hair with a finger and smiled.

"Serving under the princess isn't always easy for half-Latorians like us," she said. "His Highness shows no such discrimination. If you prove yourself able, he will give you a chance. That alone makes him a master worth serving."

While I may have left out a few of the smaller details, this amounts to a summary of my conversation with Nika.

"Thank you for talking to me," I said. "And for going into such depth."

"His Highness will soon return from his discussion with

Wilhelmina, and it will be all the harder for you if you do not have some grasp of the details," replied Nika. "When it comes to Mr. Stone-face in particular, his expectation is that the circumstances should be obvious to all who work by His Highness's side."

"Hmm...?"

"He's not easy to work with, is he? That brazen rock head."

Wait, could she be talking about...Moritz?

Her names for him kept changing, and she spoke rather casually, but there was a definite spite in each word. I knew I couldn't be at Reinald's side every waking minute, which meant that naturally I wasn't always privy to the whole picture. But that raised another question: Why was it necessary for me to understand the circumstances now? It was then that Nika surprised me.

"Please meet with His Highness," she said. "You're the best person for the job."

I was not scheduled to meet with Reinald today and was about to protest as much, but as far as Nika was concerned, the matter was decided.

"This is a personal request of mine," she said.

"N-Nika...?" I uttered.

"He's been working almost nonstop of late," she explained. "And while I don't doubt that he's in fine health, he *is* tired. It would be good for him to have someone to talk to."

At this moment, I wondered if perhaps, in truth, *this* was the reason she had called me for a conversation.

"Should I assume that by 'request,' you mean that the decision has already been made...?"

Nika's smile said everything.

Yep. No running away from this one.

"I must say, you're far more sprightly than usual," I commented.

Nika looked down at her hands. She thought for a moment, then nodded.

"I'm perhaps a little more at ease," she said. "I can finally return to the imperial capital. It fills me with joy to think I can finally see my parents again... But I must put such thoughts aside. There is still work to be done."

"No, it's only natural to be happy at the thought of seeing your family again."

Nika realized what she'd said; I could hear it in her gasp. She also realized that I wasn't hunting for sympathy or apologies. She kept those words calmly to herself.

"The deep scarlet of your hair is truly stunning, come to mention it," I said. "You mentioned you have some Latorian blood in you—was your mother Latorian, or your father?"

"In my case, it was neither. My grandfather was the Latorian in the family. There was great reform in his time, and during that period many left the country."

Nika explained that in the distant past, Latoria had once had a king that many had called crazy, and he had been fond of indulging in his authority.

"Many who left were capable individuals, and those with the means to support themselves thought of their gifts as a saving grace, my grandfather among them. You'll find that many who lead the wandering mercenary groups hail from Latoria."

"But in your grandfather's case, he ended up in the empire."

"Yes, I was told countless times in my youth that the family's reputation was built on his achievements in battle. The family history was constantly shoved down my throat."

"But that history remains, and it is a wonderful thing, is it not?" I said.

"Admittedly, I only came to appreciate it upon coming of age."

Nika's sigh in that moment was a troubled one. It struck me then that a child's lack of interest in the history of their ancestors was a throughline that existed regardless of factors like nation or even world.

And to think that we are grateful for such stories when we grow up...

"It sounds like you were blessed with quite the grandfather," I said.

"He's still lively and energetic, even to this day," said Nika. "And if my mother's letters are anything to go by, troublingly so. He never misses the opportunity to whine about how he'd love to see a great-

grandchild."

"Ah, so you can't escape such comments either, then."

"Unfortunately not. And let me tell you, it's far easier when it's just my parents."

I enjoyed our chat, and it continued until we were informed that Reinald had finished discussing matters with Wilhelmina. All in all, Nika and I had talked for about an hour. The room she was to take me to following our conversation, however, was not one of the more luxurious locations favored by the royal family, but the office Reinald had been assigned as a military official. When I asked if Reinald hadn't moved since talking with his sister, Nika mustered a wry chuckle.

"Mister Sullen wanted a nicer room, but His Highness despises extravagant displays of wealth," she said. "He turned the request down, stating that it would only make things more complicated for security."

"Not a fan of extravagant displays of wealth, you say..."

"He isn't one to spend much money on himself. To call him prudent gives a nice ring to it, but his austerity is such that it's problematic. Now more than ever, I might add."

I wonder if perhaps he was considering the feelings of the Falkrum citizenry?

Regardless, Moritz had gone from Mister Stone-face to brazen rock head to Mister Sullen. Clearly Nika called him whatever she felt like. Nobody around even flinched at the names, and so perhaps this was simply Nika being herself. Regardless, we encountered the man himself with a few subordinates as we walked toward Reinald's office.

"Saganov," he said. "His Highness is resting now that he has concluded his talks with the imperial princess. Did you not even consider that bringing him further visitors might only exhaust him further?"

"True enough, were it someone he was not familiar with, but I don't see any problems if it is only Miss Kirsten."

"That is not the issue. For all intents and purposes, he is assured the position of crown prince. What I am telling you is that you

cannot simply waltz in to see him as you might have until now."

"A very different story when I'm bringing *a friend* to see him. I will grant that you are doing your duty, but I would spare a thought for the fact that His Highness is forced to gaze upon your frigid expression on a daily basis."

"That would make two of us, then."

"As long as you're aware of it, that's what is most important. But I'd wager that my own face is a little—no, a *lot*—easier on the eyes."

These two, they're...friends with each other, right...?

Moritz gazed upon Nika with great severity, but Nika didn't blanch. The looks on the faces around the two officers said it all: *"Not this again."*

"How wonderful," I uttered, perhaps a touch thoughtlessly. "You two are so tight-knit."

Moritz's glare was unlike anything I'd ever seen. A bit much for a simple offhand comment, if you ask me. In the end, however, he was the first to fold in the stare-down.

"I'm done," he muttered.

Perhaps what he'd said was nothing more than just a light warning, and it was never his intent to actually stop Nika from taking me to Reinald. And while it nonetheless took considerable courage for me to walk among all the soldiers, given that nobody was open to chatting or joking around, I set my gaze straight ahead and passed by. Upon entry to Reinald's office, it seemed he really had been at rest, as he was doing up the buttons of his jacket. He looked surprised to see us.

"Oh, Miss Karen," he said. "What can I do for you?"

"Your Highness," said Nika, "you must excuse me, but I have some preparations to see to."

"Huh? Nika, wai—" I started, but she had fled.

And while she hadn't exactly "fled," per se, she *had* left me in Reinald's office and promptly left. Same thing, as far as I was concerned. Reinald, for his part, could scarcely hide his confusion. Still, it wasn't as though we could just stand around all day looking confused, so I explained the circumstances and bowed politely.

"I understand today to be quite the joyous occasion for you," I

said. “I know it will perhaps sound strange, given my circumstances, but you have my congratulations.”

“As you now have my thanks.”

How many times have we talked like this? Until now, it’s always been me who’s had the shifting title. This time it’s him.

I was worried that perhaps I’d made things awkward by appearing so suddenly, but Reinald seemed the same as he always did. And to speak honestly, with his ascension to the imperial family, a part of me thought he might see me turned away and kicked out of his office.

“Would it be better if I called you Your Highness now, instead of Sir Reinald?” I asked.

“You can call me what you like,” he replied. “It doesn’t bother me if we leave things entirely unchanged.”

“So I may call you Sir Reinald, then?”

“Everybody keeps congratulating me, but there’s been nothing in the way of official changes just yet. Maintaining our status quo suits me just fine.”

“It was my understanding that the imperial princess has already acknowledged your rank,” I said.

“It wouldn’t do well to take her words at face value. Wilhelmina is the type to kill you in your sleep, should the mood strike.”

“Quite the comment for the woman’s own brother.”

“That’s the very reason I can say as much. She’s a handful. You’d best be careful around her, Miss Karen.”

He seemed at once both exasperated and bemused by the topic of his sister.

“You enjoy this, don’t you?” I said.

“Well, you are guaranteed excitement when dealing with my sister,” Reinald replied. “The days will change considerably, that much goes without saying.”

He was happy, it seemed, but his response differed from what I’d been expecting.

“Are you not glad to be a part of the imperial family?” I asked.

“Why would you think that?”

“Call it a hunch, I suppose... I apologize if I sound vague, but I

don’t feel as though everyone is celebrating. It’s more like business as usual.”

Whenever I was with Reinald, comments and questions like the above simply slipped from my mind and straight out of my mouth. It would be rude to say I was used to his company, but in truth I was never quite sure what to say around him, and so my thoughts simply bubbled to the surface.

Reinald thought about my comment for a moment, his finger tapping his knee. A habit of his, perhaps.

“I suppose there’s no harm in telling you,” he whispered to himself.

It was a moment in which I realized I had earned his trust.

“I *am* glad,” he said finally, “but to me, the imperial family is nothing more than a stepping stone. It’s not just Wilhelmina either; there are many who don’t think highly of me.”

For a brief instant, I struggled to respond. It was the slimmest of moments, but it did not escape Reinald’s attention. For that reason, I had no choice but to plow ahead and say my piece.

“I sensed, just slightly,” I admitted, “that you seek more power than I had thought.”

“Oh? Do I really appear so voracious?”

“Pardon me for saying so, but I did not get the impression you were tenacious about such things. To see that resolve before my eyes comes as something of a surprise.”

Twice now he had denied that he was after revenge for his mother. And if that were true, in desiring a position among the imperial family there was only one possible goal for which he reached.

“You seek the emperor’s throne, don’t you, Sir Reinald?”

“You put words to such thoughts so openly and without hesitation,” he replied. “Were Wilhelmina or an imperial aide to hear such a thing, they might well faint.”

“We are not in the empire,” I said, “and besides, we are alone. I don’t see the harm.”

Yes, it’s true, I perhaps should have watched my tongue and perhaps *not* have been so straightforward, but it was far too late for

regrets. Fortunately, there was nothing to worry about; Reinald was enjoying our conversation, I could feel it in the air.

"You are perhaps the only person in this entire country willing to ask such a thing so plainly," he said.

"If it bothers you, I'll take it back. I apologize."

"No, I much prefer it to talking around in circles. It's just a question, after all, and more to the point you're not an idiot. I quite enjoy our conversations."

I felt it an honor to be told as much by a member of the imperial family. That said, I wasn't going to use his words as an excuse to overstep my boundaries. I would endeavor to be careful.

"But what do you intend to do once you receive an answer to your question?" Reinald asked.

"I merely desire the opportunity to grasp your thoughts, being that I am so new to all of this. And though I wish I could say that that were all, I am also simply curious."

There was something mischievous, perhaps even wicked in the smile that crept to Reinald's face.

"As you have surmised, it is indeed my desire to sit upon the throne," said Reinald. "It would be no exaggeration to say that I've dedicated my life to the goal, in fact. Does that suffice as an answer?"

"Indeed, you have spoken the words yourself," I said.

I considered everything I wanted to run by him and moved on to matters more serious.

"Will you tell me something?" I started. "What will happen to the domain when the dust settles?"

By "the domain," I of course meant Conrad. Reinald, too, did not require any further detail.

"We now know that what happened to it was either a demonstration of force or otherwise a means for the invading military to make a stealthy entry. Why they went as far as they did, however...remains unknown."

There was one more thing that bothered me. Both Latoria and the empire wanted to see Falkrum broken, but Latoria had no reason to act; there was nothing in it for them.

“Do you know under what conditions Latoria agreed to support the empire, or is that beyond your purview at present?”

As I waited for an answer, Nika returned with documents in hand. Reinald seemed surprised by my question as he took the papers from her.

“I’ve noticed this before, but you have quite the eye for detail, Miss Karen,” he said.

I was going to tell him I could do without the praise, but I held my tongue.

“It surprises me that one as young as you could think so far ahead with Conrad having so recently fallen.”

“Your words are an honor,” I replied. “To say as much is to acknowledge that the teachings of my former husband remain alive in me.”

And it was true to say that the woman I was now would never have existed without him. Even the relationship that Reinald and I now shared was built on the fact that I had married into the Conrad family. And while his words were complimentary, I couldn’t help but wonder if they were just a way to set me up for a fall of some kind. We shared a smile. Reinald then glanced at the papers Nika had given them, then placed them face down on the table in front of him.

“It was my intent to leave the topic of Conrad for a slightly later date,” he said. “I fear it is not the outcome you hoped for. Shall I go on?”

“It isn’t good news, then,” I said.

“Far from it. It’s a deal made between the emperor and the king of Latoria.”

Reinald went on to explain the reality of the situation: that Conrad would not so easily be returned to us.

“In the case that Falkrum were to fall under imperial command, Latoria would be given possession of the mountain range and forest area along the border, including a number of domains, Conrad among them. This was a condition requested by the king of Latoria, a condition that the emperor agreed to.”

“Decided between them, as it were.”

“And settled, yes. That is the reason that Latorian soldiers were deployed.”

It had been Wilhelmina who told Reinald this. He added that the treaty was the reason that both nations had aimed to execute the margrave. When he told me, my immediate feeling was one of disgust.

“Shall I go on, Miss Karen?” Reinald asked.

“Oh. Yes, please do,” I said.

But in truth, I could barely hold myself together. Conrad’s people had been murdered all because of some agreement, some treaty between invaders. So many had died. All manner of filthy curses filled my mind at the thought of the emperor, but though my hands clenched into tight fists beneath the table, my face remained the picture of calm.

“Given that there was a treaty in place between the two nations, someone would have had to have watched over the proceedings,” I said. “Am I right to assume that an imperial was among the Latorian forces during the strike on Conrad?”

“Presumably.”

“So you don’t know for sure? Is the princess hiding something?”

“I ask that you stay calm. Conrad is important to you. I want you to know what happened, but the emperor is in control of the narrative, and what details I have come by way of my sister. Verifying their intelligence will take time.”

In other words, Reinald was digging around too, and clearly he put little trust in the imperial princess.

“I understand your concerns,” he said. “Even if their target was the margrave and his family, they stepped well over the line in massacring so many others.”

He went on, his words a reflection of my own thoughts. Even Reinald and his own troops felt that it had been too much.

“Was it not some grudge held against the margrave?” I asked. “I know that he was active in the past war. He told me about it himself...”

“That I do not know. I cannot rule out the possibility, though I have no way of knowing who might have held such grudges against

him. This is just my take on the matter, but it feels to me as if the objective was to severely lower the number of residents in the domain as efficiently as possible."

"Hence the poison...?"

"That along with the destruction of the wall and the focus on burning down buildings. That is damage that will take time to mend. If the empire had taken that land, they would never have been so callous. At the very least, they would have left the wall and the buildings intact."

"But if Latoria desired the Conrad domain, the margrave's manor and the town surrounding it is the best point for building a stronghold."

"We can't say that other locations are out of the question, but yes, there would be little reason to choose elsewhere. But if I may be so bold, it wouldn't surprise me if the act was a stern message from the empire to Latoria."

The two nations had conspired in their plan, but the empire had shouldered the greater part of the responsibilities. In their efforts to bring Falkrum to its end, the empire had given Latoria the land it asked for, but it would be no good simply to hand it over on a silver platter. If the empire would not have ownership over the Conrad domain, then it would see to it that Latoria did not have an easy time making use of the place either.

"I know this can't be easy for you to hear, but it is nonetheless a plausible theory," said Reinald. "The bonds between the empire and Latoria are tenuous at best. One need only look at their past—there is a good chance I'm right."

"They slaughtered an entire town...just to send a message...?"

"I wouldn't put it past the current emperor. He will sacrifice whatever he has to if it means getting what he wants."

A message, then. And yet, it had been the Latorians who attacked Conrad. Would they accept their own people making the territory all the more disadvantageous for them?

"Why didn't they use official Latorian forces?" I asked.

"I can only assume that Latoria had its reasons. It's possible that it was quicker to sneak in by paying for hired help. That, or perhaps

they allowed for the use of mercenaries or other Latorians for the plan. Which is to say they could have been unwilling to use their own military for some reason. This is all speculation, of course, so it is best taken with a grain of salt."

I had no response. I'm not sure how long we sat in silence. Reinald seemed happy to wait for me to recover, but in the end, all I could muster was little more than a dry chuckle.

"You know, Sir Reinald," I said, "this is the first time you've ever disclosed intelligence with me that has yet to be verified."

"Do I really have so much to hide?" he replied.

"Don't play coy with me, please."

It was true, after all. Until now, he had never revealed much of himself. I had my own opinions of both the empire and Latoria, but I opted not to voice them. If I dared try, it was all too likely that I would say something terribly unladylike. So I kept my own thoughts to myself.

"However... Let me be honest with you. I'm entirely unsure how to convey all of this information to Wendel and the others," I said.

"I have a suggestion regarding that very topic," said Reinald, flipping the piece of paper on the table right side up and sliding it toward me.

"This is?" I asked.

"The official guardianship document has yet to be finalized. That said, I had the current work in progress document brought here. I'd like you to check it."

I did as I was told, but it contained everything we'd gone over together previously. That wasn't the problem; the problem was the section pertaining to the lands that were Conrad's source of income.

"We have no land under our control," I uttered.

"For that reason, I would like to suggest providing you, for the time being, with a domain currently under Rodenwald management."

A new domain?

"Due to recent events, the Rodenwald family is expected to be deprived of a number of its domains and a considerable amount of its wealth. Assigning a portion of that to Conrad will allow you to subsist for a time."

Were it possible, we wanted the land under which our own families slept their eternal slumber. Being assigned entirely new territory was not the outcome we had hoped for. Nevertheless, for a family that had lost the entirety of its land in one fell swoop, Reinald's offer was one to be grateful for.

Our plan had been to make do with what the margrave had left for us until the situation calmed, at which point we could once again begin collecting taxes from the surrounding villages. The loss of that income was rather painful, but more to the point, the whole thing was simply difficult to grapple with on an emotional level.

"I'm aware that you are doing us a great service with your offer," I said, "but it must be said that *you* are a Rodenwald yourself. In depriving the family of territory, you are...effectively..."

"Taking from my own family?"

"I apologize if I have offended you."

Reinald showed not a hint of concern.

"Marquis Rodenwald was one of the co-conspirators in the plot to overthrow the king," he said. "He was my brother, yes, but it would have been nigh impossible for the family to escape such a crime entirely unscathed. The only reason it hasn't been crushed entirely is due to *my* connection to it."

In his tone of voice, I sensed no brotherly love.

"You thought I might make allowances for my family?" Reinald asked.

He saw right through me.

"Our ties are now cut," he continued plainly. "More to the point, I am an imperial now. But if I am to release territory into the hands of another, it is far more meaningful to loan it to one I trust."

The last time I'd seen the marquis was at the duel. He'd been staring at Reinald with a blank look on his face. Perhaps the split between them had already started by that point.

"The marquis *did* lead traitors against the state," I uttered. "As such, I do not expect you to tell me what happened between the two of you."

I was far more interested in acquiring Rodenwald territory, anyway.

"You said 'loan,'" I continued. "Which means you expect repayment, yes?"

"Naturally, you won't get the land for nothing. The Rodenwald domains are prosperous and, as detailed in that document, I expect a certain amount in taxes."

"To which we do not object."

I had seen this coming, after all. This was far easier on the spirit than the idea that he might give us the land for nothing at all.

"That and... The grand dukes came under our command far more smoothly than expected," said Reinald. "The nobility, too, has remained rather peaceful. Falkrum will continue its transition smoothly, but it's unlikely that will last long. I suspect that things will become far more turbulent after I leave."

Reinald was waiting for an opportunity to return to the imperial capital. The empire would no doubt dispatch parliamentary secretaries to Falkrum, but they alone would not be able to watch over everything.

"I intend to explain all of this when I have a chance to speak to your steward...which is to say, Conrad's aides and secretaries, but suffice it to say, I'd like to ask Conrad to keep an eye on goings-on within Falkrum."

"So we're to inform the parliamentary secretaries should we notice any trouble?"

"I would like you to cooperate, yes. The response will be all the harsher if we have only imperials handling such tasks."

A watchdog role of sorts, then—though one that would not involve any governmental responsibilities, according to Reinald. I hadn't even considered the possibility until Reinald brought it up, but he had made sure it was nipped in the bud well before any tinkering with the government could ever happen.

Even then, however, Reinald offered very favorable conditions for our deal. There was no reason not to take it. And while I'd already decided together with Whateley that we would side with Reinald, I nonetheless refrained from giving a direct answer in the moment. Reinald, for his part, didn't mind.

"Then it's mostly settled," he said. "It won't be a simple or easy

thing, but as long as you are amenable to the arrangement, I will provide you with a domain. And of course, I promise not to renege on our guardianship agreement even in the event that you decline my offer. In that case, though I will not be able to provide you with land, I can at the very least offer you enough financial support to live on."

"Understood. I will discuss things with the family."

That Reinald was willing to do so much for us was likely because of thoughts he had concerning both the Rodenwald and Conrad families.

"Miss Karen," he said, rousing me from my thoughts. "You look somewhat absent. Is everything all right?"

"Oh, my apologies," I replied. "It just dawned on me that the Conrads will be under the protection of the empire...and the imperial family, no less. The scale is more than a little surprising."

"It's not all good news, unfortunately," said Reinald. "The number who don't trust you will only grow."

"My steward said likewise."

"A wise warning, I'm sure. Be sure you take good care of that man."

He chuckled, and—well, how do I put this?—I didn't know what he hid behind his smile.

"Nika," he said, turning to face her as she stood by the wall. "As you can see, I *haven't* forgotten. Are we clear now?"

"Yes. You have my deepest apologies, Your Highness," she replied. "You've been so busy with your daily military duties, and I am beyond grateful to see that you did not forget this matter."

Look at you, Nika, speaking to authority like that.

"Nika has been on my back constantly to finalize the official guardianship document," Reinald told me, a wry and exasperated grin on his face. "She seemed to believe I had forgotten about it..."

"In my defense, you were far slower to act than usual, Your Highness."

"Not by choice, Nika, just as I told you. Well, you saw things for yourself here. You know," he said, turning back to me, "she brought you here because she was worried about the Conrad matter."

Everything clicked into place. That was why she'd been so insistent on bringing me earlier. She tried to leave the room so as to not have to admit to anything outright, but before she could, a most unexpected visitor arrived. It started with a knock at the door, followed by a panicked man who sputtered a surprising name.

"Princess Wilhelmina is on her way here. We tried to stop her, but she shows no interest in waiting! Your Highness, you must get ready, there's simply no stopping her!"

He was practically shouting, but it did him no good. Wilhelmina was but a few steps behind, having ignored all attempts to slow her down.

"Excuse me," she said by way of introduction. "And let me say that your preference for the austere irks me. How about showing a little class? At this rate, people are going to start calling the imperial family poverty-stricken."

Unlike the Wilhelmina I had seen earlier, she now did nothing to hide her annoyance. She hated Reinald's plain and unadorned room, and she took to glancing at each of the people in it. It was then that our eyes met. She spoke not a word, but her eyes grew a touch wider in surprise—the gesture reminded me of her brother.

"Wilhelmina," said Reinald. "Surely my guards told you that I'm entertaining a guest."

"I forgot to pass on a message from the emperor. So keep your complaints to yourself, or take them to *him* for making me his messenger girl."

Well, I think it's pretty clear to everyone that I'm entirely unnecessary here.

I stood from my chair to excuse myself only for Reinald to stop me.

"My apologies, Miss Karen," he said, "but would you mind waiting in a different room until we're finished?"

Oh no, I'm quite done. I'll take my leave now. Thank you!

...was what I *wanted* to say, but I held my tongue because the princess was present. As I bowed my head and made to leave, I felt a gaze piercing my very person. It was a set of eyes that were very intrigued.

"No, you stay, Saganov," said Wilhelmina. "I've always wanted a sparring session with the renowned 'goddess of the battlefield.'"

"I am but a mere officer," replied Nika. "I wouldn't dare cross swords with the imperial princess."

"Don't be so formal. We're not in the imperial capital."

The goddess of the battlefield... That's what people call you, Nika? It totally fits. And you can bet your buns I'm going to ask Ellen all about where it came from the next time I see her.

"And you, noblewoman."

Me?

Why would the princess want my attention?

"Yes, you," continued Wilhelmina. "I don't have any business in particular with you, but...I believe I saw you earlier. And given the people in attendance, you must be the daughter of one of the families..."

"What did you come to tell me, Wilhelmina?"

Reinald stopped her in her tracks, but not before the princess murmured with something that sounded suspiciously like intrigue.

"My apologies. You are free to go," said Reinald.

And just like that, I was driven from the room so Reinald could engage his fleet-footed sister in another discussion. I mentally prepared myself for another long wait, but it was all for nothing—Reinald entered the room I was in just ten minutes later, looking rather exasperated.

"You look rather tired," I said. "In which case, do feel free to return to your office to rest..."

However, Reinald seemed uninterested in that idea. He said he wanted some fresh air and opened the window. Given how exhausted he looked, I couldn't help but wonder what exactly his sister had told him. At the same time—and while I understood that it was rude—it was unusual to see him in such a state, and I quite enjoyed it.

"Having a good time, Miss Karen?" he asked.

"Oh? I-I don't know *what* could have possibly inspired *that* particular thought."

"You're grinning," Reinald replied.

And I was so very certain it wasn't showing on my face.

"You always look so calm and composed," I admitted. "It's nice to see you under pressure once in a while."

He was dumbfounded by my comment, but he didn't take the words as badly as I thought he might.

"The imperial princess is a...rather unique young woman, I surmise," I said.

Her name was one I felt was difficult to get your tongue around, but did anyone ever get her name wrong? I thought of saying as much but held back. Instead, I gestured for Reinald to come closer, and he titled his ear down to me.

"Your sister," I said, whispering into his ear through cupped hands, "she's rather cute, isn't she?"

Perhaps he'd expected me to call her terrifying? He stared at me with such confused intensity I thought he might bore a hole through me.

"Cute...?" he uttered.

"Yes. Did I say something odd?"

His face spoke for him: *yes*.

"Is it possible that the reason you stopped me from replying to your sister earlier was because you feared I might let intel of some sort slip?" I asked.

Was my comment really *so surprising?*

I suppose it must have been.

"Yes, it's true that Conrad and the princess are connected, so to speak," I said, answering my own question, "and while I admittedly can't easily forgive her or her compatriots for what they have done, my steward was careful to warn me not to do anything rash."

All the same, the tragedy of Conrad was not something I would easily forget. The mere thought that the domain had been used like that enraged me, and it was my wish that I could hit the people behind it with everything I had in me, were such a thing ever possible. If Wilhelmina were the prime suspect, and punching her would bring back the dead, I would do so without so much as a second thought. Alas, such dreamlike stories were anything but the reality, and walking such a path would only make life more difficult

for Wendel and the other survivors.

And yet, as a person, I did not feel it was right to hate the imperial princess outright. My feelings for her were thus tangled and complicated; there was much I was uncertain of in terms of what I could say or do. I'd seen a flash of excitement in her earlier, and in truth it was adorable. What allowed me to see things this way was firstly the fact that I'd been reborn, but also the influence of the margrave and Whateley on my person.

First Conrad had fallen, then the nation in which it resided. The two events had come with their share of deaths. Everything had happened in succession, and in turning off my thoughts to them I felt something of an ability to grasp a little of what was coming. All of this amounted to experience, and that experience told me that this was not an open-and-shut case of hating someone and being done with it.

The margrave had had an irreplaceable impact on my life, and I would never be able to repay him for it. I knew then that it was my desire to see the Conrad domain returned to its rightful owners. I wanted to see that lush greenery and the smiling faces of the townsfolk as they passed one another by. And though many of those nostalgic faces would not return, I still longed for Conrad.

"Sir Reinald...?"

I noticed the hint of a smile on his face. It made me a touch restless, so I repeated my question.

"Sir Reinald?"

"It's like I forget how tired I am when I'm with you."

He's a weird one.

He was odd in his way, yes, but I didn't dislike talking with him. Rather, it would be fair to say I enjoyed it. And while I didn't feel that a longer conversation would cause any harm, I also knew that Reinald was a busy man. I didn't want to keep him.

"Thank you for your time and consideration," I said. "However, I did disturb you while you were taking a break, and for that I apologize. I should take my leave."

"Before that, may I have a moment?" asked Reinald, his expression now serious. "There's something I want to talk to you

about."

"What might that be?"

"Your congratulations, earlier. Whatever you might actually think or feel on the matter, know that I do not like having Latoria on Falkrum territory."

The words brought me joy, but my experiences had taught me much—I knew it was important not to get his meaning twisted.

"But not because you feel any sympathy for Conrad, yes?" I said.

"Is that what you think?"

"Indeed. If you had helped us purely out of the goodness of your own heart, we wouldn't be talking like this, would we?"

He did not deny anything, which in its own way was his answer.

"I am here in this position because I want to be," he replied, "but unfortunately, there's our ranks to consider... So while I'll spare you the particulars, you *are* right—I have my reasons for not wanting Latoria to pass the great forests."

"I see."

"Which brings me to what I want to say; while it will not be soon, per se, I promise you that I will drive them to the other side of the forest within the next ten years. If Conrad proves to be of value to me by that time, then the bright young man at Conrad's head will see his domain returned to him."

Ten years.

Years that could feel like an eternity but could just as easily pass in the blink of an eye. And while there was a strong echo of resolve in his words, they were nonetheless at least partially the stuff of dreams. It was far too early to simply accept the promise of a man who had literally only just inserted himself into talks about who would inherit the imperial throne. I knew that it was best to take his words as bearing little weight, but for some reason they made me happy all the same.

"I hate the word 'promise,'" I said, "just as I hate it when they aren't kept."

And yet... I still want to believe him.

I couldn't help but laugh.

"That said, we are dependable," I continued. "Loyal. Conrad will

side with you, Sir Reinald. You do not have to worry about that. It is far too late in the game for us to seek another sponsor, as it were."

"If it sounded as though I were fishing for your good graces, I apologize. I merely wanted you to know that our values align."

"I will take you at your word. You have put much faith in Conrad, which is to say Whateley and the other Conrad servants, and I am thankful. I for one am in their debt."

"It's the coming days in which they'll prove their worth. And while your insistence on modesty is indeed a virtue, it also appears as though you place little faith in yourself. I want you to know that I need you."

Whoa, almost got caught there believing that he meant me*. Naturally, he of course means Conrad's last hope, Wendel, and by extension Whateley and the rest of Conrad's servants. Me? I'm little more than a bonus thrown in with the rest.*

"While it makes me most glad to hear you speak your heart so openly, I must admit that the situation also strikes me as strange. You have many loyal, trustworthy people under your command, Sir Reinald. Pardon me for saying so, but it perplexes me somewhat that you would put such trust in the Conrad family."

"Such worries are unnecessary," he said, chuckling. "I am Conrad's guardian. This is what you wanted."

It was exactly what he was supposed to say, given his position, but I heard no exaggeration in the words either; they were honest.

"You are right, of course," he continued. "There are many in whom I place great trust. Those same people will happily do my bidding. However, that is the very reason that I want them by my side. It would be a waste to simply leave them in Falkrum."

"So then it really *is* your intent not to return to this nation once you leave?" I asked.

"Yes. There is no longer a place for me here."

"Ah, yes. You *did* say that once before, didn't you? You told me it was your plan to someday leave. I apologize; my question lacked thought."

"Not at all. It was but a sliver of a longer conversation. I'm surprised you remember."

I could hear a certain admiration in his voice. This, too, sounded genuine. But it also put things into perspective. Based on what he'd just told me, he did not want to leave any of his officers in Falkrum. That he was willing to say so much to a member of Conrad seemed to indicate how intent he was on keeping his most trustworthy at his side. But now that I had grasped something of the imperial hierarchy, I could understand it, especially considering that his opponent in the battle for succession was the imperial princess.

Reinald would be looking to strengthen his forces now that he had achieved a position among the imperial family. This much I had gathered from Nika, who had informed me that the cost of entry was the delivery of an entire nation. When viewing the map of political power, however, most would have ordinarily sided with the imperial princess. Unfortunately, not only did my emotions get in the way of that, but realistically it just wasn't that simple; a lower noble house from an otherwise fallen nation swearing allegiance to the princess did her very little in the way of favors.

In that sense, I was among the fortunate. Or at the very least, that was what I wanted to believe. We had already allied ourselves to a side, but the decision at least made us useful, and thus of value.

"I had intended to go home, but I've had a change of heart," I said. "Do you have a little time to indulge me in some further conversation?"

"If that is what you would like, Miss Karen."

"In which case...would you take a seat there for me, please?"

It was a rather sudden request, but Reinald didn't appear bothered by it.

"You just wish for me to take a seat...?" he asked.

"Yes. You don't want to?"

"I don't mind, no."

He was not particularly cautious about any of it, and to have a full-grown man like Reinald so obediently doing as I asked was rather funny. When he sat, I stood behind him.

"I'm going to touch your hair for a few moments, but please relax; I'm not up to any mischief. But if it causes you any discomfort,

I'll stop."

"Fine by me, but why my hair, may I ask?"

"I just remembered that time, I don't remember exactly how long ago it was, when you fixed my hair for me..."

Also, I *was* up to a little mischief. I mean, if Reinald wasn't going to stay in Falkrum, then our chances to talk in this manner would be few and far between. In other words, I simply wanted for us to spend some more time together.

This was a fact that, naturally, I kept strictly confidential.

"That's all, really," I continued. "I don't suppose you carry a comb, do you?"

"I do, though it's a little old, so do be careful with it."

Wow, he really has one on him.

Ordinarily, it was ridiculous to think that a man of Reinald's rank would carry his own comb, but I'd come to know him over our time together, and I couldn't help but wonder. That was why I'd asked. To my surprise, he brought forth a wooden comb from his upper pocket. It was in good condition, but the teeth looked a bit rough; it didn't look particularly expensive. It also fit comfortably in my hand, which made it perfect for children or those with small hands.

Observing Reinald from behind made me think of a big dog, but naturally I refrained from saying as much. His hair whorl was easy to see from this angle, and I thought it likely that this was the view of his servants or whoever it was who did his hair.

"Is this conversational topic perhaps something you aren't comfortable speaking about face-to-face?" asked Reinald.

"Etiquette insists that when one understands such a thing, they do not put it into words. Though I must say, this is a most beautiful comb. And...oh my, your hair is just *so* silky."

"I am doing my best to be considerate. You do realize, Miss Karen, that your actions are sometimes very difficult to understand, yes?"

"Is that so? I see myself as rather simple. An open book, if you will."

I took some of Reinald's hair in hand and combed it. It was so soft to the touch it felt superior even to silk, and the complete lack

of any split ends was proof of how well-kept it was. I wondered if perhaps he used refined oils on it when he finished in the bath. I almost giggled at the thought that he did it himself, and I could picture him sitting regally if it was the case that somebody else did it for him.

"Now that I have said that I will side with you, I promise you that I will not renege on the statement," I said.

Now that he was on his way to becoming something far, far beyond my own station, I felt it fine to say what I wanted here. Though admittedly, if Whateley were to learn of what I said next, he would most definitely scold me for it.

"However, to be completely honest with you...upon choosing to put my faith in you, I do at times wonder if I've made the right choice. They are but little instants in time, and yet there have been so many I can scarcely count them."

The doubt always crept in and caught me by surprise. It was there when I stood before a woman murdered, and it was there again when I was in the presence of a gallant military woman with scarlet hair. It was here, now, too, as this man sat before me. I saw them in that instant: all the smiles on faces belonging to people who were now dead.

I ran the comb through Reinald's hair and neatly separated it into three parts.





"And so when I listen to my heart...I find the feelings there tangled and complicated," I admitted. "It is difficult for me to put into words. Far too many have died. The nation's very foundation is collapsing. My sister has lost her husband, and the future is a mist of uncertainty."

What I was aiming for, you see, was a braid. I did my utmost to keep it neat and tidy, but I simply wasn't very skilled at such tasks.

Was I just playing around, you ask?

Isn't it obvious? *Of course* I was just playing around.

All the same, I made it just a little—just a *smidgen*—too tight. This was the extent of my revenge. And though it should have stung, Reinald didn't even flinch.

"Pardon these little quibbles of mine," I said. "I am just an ordinary girl with no skills to speak of. I'm not especially bright, nor do I excel in any form of combat. I survived an ordeal via nothing more than coincidence, and now I am the Conrad caretaker."

And to think I came all the way from another world...

Why wasn't I born with some kind of special power? Some way to bend people to my will?

If we were talking potential main characters, then surely that honor went to the likes of Ern, a girl headhunted by the empire for her magical potential, or Reinald, who overthrew an entire nation to reach for his goals. And putting aside whether or not they were heroes or antiheroes, they were, nonetheless, undeniably main character material.

I had felt this in my bones my whole life—I simply was not a main character. I could cry about potential and skills all I wanted, but this I knew with great certainty. In truth, I had no desire to lead others. I was happy enough if those around me were at peace, and it was for that purpose I would try to put out the fires around us. The scope of it all had widened at present, and that was what led me here, but it didn't change the facts.

And put simply, the facts stated that I was just another ordinary person.

People like Ern and Reinald, when faced with a crossroads, could pick a direction and follow it, knowing they had picked the right

path. But this was far more difficult than it looked. And when I tried comparing myself to the isekai books I'd enjoyed in my past life, I realized I just wasn't interesting enough. Regardless, these were the cards I'd been dealt. This was my life. The path I walked was not a book to be read.

"And so, like any ordinary girl, I want to walk a path and live a life that I can be proud of."

What was right? What was wrong? Those were questions that would spring up along the way. And so, at the very least, I wanted to be sure that I did not regret the decisions I made.

"That's why, at present, the word 'betrayal' will not cross my mind. If you care for us, then we are your faithful servants."

"I can't help feeling some unease in the words 'at present.'"

"That is for you to handle," I said. "We, too, worry about when you might abandon us, such that it is something I feel the need to consult you about. We share our worries between us."

"I'm surprised. I am doing the best I can to show you your due kindness."

I had finished the braid, which felt like a success. However, I lacked any string with which to secure it. Reinald turned and took the hair in hand, and while it was by no means skillfully done, he smiled.

"I daresay this kind of thing isn't your forte, Miss Karen," he said. "I could do better with my eyes closed."

"I've no retort, it's true. And I consider embroidery among the ranks of my sworn enemies. But just what do you mean, 'with your eyes closed,' hm?"

"I mean you're clumsy."

"Oh, you mustn't say such things to a lady," I replied.

I'd once tried my hand at embroidery. The goal was to end up with a cute little chick, but everyone I showed among the Conrads replied only with the most awkward of smiles. It came down to a difference of aesthetics, really; in present-day Japan, one would have thought my design adorable.

Well, probably.

But what did he mean by that? Showing due kindness?

"Have I done anything to warrant such kindness?" I asked.

Reinald did nothing to untangle his hair. In fact, his shoulders began to shake slightly. Was a person's lack of finesse really so strange a thing to behold?

"I'm sure that there are a few people in your life you endeavor to treat well, no?" he asked.

"Oh, uh...yes, of course."

"It's the same as that," said Reinald, waving his free hand. "When I talked to you back at Saburova manor, I felt that you were someone I wanted to treat with kindness. That feeling has persisted."

Is it really that funny, though?

"I don't really get the point, but okay. Point taken. Oh, thank you for the comb."

"You're most welcome. I don't suppose you have any string on you, do you?"

"I'm terribly sorry, but I don't... Wait. Why would you need string?"

Reinald put the comb back in his pocket. He had yet to release the braid from his grasp or make any attempt to untangle it. More to the point, it was like he was trying to ensure it stayed exactly as it was. He didn't even answer my question. Instead, he stood to his feet and began walking toward the door. It was all I could do just to grasp his sleeve.

I have a terrible feeling about this!

"Where do you think you're going with that head of hair?!" I demanded.

"It's funny. I'd very much like for Nika to see it."

"No! No way!"

I can't believe it. He actually wants to secure my messy excuse for a braid! But he can't! He mustn't! I did what I did because we were alone*! What will Moritz do when he sees I've been using the imperial prince to practice braids...and badly, at that?!*

"Stop, please!" I cried. "I'll be in *so* much trouble if people find out I was playing with your hair!"

"Oh, are you saying I was your plaything?"

"I-I-I-I'm so very sorry! Oh, er, were you mad at the way I pulled your hair? It was just an impulse! It was impulsive, I say!"

"Impulse, you say?"

He turned to look at me, his eyes narrowing. Which told me he *hadn't* until that moment realized I'd done the pulling intentionally. It was like I was digging my own grave.

"But you didn't even respond in the slightest!" I said.

"Oh, I didn't mind. It was a touch painful, but I'll indulge in some fun once in a while. And given that it was all a result of your clumsiness, there was no real helping it; I'm certainly not going to blame you for it."

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

I pulled with all my might to stop him from leaving the room. It took ten minutes to convince him, but I did it; he released a hold of the ugly braid-like thing I'd done to his hair, and the crisis of him displaying it for all to see was thus averted. I couldn't help but feel like he was making fun of me, but at least he saw me off with his usual smile.

"Things are sure to be hectic for me now, and I fear we won't be able to speak like this again for quite some time," he said. "I do hope that the days will be good to you, and that you see them in good health."

"You flatter me, Sir Reinald. Do be sure to take care of yourself. In both a professional and private capacity, I will pray for your safety."

"I said earlier that I want to keep those I trust most by my side, but I will leave a number of dependable individuals here in Falkrum. Use them if such a thing becomes necessary; I will make sure they know to support you."

"Many thanks. I'm sure there will be much we'll want to consult with them on."

I left the office with my game face on, but when I departed from the castle proper, a sigh of a different kind escaped my lips.

I admitted that I want to live a life I can be proud of.

But I would not live a life in which I relied solely on others. I, too, had to stand strong and walk tall. For starters, that meant settling

my resolve and heading for Whateley. It was time to sort out our schedule.

"Why is it so excruciatingly difficult to stride boldly along the path you choose, without hesitation...?" I pondered.

Two days later, the news spread across the nation that the king and queen were dead and that the ruling system would undergo seismic changes as the government shifted to take an entirely new form.

Standing before the mirror was a prim and proper young woman in a beautiful dress. All would have called her beautiful, but with remnants of childlike innocence still lingering in the lines of her face, none would have called her imposing. She took to the sides of her mouth with both hands, creating stern expressions and frowning faces as an exasperated voice spoke up from behind her.

"You're not going to change anything doing that."

"Change what, exactly?" I asked.

"I'm saying that you're cute, Karen. Adorable. Nobody is going to expect any grandeur or stately dignity from you. More to the point, any criticism or abuse you level at anyone will be far more effective with your usual expression."

"While I appreciate the advice, Achim, I'd prefer it if you at least acknowledged my efforts."

"I am. I don't want to be telling you this, and I wouldn't if I didn't see the effort you're putting in. But you can't just wish upon a star for what you don't have and expect it to appear for you. The wise among us innovate; they adapt."

"I'm sure they do, but I at least want to put up a strong front."

We were in Conrad Villa. With me was Achim. Ordinarily he was my brother's bodyguard, but I'd arranged for his attendance and help on this particular day.

"You're really doing it, then?" he asked.

"I really am, yes. And in any case, it's something that must be done."

"Let it be known that I think it's a bad idea."

I ignored Achim's muttering. A knock came at the door soon after.

Whateley bowed his head respectfully as he entered. Usually he would have greeted me with a simple nod; his formal manners were a sign of his nerves.

"Everybody is in attendance," he announced.

"Thank you, Whateley. Has anybody said anything yet?"

"They're all reacting largely as we expected and demanding that we bring out Master Wendel."

"Well, even then, they all know that they'll have to deal with me eventually whether they like it or not. Still, it's a small miracle they're all here."

I had asked Whateley to gather all of Conrad's relatives for a meeting, but none of Conrad's relatives had gathered here at the villa by choice; they were here because behind Wendel's caretaker—me—was a much bigger, much more intimidating presence. The point of it all was the families of the margrave's brother and sister. In other words, anybody with some claim to the Conrad inheritance and the will to make a lot of noise about it.

Since the last time I'd seen Reinald, he'd made his declaration to the people of Falkrum. Firstly, he told them of the passing of their king, starting with the internal revolt that had looked to overthrow the kingdom entirely. He told the people that nobles with connections to the royal family had been involved, and he criticized all of them publicly, making it known that no small number of the perpetrators had already been executed. Those who knew nothing of the truth cried out in despair for the future, while those who did could do nothing more than clench their teeth and look down at their feet.

Reinald then informed the people that upon meeting and discussing things with all who remained, all were in agreement that the last valid descendant of the royal family was Lady Saburova's unborn child. Reinald asserted that he would be the one to raise this child to adulthood, but this decision brought with it a wave of skepticism; he was, after all, just another member of the nobility.

It was here that the tone of the speech shifted.

"The great king of Falkrum is dead," Reinald had said. "His wife, our compassionate queen, lies dead by his side. Both were killed by

traitors of the state. I stand before you, all of you who loved and believed in what our king stood for. Let it be known that this grave declaration of mine tortures all of us. Were time on our side, we would speak of the exalted words he left us, and offer our awe at his greatness. But we cannot stand idly by while a great hope still glimmers. We cannot let that flickering light be extinguished. We cannot allow ourselves to gorge on feelings of enmity and hatred. With these feelings in mind, I have come to a decision."

There was no hesitation in any one of Reinald's words. It was a speech of great power, and one that stood in contrast to the softer beauty of the man who spoke it. It was as if, in that moment, the entirety of the sun's light shone upon him. That was the extent to which the crowd stood, rapt.

Naturally, in the matter of the attack on Conrad nothing was spoken of imperial involvement. Instead, the new story went that imperial troops, requested by the king and led by the imperial princess, had fought off the invading Latorians. On the face of it, it looked as though Latoria had tried to start a war, and when they launched their assault on Conrad, traitors within Falkrum had attempted to use that to overthrow the king.

Though it may all sound far too convenient, the words had the taste of truth to them, and it was that which sunk into the hearts of the people. The blame was being placed on Latoria's shoulders, and not a word was spoken regarding how Conrad would be given over to them.

"I know there are those among you with a question," Reinald continued. "Why you? Why a young man from just another noble family? What gives *you* the right to raise the king's child? For all of you I have an answer."

It was here that Reinald's heretofore hidden identity was revealed in all its glory.

"I am a citizen of this very nation, but I am also the son of Karl Noah Balderas, emperor of the Arrendle Empire. I reveal to you this name because it is my intent to succeed the king and take up the responsibility of protecting Falkrum's people."

This news naturally brought waves of shock and confusion, but

among a number of select nobles—and the king too—it had always been an open secret. None of the grand dukes, all of whom were presumably privy to the information, offered any objection, and so the fact simply sunk into the minds of all who listened as Reinald pledged—on the empire's name—to protect the citizenry of Falkrum and to right past wrongs.

In the aftermath of Reinald's declaration, the crowds rippled with excitement and confusion. Some simply accepted what they had been told, while others made it clear they were unhappy to have the empire involved. Many cried at the passing of the king, but no small number were drunk on the beauty of Reinald himself.

"Master Wendel, Lady Karen," said Whateley as he looked over the crowds. "Do not forget the faces that you see before you, here on this day. Even when the truth is buried amid the darkness, history is carved by the victors. And even if some may doubt what they have been told, in time the words in the speech we heard will harden until they are as immovable as fact. It is not unlike the almost forgotten truth that, at one stage, Falkrum was on the verge of losing the war."

The crowd was a swirl of different thoughts and feelings, and it was among this whirlwind of emotion that people returned home to consider their futures. It was thus, among all of this despair, that I called the various relatives of Conrad for our meeting. It was not long after Reinald's speech, when one of his special envoys had delivered us a document.

The document in question was the contract confirming Reinald as Wendel's guardian. It arrived already signed by the other party. I signed the two copies that had been sent to me, ensuring that both parties had a copy of their own. The settled contract thus put Conrad under Reinald's official protection, and by extension, the empire. The future was still very much a murky haze, but we had at least secured for ourselves rank and capital. Those among Conrad's relatives who kept their ears close to the ground were quick to act; regardless of whether or not *I* was involved, this was still a means for them to secure a future.

"Very well, shall we have at it, then?" I asked.

"My lady, I ask that you please refrain from swinging your arms around like that," said Whateley. "You'll only wrinkle your dress."

"Yes, sir," I droned.

Admittedly, I *had* mentally prepared myself for a forceful confrontation. It was billed as a discussion, yes, but my job was to convince the others to fall in line, or failing that, intimidate them to achieve the same results. This was because Whateley and his aides were tasked with watching over the state of things in Falkrum and reporting to Reinald should anything odd come to light. We were the empire's eyes, if you wanted to put a nice spin on it; their watchdogs if you didn't. For that reason, we did not want any of Conrad's family members to cause any trouble, even if we weren't directly involved in their affairs.

It was true enough to say that if trouble *were* to occur, we could simply cut loose the offending relative. Waiting until trouble occurred, however, would only give the empire a poor impression of us. Holding this discussion *after* confirming Reinald as Wendel's guardian was a bit like bringing a gun to a knife fight, but there was no other way to gather everyone so quickly either.

We had *tried* to contact everyone before the guardianship was finalized, but only a handful of houses responded. The margrave's siblings ignored us completely. That said, we were at least able to have a number of very meaningful conversations with the families that got in touch with us.

"Put simply, the families who contacted us before this meeting have proven themselves capable of foresight," I said. "That will at least make it easier to tell them apart, should the worst come to pass."

"What a frightening thing to say," said Achim.

"Let me assure you that I'm not particularly fond of making such terrifying observations. I know fully well that it's best for all of this to go smoothly and problem-free."

In terms of guards, we had Hil and his subordinate, Humphrey, both of whom were survivors of the Conrad attack. Given that our visitors were not allowed weapons, Hil and Humphrey were more than enough in terms of security. Still, I'd enlisted Achim simply

because there was no telling what might happen. There was also the fact that his presence made it crystal clear that Lady Saburova and the Kirsten family were aware of our relationship with Reinald. We put little focus on whether or not people knew Achim's face or noticed his presence; Whateley told me that what was more important was keeping an eye on whether any could discern that houses outside of our own were also involved.

I was ready for a fight as I strode toward the conference room but was surprised to hear a number of voices arguing from within even before I made my entrance. Humphrey stood before the half-open door, a look of worry etched into his features.

One of those voices... Is that Wendel?

"I tried to stop him," said Humphrey, "but he insisted that he had a matter to discuss with everyone."

"Who else is in there?" I asked.

"Master Hil is by the young master's side. I don't think there's any need to fear the worst..."

Upon a closer listen, it sounded as though the margrave's brother and sister were attempting to talk Wendel around. Even from behind the door I could make out their voices clearly. The topic of conversation was, perhaps unsurprisingly, me.

"Do you seriously intend to hand over our brother's inheritance to that cunning little witch?" said one. "While you may not be related by blood, you are nonetheless our brother's son. You should assert your rightful privileges."

"No," said the other, "regardless of the circumstances, the family is now under the protection of the empire. Wendel, you *must* make the just and right judgments as the family lord. You know that to do so ensures you have our full support for restoring the Conrad domain, yes? Please don't tell us you plan to throw it all away and give the Conrad family's wealth to a woman who only has coins in her eyes!"

"Wendel, you must know that we're here to support you. Remember your father's will and resolve!"

Nobody let Wendel get a single word in. Judging by how intense they were, it sounded to me as though they'd completely forgotten

who invited them in the first place. I noticed Whateley nearby, wearing an uncharacteristic frown. Just as I was considering the best timing for my own entrance, someone spoke up against the margrave's siblings.

It was Wendel.

"Pardon me for asking, but am I to understand that your intent is to convince me to betray my stepmother?"

"Oh, my! Who said anything about betraying? We only—"

"Because that is very much what it sounded like to me. Conrad's very existence hangs in the balance, and you would tell me to abandon my own stepmother after she has made inroads with the imperial prince? I can scarcely believe my ears. Am I to think that you want to see our family ground into dust?"

"Wendel!"

"I *trust* my stepmother, and I *will* inherit Conrad."

Someone lost control burst into a fit of rage, but it didn't seem to bother Wendel in the slightest. In fact, I heard the anger in *his* voice when he replied.

"I am here before you all today because I wanted to ask you something. Uncle, aunty, when my father passed away, what did *you* do for me?"

"What, you say? Why, of course we worried for you..."

"You were worried. I see. Did you ever reach out to help? As far as I can recall, it was my stepmother and our steward who were there when I needed them. When we arrived here, the first to visit and speak to me were the houses closest to my father, and yet, *the* closest of them all—his own brother and sister!—only saw fit to appear when it came to his inheritance."

"This is...all a misunderstanding. We were still in the midst of discussions regarding the Conrad lineage... You are unrelated to our brother by blood—"

Wendel cut in without a second thought.

"My father made that decision. You all *left* Conrad. You forfeited your right to make such a decision. I *am* the son of Kamil, the Margrave of Conrad."

He spoke the words with a firm, unwavering resolve. If one were

to look at things objectively, the margrave's siblings weren't exactly wrong to put a focus on lineage. At the same time, Wendel was right to state that in leaving Conrad, those same siblings had no right to speak of it. The opinions were at ends, but I had chosen to side with Wendel, who I believed the rightful heir. Reinald, too, was in the same camp.

In short, this simply meant that the margrave's brother and sister were only going to make Wendel angry by insisting on their view of things.

"I will not forget that when my father died, the first thing you did was dig around to find out how much the inheritance was."

This was a matter that Wendel had *not* been told about. After much discussion with Whateley, we had decided to remain silent with regards to matters of money as they concerned the margrave's siblings. I glanced at Whateley, who replied with a quick shake of the head. Humphrey, however, stood a little taller—I knew then that Wendel had enlisted their help with regards to intelligence.

Still, I did not enjoy this talk of inheritance. Even if the margrave's siblings had done what Wendel accused them of, it was no good to have their ire directed toward Wendel. This was the perfect time to act, and so I gave a light rap on the door, drawing everybody's attention.

"Well, it would seem you're all already engaged in a rather passionate discussion," I said. "I apologize for my tardiness."

So passionate, in fact, that everyone looked surprised to see me. The margrave's elderly siblings cleared their throats and neatened their clothes as they looked to settle themselves. I used the ensuing silence as a chance to position myself by Wendel's side and place a hand on his shoulder.

"Wendel, you know that everyone has their own circumstances to worry about," I said. "It's nothing to get up in arms about."

"You're right. I apologize, mother."

He understood that my words were a request for him to step down, and so he took a seat behind me, though he made no effort whatsoever to apologize to his uncle and aunty.

Well, that's shifted the plan considerably, but let the cards fall

where they may!

"I apologize on behalf of my stepson," I said. "As you know, he has only recently lost his family, and his heart still has yet to find peace. I ask that you look upon him with magnanimity."

The margrave's sister, her face bright red, was about to launch into an outburst but was halted by her son and his wife.

"Hm... Mhm... He *is* still but a child, after all..." he muttered.

Wendel had directed his ire at the margrave's siblings, but with them today was their son and his wife, their cousins, and some ten other relatives of varying but considerable power and influence.

"I'm sure you all know who I am already, but being that I'm meeting some of you for the first time, allow me to introduce myself: I am Karen, of the Conrad family. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintances."

In my introduction, I showed no more modesty than was absolutely necessary, a gesture that let everyone know I saw us as being on even ground. The elderly among those gathered were anything but pleased by the attitude. In truth, I'd planned something of a smoother start to the proceedings, but this was how things had to go; it was far better to have everyone's enmity directed at me than at Wendel.

"Though we have a great deal to discuss," I continued, "let us start with the margrave's last will and testament, as it appears to be at the forefront of everyone's minds. However, as I informed you earlier, he bequeathed everything to his eldest son Sven, and no other, newer will exists..."

I had not wanted Wendel to be present during this discussion, but his presence was necessary in an official capacity. I ran through the contents of the margrave's will, but it was little more than a performance. Sven was dead, and the margrave's will was no longer valid. Whateley and I had already decided that Wendel was the next Conrad heir.

I cast my gaze across everybody gathered before me and let out a deliberate and obvious sigh. It was a gesture I'd learned from Gerda.

"I have not asked you all here today for a discussion. We meet

today to confirm the margrave's will and testament and its expired validity, and to consider your ongoing relationship with the Conrad family."

I announced that the family name would go to Wendel, as per the margrave's last wishes, and that I, Wendel's stepmother, would act as his caretaker. When I made the declaration that his guardian was the imperial prince Reinald Noah Balderas Arrendle, tension filled the air.

"It is wonderful to hear that Conrad will live on," said one of the relatives, "but is everything...is the guardianship...settled?"

"The official documents have already been signed, sealed, and delivered," I said. "There will be no revisions."

Were there any other ways in which I could speak with more haughty arrogance? The only reference that came to mind for me, outside of the margrave, was Reinald.

"That is *not* what matters," I said. "My husband, God rest his soul, put great value in his familial bonds, and it is my wish that those bonds remain tight. But really, everyone, is *this* where we stand at present?"

"All of us wish nothing more than to cooperate with Conrad," said the family's spokesperson. "I am afraid I don't understand what exactly it is that you're saying."

They had decided to play dumb, but I didn't call them out on it; instead, I let a knowing smile creep to my lips.

"If we do not stand in unified alignment," I said, "then none of us gets what we want. This is all the more so with the general state of affairs—and the very nation itself—changing before our eyes. A single discordant note will echo and bring with it attention."

It dawned on me then that the proceedings were slipping away from "discussion" and into the territory of "coercion." But given the trajectory so far, I saw no change of course ahead.

"For that reason, Wendel's words carry the most weight," I continued. "I do not intend to ignore the thoughts of the future lord of Conrad, and it is my intent to see that they are given their due consideration."

I paused for a moment to meet eyes with the young boy, whose

gaze showed his strength of resolve.

"The only reason that all of you are present here today is because you are related to the margrave. Nothing more. Your connection to the family until now only existed because he did. You maintained good relations... That is why you are here."

And let's just put aside the discussion of whether or not those relations were actually *good, shall we?*

The lack of any retort frightened me. I had not intended for this to be such a one-sided beatdown, but I suppose I couldn't help being impacted by the argument I'd heard between Wendel and the margrave's relatives.

"Should the trust we share waver, how are we to call any of you, in any good conscience, our relatives?"

To put things as blunt as a club to the face, I was telling them that any further behavior regarded as disrespectful would see their ties to us cut. I'm sure it didn't help their pride to be told as much by a petite woman of my age either. Not that it mattered to me; my intent remained unwavering.

"It bears mentioning, but have you not noticed that there should have been others here in attendance with you today?" I asked. "Do you not find their absences curious?"

"Oh, that's right. Our second cousins..."

"Perhaps you might also have noticed that some did not *need* to attend. In their long years of supporting Conrad, they have not once raised their voices in dissent."

These were largely the families of Sven's second cousins; families that were as good to us as any more directly connected relatives. The margrave's younger brother and sister had always kept only the barest of ties to him, and so naturally his relationship with the rest of the family had never been of interest to them. Nonetheless, I wielded that information like a whip now that I was in control, and I let them know it.

"As you all understand, there's been much time since my husband's passing and this particular meeting, and those not in attendance today were kind enough to visit and chat with us during that period. Every single one of them has promised to support

Wendel as the future lord of Conrad."

I'd done a little of that work myself, but the talks had largely been conducted by Whateley and his aides. It was yet another reminder to be grateful for the company with which I'd been blessed.

I looked once more at everyone gathered and, taking Achim's advice, flashed them the kind of bright smile typical for one of my age.

"Now, shall we discuss the ways in which you might all prove useful to us in future?" I asked.

I need not bother explaining to you how the rest of the discussion went.

And so it was that I saw the downfall of the nation into which I'd been born, as its government fell under the control of the Arrendle Empire. Next, I suppose I'll move onto the topic of how Reinald shaped the place; at present we've been concerned only with how we sought to survive among the upheaval.

You see, at this point I'd hoped for some peace within the former kingdom of Falkrum, but it was only three months before circumstances would once again shift.

9: A Caretaker's Woes

Three months had passed since the fall of Falkrum, and my thoughts were plagued by a particular worry. The chilly grasp of winter was finally weakening, and spring was beginning to show signs of waking. The mornings and the evenings were still cold, but the days were sunny and fine.

And on one such day, as the evening sky stained the buildings red, Wendel returned home.

"I'm back," he announced.

"Welcome home," I said, greeting him with a smile. "How was school?"

"Oh, you know," he uttered, dismissing me with a wave before heading straight to his room.

A few moments after the boy had disappeared from sight, Whateley appeared, looking rather despondent.

"How is it...?" I asked.

"I checked things with Humphrey and the guards," replied the steward. "As expected, it's not going well."

"So it's as we thought?" I prodded.

"No outright violence. They tease him or otherwise ignore him completely. Recently they've been hiding his textbooks and pens. It's not getting any better; quite the contrary."

"No signs of improvement, then?"

"None, I'm afraid."

We looked at one another and heaved a shared sigh. In front of me on the table were reports and ledgers that required my attention, but I couldn't concentrate on any of them. The problem, you see, concerned Wendel. He was being bullied, and it was causing Whateley and myself no end of worry.

"Perhaps we ought to go ahead and change schools, then?" offered the deeply concerned steward. "Staying at a public school

might only invite further unnecessary misunderstandings."

"It is the boy's wish to follow in his brother's footsteps," I replied. "We can float the idea of him attending an upper-class school, but...I don't think he'll readily jump on board."

"I understand how Master Wendel feels, but at this rate..."

"Changing schools doesn't change what nation we're in. Rumors stick, and there's no guarantee the bullying won't follow him from one school to another. It isn't just a matter of his nobility, as you well know."

"Yes, I'm aware. But if it happens again, we'll have no choice but to pull him out of school completely."

"Did Hil and the guards say anything else when you spoke to them?" I asked.

Wendel had started going to school about two months ago. As mentioned earlier, he chose to follow in Sven's footsteps and began attending a public school. Now, it wasn't like we didn't raise the idea of a school for the nobility, but the truth was that schools for building networks for the influential simply weren't as helpful given Falkrum's present circumstances. As such, Whateley and I agreed to abide by Wendel's own wishes.

I was worried, yes, but at least in the beginning, Wendel seemed to enjoy school and even told us that he'd made friends. This came as a relief, but it was not long before Wendel began avoiding the topic of school altogether. The first to notice was Humphrey, who suggested we do something about it.

"It is the very problem we feared," I uttered.

Falkrum was in a state of disorder. It maintained a certain stability, but the truth of the matter was that the citizenry were filled with worry and uncertainty. Control of the nation's government was shifting hands, and everyone was slowly coming to terms with that reality.

"Karen, you mustn't blame yourself..." started Whateley.

"I can't *not*," I said. "It all started with me."

This was the truth. At the end of the day, *I* was the reason Wendel was being bullied. Perhaps more accurately, the subject of the enmity was more broadly Conrad, whose guardian was now the

imperial prince. But if you followed the actions that brought that guardianship about, what you found was me.

Falkrum was changing as it became an official part of the empire's territory. What remained of the royal family, starting with Gerda's child, was now under Reinald's protection. This, however, was a condition allowed due to their symbolic importance to the nation. For the purposes of national reputation, Gerda's child was to be appointed Falkrum's governor general.

Nobody dissented to these decisions outright, but many weren't happy with them, and those thoughts and feelings trickled down into the nation's schools, together with various opinions regarding Conrad in general, which many believed to be sucking on the sweet nectar of the empire's teat, so to speak.

"The transition of power and authority is going rather calmly, all things considered, though unfortunately this is not true in every case," said Whateley.

"You mean to say we should be glad it's *just* bullying?" I countered.

"No, but consider that under other circumstances we might be holed up in our domain, or otherwise moving to an entirely new one. It must be said that your friend is doing quite a commendable job."

"Well, we get favorable treatment thanks to our links to the royal family. I never imagined he would crush so many noble families in the manner that he did."

As part of his new governmental policy, Reinald made it his first order of business to expose the nobles who had the most authority over the nation. Before his ascension, Reinald had already been investigating their abuses of power, and he now saw fit to use that as evidence for what his government called "maintaining a safe and secure future." A great many noble families were summarily stripped of their authority. Others—those who had either escaped Reinald's initial investigation or otherwise pledged their loyalty to the empire—avoided losing their land entirely but nonetheless saw major reductions to the territories under their control.

Reinald's policies concerning the nobility did not stop there. Among them was a revision to trade rights. They had once been

entirely under the control of the nobility, but Reinald saw to it that marketplace trade rights were spread among the citizenry. By allowing for a free market, the government promoted trade among citizens and merchants. Anybody who opened their own shop would of course have to pay taxes to the state, but the amount never went any higher than the preset rates. These rates were a bargain when one considered that many had been forced to pay their noble masters under the table for the very same privileges.

There were many other small and detailed policy changes, but I'll spare you the details. Trade was now falling in line with how things were done in the empire, and one could see that imperial leadership was slowly bringing Falkrum under its complete control.

When it came to the matter of military officers and civil secretaries, the empire was rather generous. It declared that it would accept into its ranks those who had lost their positions under the nobility because of the new government policies. Those who instead decided to retire from their posts were entitled to severance pay with no punishment or loss of reputation.

For those employed at the castle, allowances were paid out to support those in the hunt for new work. And while there were set conditions to this particular system, it nonetheless proved effective, as the vast majority of soldiers simply went from working under Falkrum command to working under imperial command. Naturally, those who did accept the offered conditions had no choice but to leave the castle.

The empire only really wanted what was essential for the castle, because the intent was to eventually put a stop to the use of it altogether, though these particular plans were kept mostly under wraps. I had heard, in fact, that the empire wanted to open a section of the castle to the public, essentially making it a sightseeing location.

The shifting of the nation was, in this way, remarkable. While there was confusion at the top, life in the cities and among the citizenry remained largely unchanged, perhaps thanks to the support of the grand dukes. I say largely unchanged, but in truth, the new policy changes caused the world of the local citizenry to grow in

scope, improving standards of living. For a short period, the cost of living rose, but it quickly returned to normal.

So while there was sorrow at the king's passing, Reinald was generous in his treatment of the royal family, which had been all but crushed. Perhaps the response of the people was also due to the fact that Reinald had taken vengeance for the king by dispatching the traitors of state. The grand dukes all stood in support of him, and so there was little in the way of conflict; the citizens of Falkrum largely went about accepting the new life that was shaping itself around them.

If the truth were to come to light, riots would only be a matter of time, but there was no hint of any such rumors. One might attribute this to the watchful eyes of the grand dukes and the family Conrad.

But while the common people lived lives that were largely unchanged, this was not so for the nobility. You have probably read this far and come to the conclusion that the nobility got the raw end of the deal. In this you would be right, but Reinald was not entirely unsympathetic in his dealings with them, and he made sure that the noble families who lost their sources of income were left assurances. Realizing that swiftly dissolving such families would only result in hostility, Reinald saw to it that the state paid them a yearly income. It was a system in which Falkrum's former nobility were given money for nothing. The yearly sum looked to me quite generous, but Whateley disagreed.

"It is fine if one leads a relatively frugal life," he said, "but the nobility are accustomed to luxury, and this amount will not come close to affording them the lifestyles they once knew."

In other words, the nobility would take their money, after which it would only be a matter of time before they disappeared. In any case, Reinald bolstered the national economy by stripping the privileged class of what they'd long believed to be vested rights, and then some. In that sense, one could see his yearly payments as a message that read, "Should you desire more money, work for it."

Whateley, however, offered more comprehensive insight.

"Falkrum boasts a long-established society. Far quicker to tear it down than to arbitrate. More to the point, by exposing the crimes of

the nobility, he is able to claim their property and capital as rightfully belonging to the state."

"And if he does it through the revelation of foul play, he doesn't run the risk of uprising or revolt."

"Nothing will stock the national coffers more than the riches the nobility have been hoarding. There would have been an outcry, I'm certain, but even those who complained were provided monetary state support."

"It would seem the handover is going smoothly and without issue, which would indicate that this was a plan long in the making."

"One must assume so. I have heard that work is already being done within the territories claimed by the government."

"Yes, I've heard talk of miners being assembled of late. Falkrum is a place of vast natural resources, and perhaps we'll see the manufacturing industry take off as a result of all this."

The land we had been given—formerly belonging to the Rodenwald family—was being prepared as a prime location for vineyards. It would be some years before they would ever bear decent fruit, but when they did, they would be a staple of the domain's income. That wealth would circulate, being used on the domain's people and its facilities.

And while this gradual change was exactly what Reinald had planned, some things were not so quick to change.

"I am going for a walk," I announced.

"Very well, I'll call..."

"It's just a stroll around the garden. I'm not leaving the grounds, so there's no need for guards."

There was a chill in the air, but the spring sunlight helped soothe my soul. The gardens in the villa reminded me now of the simplicity of those in our old domain, perhaps thanks to the work of old Ben, our gardener.

"If I stick my nose into things any further, I'll only make things worse..." I muttered.

Let us return to the topic of Wendel's bullying. I had actually intervened, just once, before things got to where they now were. It happened not long after Wendel enrolled. I'd received a message

from my former homeroom teacher, informing me that some other students were planning something behind Wendel's back. As for what was planned, well, suffice it to say that it was quite a wicked thing for children to get up to, and to the extent that the perpetrators' parents would also have been made to take some responsibility. To that end, a discussion took place between the involved parties. As a result, nothing happened, and the boys and girls who had planned the bullying were made to promise not to go near Wendel.

There's been no sign of that *story leaking, but...*

"Even then, it wasn't enough to stop things entirely..."

Among schools as among towns and cities, there was a unique society. It was the role of adults to correct that which was wrong, but at the earlier stages that fell on the shoulders of the school itself. If I barged in complaining about Wendel being ignored and insulted, it would only make him look worse. More to the point, if *I* took action, then so would the teachers around Wendel, and it was all too easy to imagine his reputation taking even more of a hit among his classmates.

Yes, consulting with Wendel's homeroom teacher was an option, but unfortunately there was simply no escaping the envy that surrounded Wendel's person; the Conrad family had received great benefits from its connection to the empire.

"What a bind..."

Wendel was no weakling. He would not quit school—not given how he felt about his brother, Sven—but even then, I knew that the bullying caused him grief. As his caretaker, it pained me to think that perhaps all I could do was trust him and wait for a breakthrough of some sort. This was not an ordinary case of bullying; Wendel was being targeted as the son of a traitorous family currying favor with the empire. Wendel, too, was smart enough to know that if he did anything thoughtless it would only further harm his reputation. Not that I expected him to enact any kind of revenge; the margrave and Emma had raised him far too well for that.

All the same, it tortured me. Wendel was the son of my mentor, and I was powerless. I took to pulling at weeds sprouting from a

nearby flowerbed and muttering my discontent.

"Am I just being an egotistical parent about all of this and putting my own emotions at the forefront? But no, he's not even my actual son..."

At this point, however, my hands truly felt tied.

I wonder, do you remember the reason I had gone to Reinald and not the Kirsten family when Conrad had required a guardian? It was because there was one eventuality—one possibility—that still existed for me as long as I did not indebt myself to the Kirstens. I had gone to Reinald thinking that eventuality would be easier to reach were I free from any binding familial responsibilities.

Back then, however, I had a differing picture of things. It was not Wendel's bullying that I feared, but something of the level of statewide slander, or a revolt...

Yes, at the time that one potential future I wanted to have in my back pocket was that of, to put it bluntly, simply moving elsewhere.

"And as nothing more than a member of the Kirsten family, it would have been that much *more* difficult..." I muttered.

Now I found myself considering the idea of leaving Falkrum until circumstances calmed. I had never imagined that I might have to seriously consider such a thing so soon. Not that such a move was a given, mind you; I first needed to ask Wendel for his opinion, of course. All the same, I felt it at least worth discussing with Whateley. We *would* be conducting trade across the border in the future—given that the vineyards under our management would one day produce wine—and Whateley himself had said he wanted a better understanding of the current state of things in the empire. Moving came with certain upsides; it would allow us to make inroads and connections with both merchants and craftsmen.

"A new life in a new land will come with its share of challenges," I muttered, "but on the other hand, there won't be many who know the Kirsten and Conrad names."

In the empire, we would not have to be excessively worried about those around us. This was the life that, truth be told, I longed for anyway—but more importantly, Wendel's school life wore all of us down; we always had to approach it so gingerly, so cautiously, as

though it were a bomb of some kind.

Ever since I started working in earnest for Conrad, this talking-to-myself thing has really *gotten out of hand...*

The soil in which old Ben had planted our flowers was soft and fluffy. This made pulling weeds out from their roots delightfully easy, and as such I got completely lost in it. So engrossed was I with my new gardener's assistant role that I was there until a servant informed me that guests had arrived.

There were only a scant few who were allowed to visit without prior word, and on this occasion the timing was perfect; it gave me a chance to discuss things with Arno anyway. That was who I assumed it was, and sure enough, I arrived back at the manor just as Arno and Achim were being served tea. The two were sitting side by side, and I wondered for a moment if I should say something about how chummy they looked, but I knew it was pointless. Whateley had become more than accustomed to the unique sibling-like relationship, and he even acknowledged Achim with a simple nod of the head whenever he turned up on his own.

"Have you lost weight, brother?" I asked.

"What? No, I assure you..." started Arno.

"That he *has*," said Achim, cutting in. "Everybody clings to him in tears of late, and dealing with them all has become something of a daily struggle."

"Achim," said Arno sternly. "I expressly told you *not* to say anything."

"Even after three months, things among the nobility haven't calmed down?" I asked.

"Are you joking?" replied Achim, teacup in hand as he ignored Arno's glare. "They're all bluster. They live the way they always have, like the rules of reality don't apply to them. It hasn't gone well; their finances are starting to plummet."

"Are you perhaps getting requests for loans?" I asked.

"More than you can imagine. The young master sends them packing, but...I guess by that look on your face that you've faced much the same thing, yes?"

"Unfortunately, yes. We're not exactly swimming in money

ourselves, so we decline such requests when we get them, but...that doesn't make declining them any easier."

"That's how it goes. Getting all flustered and panicked now is like declaring to the whole world that you couldn't see the future barreling right for you. Anyone with some foresight would have started preparing for things right away."

"Achim, that's enough," said Arno.

The Kirstens were among the families to escape the chaotic whirlwind that came with the fall of Falkrum, and as such many relied on them.

"Say something to him, would you, Karen?" pleaded Achim. "The guy spends so much of his time responding earnestly to people who don't deserve it that he barely has a free moment. I mean, look at how pale he's gotten!"

"You *are* carrying more than you can handle, aren't you, brother?" I said.

Arno cleared his throat in an attempt to avoid my pointed glare.

"Achim is just a fan of blowing things out of proportion, nothing more," he said. "There's no need to worry about me. More importantly, how are things going with you? It would appear you're doing an excellent job of managing Conrad's affairs."

"All I do is sit in a chair and issue orders," I replied. "If things are going well, it's largely thanks to Whateley and our aides. They've always been the very height of discerning."

They were all outstanding, even from the beginning, and so even without the margrave they'd been able to maintain order. The margrave had truly had amazing people around him.

"With all the confusion of late, it would seem many have been made to quit their posts," said Arno. "I've heard lots of talk of retirement."

"I suppose age has finally caught up to many of them," I commented. "Perhaps it's all too much to handle... And by the way, brother, I know what you're thinking, and the answer is no, I *didn't* have a hand in it."

"Oh... I suppose I could have worded that better. My apologies."

"Oh, brother. Do I really look so sly? So cunning?"

Arno was talking about Guido and Griem, the margrave's siblings. Since meeting with me at Conrad villa, they'd stepped down to let their descendants run things. It seemed that the family had decided it was best if Guido and Griem retired, given that Wendel thought so little of them. And I *had* pressed that upon them somewhat; the idea that yes, they were leaving an awful impression on the boy.

Oh? Then perhaps I did *have a hand in things after all...*

"What is it, Achim?" I asked. "You look very much like there's something you want to say."

"Hey, no need to stab me with that gaze of yours," he replied. "I just couldn't help thinking that you grow more and more beautiful with each passing day."

"Ever the smooth talker, though I do wish you'd spare a little of those comforting words for my brother."

"I endeavor to provide him a lesson every day, but he's proven a rather lazy student. Ah, the woes of a teacher... Do they know no end?"

"Knock it off," said Arno. "I'd much prefer to profess my love to a portrait than to learn from the likes of you."

"How callous," said Arno. "I hope you realize that outside of me, you'd be hard-pressed to find a man so kind."

I judged by their bickering that something had happened that I was yet still unaware of. Arno quickly pulled himself back together—clearly he didn't want his little sister knowing—but as far as I knew, there hadn't been even a hint of female company in Arno's life since the loss of his fiancée. I couldn't imagine it would be easy to select a prospective wife given the current state of the world, but it clearly had people in knots, even though it probably should have been the last thing on their minds...

"And how is Gerda doing?" I asked.

"Her appetite has returned, and her ever-growing young one seems healthy. You can see the bump now, though it's not easy going for her. Achim's mother practically never leaves her side."

"Yeah, the old bag is having the time of her life," commented Achim.

"Gerda's been worried about you of late..." started Arno.

"It's fine—really, it's fine," I said. "Let's not push things. Until her child is born safe and well, I know it's best that I don't see her."

"But Karen, Gerda—"

"I know, and it's *fine*," I said, cutting Arno off again. "It's only natural given her position. And it's not like we had a fight. When things calm down, I'll go and see her."

I had barely seen my sister since everything had happened. You could say that in the last few months I'd made no attempt to visit her. Even so, Wendel was still checking up on her regularly, and Emil was always keeping me up to date with the latest news. I was doing my utmost to keep abreast of Gerda's situation.

What brought Gerda and me to this point was the fact that Reinald had killed Falkrum's king—her husband—and I had sided with him, even upon learning of the fact. I didn't know how Gerda had found out. I felt it likely the news had come by way of one of the grand dukes, but the fact of the matter was that Gerda now knew. I had expected the news to leak at some point, but it was nonetheless quicker than I'd expected.

Think about it; put aside for a moment the Saburova family and, by extension, the Kirsten family, which were both of value to the empire. Think of Falkrum's nobility, who were seeing their wealth and territory seized, and how among them all the Conrad family received imperial support as it lay on the very precipice of complete ruin. The timing of it all was just *too* perfect, and it left much to be suspicious of.

But even without that, my family already knew of my dealings with Reinald. And if I were to be asked point-blank if I knew that Reinald had killed the king, I could not say in good conscience that I didn't.

And so, I opted to put some space between myself and my sister.

"Sometimes it's best to give things time," I said. "I don't believe Gerda will be open to calmly discussing things at present."

"Look, if something happens, tell me," pleaded Arno. "I'll do all I can on my side to help you."

"Thank you. But that goes for you too. I fear we won't be able to respond to your needs immediately, but we'll do what we can."

Despite the importance of the topic—sad as it was—I did not think it was the reason Arno was here. Arno, too, must have seen the look on my face, because he saw fit to raise a new concern.

"A messenger arrived for Gerda, from the empire," he said.

"Oh? I didn't hear anything about it..."

"Not from Reinald. The messenger came on behalf of the emperor, so it's not surprising that it might've escaped your notice. That, or the news is on its way."

"The emperor?"

Reinald's father, in other words. But what business did he have with Gerda? I waited for Arno to go on.

"The message concerned the near future. It said that when Gerda's child is born, they will be raised in the empire until the age of fifteen."

"They'll be educated there, in other words?"

"I assume so, yes. The empire likely wants the child somewhere they can keep a close eye on them."

This wasn't entirely unbelievable. After all, an education in Falkrum could result in a skewed perspective. It was also a convenient way to keep the child as a hostage of sorts.

"And what did Gerda say?" I asked.

"Well, it didn't make her very happy, that much is certain. But they didn't say anything about her having to remain here, so I assume she'll go with them."

Until Gerda's child grew to adulthood, an imperial would bear the responsibilities of the governor general, meaning that the absence of Lady Saburova would mean little.

"What worries me, however," continued Arno, "is the rumors I've heard of the emperor's womanizing... Still, something more pressing has occupied my mind at present, and that's why we're here today. I want to ask you about something."

It was the strangest thing to have *Arno* coming to *me* with a problem. Not that I wanted to make light of it, but ordinarily the situation was flipped.

"I don't intend to allow Gerda to make her trip alone," said Arno. "The very idea makes me terribly uneasy."

"Yes, I agree that it's best you send someone trustworthy with her," I said.

"Right? However, I also don't want her heading over to the empire before we know anything about the place. Our family has also come to the understanding that it would be best to make connections in the empire for the sake of our future. We want to learn about the residential area and find a place to live too. To that extent, would you be open to scouting the imperial capital for us?"

"Me? Why not you?"

"I would like to go, but even with father assisting with our businesses, I cannot leave Falkrum before Gerda's child is born. I'm sending Achim and a number of secretaries, whom I trust to return with trustworthy intel. But it would reassure me to have your opinion along with theirs."

It was unusual for Arno to ask something like this of me, though I had to admit that the timing was a godsend...

But why now? And why me?

"There are a number among our extended family who are opposed to you going," he said.

Arno must have read the question in my expression.

"Oh, er... I'm fine, I assure you," I said. "I was ready for something like this, so you don't have to look at me like that. Please, go on."

"There are many who do not look upon the Conrad family with much fondness. Now, *I* don't believe you to have any ulterior motives, but given the way many feel, it would be best for you to do some work that benefits Gerda."

"It's important that you show you're doing something for the sake of Falkrum," added Achim. "By aiding your sister, who was essentially left entirely alone after this, you'll earn yourself the moral high ground, and it'll help to pacify some of the enmity and distrust flitting around your person."

"I gather people think I'm scheming something. Won't that be a hindrance?"

"As long as you side with the prince, there's no escaping those rumors," replied Achim.

Arno wanted me to go out and earn some brownie points, so to speak. Not that it bothered me particularly; in fact, I was more than happy to do it if it helped Gerda in some way. However, Conrad's present responsibility was to report on happenings in Falkrum, and so I told Arno I would first have to consult with the rest of the family before giving him a definitive answer.

I took this as a chance to change the subject and decided it would be fine to confide in Arno and Achim about Wendel's current circumstances.

"There's also something I would like to consult you two about..." I started.

I tried to choose my words carefully, but both Arno and Achim reacted visibly at the mention of bullying. Arno had come to see Sven as a little brother, and he had even gone as far as providing him a home in the capital. No doubt he had similar feelings with regards to Wendel.

Arno left in the evening to see to some business. He was in quite the hurry, and I couldn't make sense of how flustered he was.

"Did something happen to Arno recently?" I asked.

"He's got an important trade discussion ahead of him," replied Achim.

"But it still feels so odd, all the same..." I muttered.

Achim stayed to join me for dinner, but I couldn't help thinking that if Arno's trade discussion was so important, then shouldn't Achim have gone with him? Then again, Achim *had* told me that he'd been training others to do the same job.

"Well, in any case," I said, "if you're able to leave his protection in the hands of others, they must be quite something."

"I have some thoughts of my own about that, but...well, it's out of my hands. I'm the young master's most trusted aide, and being by his side on a regular basis means I've got a lot of responsibilities. But the rank also comes with good food, so there's that."

He said it all very casually, though I didn't think any ordinary guards would be up to quite so much. Not that I mentioned it, of course.

"Oh, and there's something else I wanted to mention," said

Achim.

"What is it? Mind you, if it's about the menu you'll have to find someone else."

"It's not about the menu! Look, if at all possible...I really want you to take the young master's suggestion. Can you find a way to bring the rest around?"

"It's a request from my own brother, so of course I'll do my utmost..."

Achim's expression was earnest, his features serious. He was telling me to get out of Falkrum.

"The country is in a very precarious state," he said. "Everyone's calm and quiet now, but word is going around that some are going to start showing their true colors just as soon as things settle. There's no telling who has eyes and ears around the place, and there's no guarantee that they won't do something stupid."

Arno had decided not to frighten me with what he thought of as baseless rumors, but Achim was far more realistic. And in truth, though Achim disliked how entwined my path was with Reinald's, he had accepted it to a greater extent than my own brother.

"Rumors..." I muttered. "If it's just me taking the worst of it, then that's one thing, but I can't have Wendel getting caught up in it all. I don't want him or his reputation hurt."

"This isn't about *who* takes the brunt of things, you idiot. The young master puts up a front, even for his family, but what he wants is for you to flee. Can you understand that for me, please?"

"Yes, I shan't forget. Thank you."

If only everyone had brothers so sweet and kind. I looked up at Achim, a man I'd known since childhood. He was like a brother to me, and I knew that he had his own troubles to deal with.

Oh, his lower lashes are just so long...

"You really do like making things hard on yourself, don't you, Achim?" I said. "Don't you ever consider that you might be *too* considerate?"

Achim laughed.

"Please don't tell me you forgot that the vast majority of my struggles are due to your older siblings?"

"I'm sorry, really, I'm... Ow! Ow!"

The noogie is uncalled for, Achim!

I couldn't help but shriek, and so it was just a few minutes later that Wendel burst in.

As for the Conrad family discussion around things, Whateley was in favor of my going. It was a request from the Kirsten family, for one thing, but also there were Wendel's present circumstances to consider.

The Conrad aides were naturally concerned about the bullying, but their greater and more pressing concern was the continued existence of the Conrad family enterprise. They were amenable to the move to the imperial capital for the chance to make connections, and in any case, there would be a need to eventually visit the empire anyway.

This was not to say that things within Falkrum were hopeless, but rather that it was near impossible to read how things would shake out economically. With that in mind, there was no harm in having a base of operations in both Falkrum and the empire.

"If you are leaving for the empire then I would very much like to accompany you, though I do worry a little as to what Sir Abelein might say..." said Whateley.

"Is it a problem if you or I leave Falkrum?"

"I'm sure he'll have his grievances about it, but knowing his personality, he won't object as long as we conduct ourselves as expected and continue to see to our responsibilities. After that, it's just a matter of convincing the proxy governor general, but I don't see that being much of an issue."

"Can I leave that with you, then?"

"But of course. Why, I think it more than sufficient to simply send Aubin or Barraque in my stead. The proxy governor general is a bit unrefined for a civil secretary, and I daresay that gives us an advantage."

"It's enough for me that you're confident, but best avoid saying as much to the man himself."

"Oh, not to worry. I quite like the chap. Those who are too by the book in every matter usually find themselves widely disliked. In that

respect, Abelein has chosen the right man for the job."

Whateley seemed to think that talking the governor general around would be as simple as taking a stroll in the park. He said he wanted to come with us to the imperial capital, but I wasn't sure he was serious; I'd been having trouble discerning whether such comments were genuine or sarcastic of late. I asked the aides mentioned above and Hil and old Ben, and all of them said that Whateley had softened thanks to Wendel's influence. All of this led me to believe that Whateley had been quite a different person back when working as a diplomat. There was also the fact that he was far happier to delegate tasks to others now.

The current proxy governor general of Falkrum was a former assistant of Sir Abelein, also known as Moritz. He was in his mid-fifties, and while he was older than most of his superiors, he was nonetheless known for his loyalty. I suppose Whateley was able to give his evaluation based on the fact he was a former military officer. Whateley was partial to those who endeavored to maintain standards of equality, but he knew that the proxy governor general would not hesitate to raise his sword should any uprising occur.

He was, in other words, rather the easy type to manipulate.

"Though I doubt he will deny our request, I will send a letter to Sir Reinald," I said.

"Yes, please do. That would be better coming from you."

"Which leaves Wendel..."

This had all started with Wendel. And while we needed him to agree to the move, it wasn't like we could just say, "Let's pick up and move nations because it looks like you're getting pushed around." Fortunately, Conrad's current circumstances and Arno's request provided sufficient cover, and though Wendel labored over it for a time, he ultimately agreed.

"Arno is thinking in terms of simply scouting the area, but we're looking at moving," he said. "What's the plan?"

"That depends on how things go," I replied. "Whatever is best at the time...is likely how we'll decide, but I don't want to move too often as it will get in the way of your studies. We'll be meeting with various people to create a foundation upon which to build

connections, and I expect that will take at least two or three years."

"Oh, I see. If that's the case, then there's so much I don't want to leave behind."

The number of years felt right to me; surely that would be enough time for the political and social situation to calm. Wendel was likely worried about all the family keepsakes and mementos, and he was visibly relieved when Whateley assured him that his things could also be sent to him later, after arrival.

And yet, there was still something bothering Wendel... A worry, perhaps. He did not want me to see his troubled gaze. He had become much more mature in his choice of words since we had lived in Conrad, but in times like this he could not hide his age.

"It's just..." he started.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "Is something bothering you?"

"You said two or three years like it was nothing, but is that really okay for *you*, Karen?"

"Oh? Whatever do you mean?"

"It's just, if none of this ever happened, you were going to leave, right? And so when you say that, I... I mean, I'm happy you're always right there to help when we need it, but it means you're going to be tied down again..."

"Oh, Wendel..."

"Wh-What's with that look?"

I'm just so overwhelmed by that big heart of yours, Wendel...

Wendel had his own troubles to bear and was often cooped up in his room. It made me happy to see that he still had space to care for those around him.

"Now, now, there's no need to get mad. Whateley was worried about the same thing, but I don't see it as being tied down at all. And besides, with all the worry about Conrad and my older siblings, this is hardly the time to think of such things. I'm not so cruel that I'd just pack up and leave. If I left now, I'd never be able to forgive myself."

"Yes, but..."

"If Lady Karen were to leave, Conrad would simply collapse," muttered Whateley.

"What if you took my position and coordinated things?" I asked him.

"Oh, but you jest. I've hardly the rank for it, and Wendel is far, far too young, as you well know. So when you *do* decide to leave, I ask only that you provide us with advance notice."

"Of course. I'm not just going to leave without so much as a word."

A little jest on my part and look what happens.

That said, it was all in good fun, and there wasn't anything particularly serious about it. Wendel was thus convinced, but within just a few days I found myself with yet another problem to address: the youngest of the Kirsten siblings, Emil.

Emil was always watching over Wendel like an older brother, so the fact that he heard about our move came as no surprise. What *did* come as a surprise was his declaration that he wanted to study abroad at the imperial capital. He barged into my office, nostrils flared, and told me in no uncertain terms that, as future second-in-command to his older brother, he wanted to see more of the world.

"If I wait for the Kirsten family to move, it will be too late," he pleaded. "So I beg of you, let me tag along with you, sister."

"Tag along...? Emil, what about Gerda?"

"She has everyone else! She'll be fine! I'm looking forward to the birth of her child as much as anyone, but that doesn't mean I can simply disregard my studies. This is far too excellent a chance for me to simply pass up!"

"Say what you will, you're still under the official care of our parents. You'll need to get permission from Arno... Oh, not Arno, father."

"So I just need to get permission, then. Understood!"

The very next morning he was back, and he really *had* gotten father's permission.

"You must be joking!" I exclaimed.

But based on Emil's puffed-up chest and proud, delighted expression, I gathered it was, in fact, no joke. Further proof of that came with what Emil said next: that father wanted to discuss it with *me*.

“Given the importance of the move, he’d like for you to come alone,” Emil explained. “He said that it’s fine for Arno to be there too, but you likely won’t need him for an issue of this nature.”

If father had said as much, then I had to assume he wanted me by myself. I went to the Kirsten manor as soon as the time was available. Father must have been expecting me; I was led straight to his office. When I entered, I got the impression he’d been arguing with my uncle before my arrival. My uncle fell silent when he noticed me, and father had him leave the room. I assumed from my uncle’s worried glances that he was worried for father, who admittedly looked rather pale. I knew Arno all too well, and father was no different; he was not the type to ever let people see him in such a state. Even now he looked on the verge of collapse, his face a mask of sorrow.

When we were finally on our own, my first impulse was to do away with introductory remarks and ask about father’s health. Though father’s default expression was calm, in truth he and Arno were alike, which was to say that Arno had inherited his emotional fragility from his father. I remembered then that father’s heart was perhaps the most delicate in the family.

“You don’t look well,” I said. “Is everything all right?”

“Yes, nothing to be concerned about,” he replied. “Pay it no mind.”

These were our first words in some time. Father was a thin man who was perhaps even more neurotic than Arno, with a rather handsome face for one his age. However, since that fateful day of my past, I’d become unable to read his thoughts, and even now I was unsure what to say. Father seemed to be in the same boat, though today I felt like he’d removed his usual mask. It was as if he were colored by some of who he once was. Putting it this way is rude, I know, but it was like I glimpsed some of the feelings he’d once held for me.

“I suppose it would be foolish to ask if you are doing well?” he said finally.

“Oh, well... I’m sure you hear all about me from Arno...”

“Him and Emil, yes. And sometimes Gerda too.”

"You see Gerda on occasion?"

This surprised me because Gerda never spoke of our parents. She was estranged from our mother, and I assumed that was still the case, given that she was currently relying on Achim's mother for support.

"She doesn't refuse seeing me from time to time," said my father. "As for Anna, well, that is Gerda's decision."

Anna. The name of his wife, my mother: the person with whom it all started. In the past, you could hear my father's love for her in the mere utterance of her name, and yet this time I heard none of it.

"About Emil..." started father.

"Indeed. Are you serious about letting him go to the imperial capital?"

Neither of us were particularly interested in small talk, and so we got straight into it to keep things short and sweet...though perhaps it would be more accurate to say that we were both trying to get a read on the other's intentions. This was only natural, as it had been a long time since we'd last spoken face-to-face, and naturally that came with some awkwardness.

"Quite," said father. "I was actually going to recommend he study in the imperial capital once things settled here."

"By *he*, you mean Emil?"

"Yes. He's more adept than Arno when it comes to matters of socializing. I thought it would be more useful to have him broaden his horizons than simply wait here twiddling his thumbs for the immediate future."

"More so than Arno?"

"Arno makes for a fine lord of the family. It's simply a matter of their strengths and weaknesses."

"I... I see. I don't intend to critique any decisions you've made as a family. But that has led you to the idea of sending Emil abroad?"

"Emil is very fond of you. And I'm sure the place will provide a better environment for studying than our home. I hear he is also close with a young boy he now sees as a younger brother."

"Yes, he and Wendel get along very well. In that sense, things are sure to be brighter with Emil along. We've no problems in that

regard...”

Had I said too much about my own family? The thought crossed my mind, but I had to think father felt the same way. There was something like resignation in his eyes, and after a long silence he finally spoke again.

“I know this will feel like too little, too late as far as you’re concerned, but... Anna and I, we’re going our separate ways.”

“Oh... Yes, late indee— Ahem. Excuse me.”

The news came as a genuine surprise, especially because of how late it was happening. If he was going to divorce her, why hadn’t he done it back when I was fourteen? That was how I felt, though I’d always seen his decision as having to do with matters like reputation, family connections, Emil needing a mother, and, above all else, the fact that he loved her. Father likely knew how I felt.

“You did me the service of accepting my invitation to speak,” he said. “I’m sure you know some of the particulars, but if you’re leaving for the imperial capital, then I feel you should know.”

I was told it had to do with my biological father. It was like a ghost from the past, coming back to haunt me. Father put his hands to his forehead. A slight groan escaped his lips. He could hide his sorrow no longer.

“There are two men who might be your father,” he said.

A question mark appeared like a neon light above my head.

“‘Two’? ‘Might’? F-Father, what are you saying?”

It didn’t make any sense. So shocked was I, in fact, that I called him “father” for the first time in who knew how long. I had always known there was an affair. I had always known that I was the result of it. But even if there was another man, how did that equate to multiple potential fathers?

“One of the men you already know.”

“H-Hm? Oh, er, wait. This is so odd. We found *proof*. The man even admitted to the affair. I inherited a number of his physical characteristics. Wasn’t *that* why we could all be so sure of it?!”

Those physical characteristics included the color of my hair and the shape of my face. That said, I’d inherited a number of mother’s characteristics too, so it wasn’t as though I was a mirror image of

my father. Father listened patiently as I spoke. He acknowledged the letter that was discovered and said that yes, my (potential) real father—the son of a gardener—had admitted to it.

It was only when I'd exhausted all my questions that father saw fit to drop another bomb.

"Given the resemblance, I too never suspected anything else until recently."

Oh, come on. What am I even supposed to say?

I could feel how gaunt and drawn out this subject left him, and though I wasn't at fault, I nonetheless felt suddenly sorry. I could feel myself wanting to apologize.

"To speak of this in depth, I will have to tell you about our failing as a married couple. Are you amenable to that?"

"If you are happy to share it, then yes."

"It concerns your mother, and if you want to know about it, then it is my duty to tell you. In the past, I...remained silent, but you are a respectable adult now, and one of rank, no less. I no longer need to hold back out of concern for how our relatives might respond either."

That clicked for me. Kirsten had been a distant relative of more distinguished families, and those links had led to my parents' marriage. Now, however, the tables were turned; it was our relatives who now had to be concerned about what they did around the Kirstens.

I began to grasp now why things had been so hard for father. He had loved mother as a woman, but mother had not been content to simply be his wife. That was the nicer way of putting it.

"Um, I am going to ask a question that might be incredibly rude, and I don't want you to get angry," I said, "but what we thought of as one thing has become *two*, and while I highly doubt the possibility..."

"Speak your mind. Go on."

"It's something that has itched at my mind, but...what about Emil?"

That was enough for my father to understand what I wanted to say. He closed his eyes for a moment before responding.

"To be honest, I am no longer entirely certain that he is my son. Fortunately, we've had no one cast any real doubts."

"Oh, well, that *can't* be easy to bear..."

"But I care little for that. I am not sending Emil to the capital as some kind of banishment. Please don't misunderstand me; I have no intention of expelling him from the family."

Father then made me promise not to speak a word of it to my older siblings. It felt a little like he'd let things slip unintentionally, which perhaps showed just how much this all weighed on him.

"You have my word," I said. "We all cherish him as our brother, and it would pain me to hear talk of lineages and bloodlines after all we've been through."

"Thank you."

"But if what you speak of is the reason for you deciding to end things with mother, then...am I right to think you have proof?"

Father's lack of a reply told me I was on the mark. But if what father said was true, then Emil's shock would be something else. The reason I'd asked my question earlier was because Emil's face lacked some of the characteristics more prevalent in Arno and Gerda. Still, that particular theory was only speculation; it wasn't like DNA tests existed in this world, and so I pushed any further thought from my mind. Father was intent on treating Emil as his legitimate son, and I would continue to care for him as I always had. Any further digging around was pointless.

"I apologize for my question," I said. "Let us get back on track. Please, tell me what you mean about these two potential fathers of mine."

"First let me ask you this," he replied. "How much do you know of your real father?"

"I've barely ever talked to him, if I'm being honest," I admitted.

The man had taken me in at fourteen, but by then he already had his own family. His wife had been rather taciturn, and I didn't speak much with his son either. The fallout of the whole debacle had left my (potential) real father in shock, and so heavy were the gazes of his neighbors that he'd quit his gardening job and moved to the countryside.

As for the cold shoulder given to me by my (potential) real father's wife, that likely (and unsurprisingly) stemmed from the very nature of my birth. Was it any surprise that we didn't really get along? In any case, her default setting was to ignore my existence entirely. We spoke only as much as was absolutely necessary, and preparations were arranged for me to live alone.

"But how do I put this..." I muttered. "He struck me as timid but cunning. The kind of man who might get up to no good, but only ever commit minor crimes. Your run-of-the-mill low-level gangster, I suppose you'd call him."

"How many times have I told you to watch your mouth?"

"Oh come now, I wouldn't speak like this if I were in the company of others."

Father couldn't stop himself from letting out a wry chuckle. It was nostalgic, and I remembered that in the past he had scolded me like that quite often. Still, I wasn't exaggerating in my description; that was just how the man had struck me. He was good-looking, but he wasn't going to make anything more of himself than he already was. Both he and father were similar in that they were difficult to talk to, but there was no doubt which of them I preferred. What had drawn my mother to him was a mystery I couldn't quite understand.

"I assume that you don't know where he and the Lorenzis are at present?" asked father.

"I've no idea. This is the first I've heard that they've gone anywhere."

"Bernardo left for the imperial capital. His wife took their child and returned to her family home in the countryside."

"So they're not together. Did they divorce?"

"It would appear their relationship soured over the last few years; but that has nothing to do with you. Do not let it trouble you."

So father said, but the very reason their relationship began to fracture in the first place was undoubtedly me. Not that there was anything I could do about how things had gone.

But it would seem my (potential) real father is now on his own...

"Just a moment," I said. "Why the imperial capital? He was just a gardener's son, wasn't he? He inherited his father's position and

then he met mother...”

“No. You have the order of things backward.”

“Backward?”

“Anna fell into a tryst with Bernardo and one other man, both wandering travelers at the time. Bernardo’s travels came to an end when he was injured, and he thus returned to his father.”

“Huh? *He*...was a...wandering traveler...?”

My (potential) real father? A traveler?

Wait a second. One. Other. Man?

Who?

Ugh. I can’t keep up. This is not the story I was told. I thought the guy was just a gardener’s son. He’s actually not?

“Bernardo’s days as a traveler are a part of his past, long ago. That’s why I believed Anna’s letter to be addressed to him. But actually, let me make a few things clear first. As much as it pains me to do so, I simply must. You see, at some point, Anna gave herself to another. How it happened I...do not know. At the very least, I want to believe that things were different up until we had Gerda.”

For a time, not long after Gerda was born, the relationship between my parents frayed. Buried under his work responsibilities, father had little in the way of time for the family. When her frustrations with the situation boiled over, mother left their children behind and fled for a villa owned by her family, taking only her most trusted maids with her. It was hard for me to believe that she would just abandon Arno and Gerda like that, but at the time she’d had her reasons, unfathomable though they were to anyone else.

It was during this time that mother met with my two potential fathers—wandering travelers-cum-mercenaries employed by mother to act as her guards. After a time, mother returned home to father. She was pregnant, and she told him the child was his. She explained that it was the reason she’d come back. My parents’ relationship once more settled into its previous harmony, and father was relieved beyond measure.

Elsewhere, Bernardo sustained injuries that rendered any future travel difficult and returned to his parents, where he began helping with the family business. It was through this work that he was

reunited with his past flame.

If one were to take a cynical view of things, then you could see it as something not unlike just another drama series on a streaming site. It all hinged on how the various roles were played. The thing was, said drama series would have to make the husband and his family unbearably cruel if they wanted the audience to willingly go along with events.

Father went on to tell me that he believed my two potential fathers kept their individual trysts with my mother separate from one another. But unable to forget their past relationship, mother wrote to one of them...

"And the intended recipient of that letter...was the other man?" I asked.

"Assuming I'm correct, yes. Bernardo didn't know about the letter because there was no way he could; Anna wrote it but she couldn't bring herself to send it. I had always thought that this was because of their differences in status."

Father had gone on thinking this way until I had married into the Conrad family. Sometime after my marriage, Bernardo had shown up to see father. His intent? Extortion. Father naturally refused outright, at which point Bernardo brought forth the ace up his sleeve.

"Bernardo informed me that Anna had been in a relationship with one other man at the time...and it was this man who Anna *truly* favored."

Late or otherwise, it was a truth Bernardo was ready to make public. The story stank of lies, but upon investigation, all signs pointed to Bernardo's claims being true. His extortion plans came not long after his wife left him. It was a divorce he had little chance of preventing, and one that ended with his wife taking the windfall of the family's money.

Suddenly penniless, his reputation in tatters, Bernardo saw little ahead save for a gaping, dark abyss. He was a man with nothing to lose, and there is never any telling what men like that will do. And so, father gave him the money he asked for under three strict conditions: that he never return to Falkrum, that he never approach a member of the Kirsten family, and that he never approach *me*

under any circumstances.

Father was not particularly direct in his telling of the story, but one could at least get the idea. As for me, I found myself suddenly unable to look my own father in the eye.

"I... I'm sorry," I uttered.

"Hm? But why?" asked father.

"Because among the people who would have suffered had Bernardo gone public was..."

...me.

The Kirstens would have lost some face, but *I* would have become a laughingstock. By his actions, father saw to it that everything was swept under the rug quietly and without notice.

"Pay it no mind," said father. "It was a matter pertaining to the Kirsten family's reputation, after all. And besides, it was all I could do."

I was torn, my heart like a destructive whirlwind of guilt. Though I'd never been told any of it, I had continued to avoid talking with my father since being expelled from the family. But all the while, he had worked for all of us—his family. Even now he was no different. And now that I knew, I felt so ashamed I couldn't even lift my gaze to meet his own.

I never imagined that in trying to avoid my real father, things would backfire in this way.

I couldn't bear to hear any more. Father, however, was resigned to his fate, and while he spoke each word calmly, I knew that they all made him sick.

And yet, I must ask this last question.

"If he came to you before going to the imperial capital, then that means he has connections in the empire, yes?"

"Yes."

Yep, saw that coming. I mean, why else would he go?

"It's likely that Bernardo entered the empire with the help of his brothers," continued father. "I don't know what he's doing over there, but given how he holds himself, I knew that I had to warn you before you left with your family."

"There's more, isn't there? Go on, I'm ready."

"You should know that aside from Bernardo, one more of the Lorenzi family lives across the border. I made it clear to Bernardo that he was not to approach you, but in truth I have little trust in him. And you cannot prepare for what you do not know is coming."

Later, I would look back at this and wonder why I was so slow to catch on. Perhaps because I was the focus of it all, but father had essentially told me earlier; *Bernardo* had been injured and unable to continue his travels. This was not so for the other man, however.

"Who is the other Lorenzi family member?" I asked.

Father's gaze searched my own. Perhaps he wanted to make sure that I was not in danger of fainting.

"Your other potential father, Bernardo's older brother Bertrando, is...an officer in the imperial military."

Ugh. I'm done. I'm out. Time to head home.

And while I wanted nothing more than to escape reality, reality had other plans.

"It would appear he's a man of some renown over there; though, given the situation here in Falkrum, I've been unable to look into it. However, his position among the military is sure to complicate matters. You must be careful."

Father had tried to investigate, but his well of information—merchants who traveled between the nations—had dried up. That was just as the seizure of Falkrum went into motion. Perhaps the merchants had sensed the arrival of war and decided to lay low. It was also possible that the empire had put restrictions on the sharing of intelligence. Father was busy enough as it was, and he could not put all his time into this one matter. Instead, he could only wait anxiously as the situation in Falkrum worsened.

"If only I'd looked into it more when I had the chance," he said, vexed. "But this is all I could do. I should have ended things with Anna sooner, I know, but all my decisions felt muddled. As a result, *you* were made to suffer. I am sorry."

In his gaze I saw his regrets of times past. And having talked with him here, face-to-face, I could understand that he had been grappling with problems of his own at the time too. And so, for the first time in what felt like years, I spoke to him as a daughter.

"Father," I said. "Did you love mother?"

"More than anybody else in the world," he uttered, his gaze dropping to his hands. "Her betrayal left me shattered, but even then, my love persisted. I wanted her by my side. That's why I...I could not bring myself to look you in the eyes. I did not acknowledge you as you deserved, and for that I am sorry."

"Did you hate me?"

"I couldn't. I would never have even dreamed of it."

He said no more. In speaking to my father, I sensed an agony that he could not give words to in front of his daughter. But of course he would feel this way. To see the symbol of his beloved wife's betrayal right there before him would have put him on the verge of madness. He had released me because he had wanted to accept me.

And when I thought of it like that, I no longer felt that this was a problem of forgiveness. As far as I was concerned, I no longer wanted to deny father's very existence in my own life. Back when I was fourteen, he had been stern and solemn, but never once had he treated me unfairly.

And isn't that enough?

"Am I still your daughter, even now?" I asked.

"If you will allow me the honor of having you as my daughter," father replied.

In which case, I saw only one answer to my question. He had raised me and shown me affection, and now I felt I wanted to treasure that.

"You can do away with your regrets," I said. "You know me, father, and you know that I do not fold easily. Things may have gone the way they did, but I can no longer imagine a future in which I am not connected to Conrad."

"As a father, I am conflicted, but...I am glad you made Margrave Conrad's acquaintance. In talking to him, I found the means to confront myself."

"He truly was a most wonderful man."

"As a noble, certainly. But as a father, it's complicated."

I giggled.

“He was a good man, I assure you.”

It had been years since my father and I had last hugged. “I’m sorry,” he repeated as his arms wrapped themselves tight around me. And in the warmth of his embrace, I found myself marveling at just how much Arno had come to resemble the man.

10: A Lost Couple

The list of things to do to prepare for our move felt endless. There was of course the letter to Reinald to write, then syncing things with the Kirsten family, and the assigning of staff while they (and we) went about our usual work. Many discussions were had regarding the future of Conrad, and the necessary preparations were made for those who would remain in Falkrum.

Father was helping us with regards to Emil, but we also had to see to the paperwork for his change of schools. We were so flustered that even Wendel offered to help, he was so worried. All the same, I shut that idea down completely.

"We have no idea what kind of an education gap might exist between Arrendle and Falkrum," I said. "You should be studying with Emil to make sure there's no gap to worry about."

"I *am* studying. I'm just in need of a break."

"Then can I ask you to check on Gerda for me?"

"You can. I like Lady Gerda. She gives me pocket money."

It was only me with whom Gerda was awkward; with Wendel it was the same as always. He'd always looked after her, and I think she was grateful for the herbal tea he brewed for her. I often asked him to go and check up on her.

In and among the hustle and bustle of preparing for our move, a reply arrived from Reinald. Or to be more precise, a reply arrived from Moritz on Reinald's behalf. In short, it read, *"Just don't slack off on your assigned duties."* It was exactly what Whateley had predicted. With letter in hand, the Conrad aides thus met to discuss things with the governor general, and so it was decided that Conrad's base of operations would shift to the empire.

I did meet once with Gerda, however, on the day before we departed. Conrad was heading to the imperial capital on behalf of Falkrum, and by extension the Saburova family, after all. My visit

was, in an official capacity, the Conrad family's closing report. I hadn't seen Gerda in months, and she had far more energy than I was expecting. Her skin, too, had a healthy, vibrant sheen.

"Do be careful, please," she said. "And don't overdo it. You'll only come down with a fever or hurt yourself. You're always far too reckless."

We parted ways with a hug.

I wondered: *Will I have something more of a smile for her, the next time we meet?*

And then I thought: *More importantly, I must point out the young grand dukes who shot their mouths off with such bluster I couldn't tell if their words were meant as sarcasm or praise.*

Almost the entirety of those who called the Conrad villa home were coming with us to the imperial capital, though that said, the villa had never employed many servants, so it was a comparatively small group. We promised to pay everyone's salaries should they choose to remain in Falkrum, but all were intent on joining us at our new home. Old Ben the gardener vowed to make the garden at Wendel's new home a truly magnificent sight, while Humphrey pledged to make up for his past by wholeheartedly seeing through his duties now. The one-armed Hil, meanwhile, saw it as his duty to watch over his pupil and all members of Conrad. We also took on another two live-in servants, Louisa and Rosanne, both former housewives.

"To be honest, I can't bear to stay here with my son gone," said Roseanne with a smile. "So I think it's best to take what keepsakes I have left and start a life elsewhere."

We made a point of talking things through with the older servants and assistants. It was going to be hectic starting over, and wherever possible we wanted everyone to live well. However, Old Ben in particular made it clear that he did not mind if he saw out the rest of his days on foreign soil.

Along with organizing our entourage, we also had to attend to family business matters. We planned to take a number of aides with us, and those who agreed to join naturally wanted to bring their families along with them. Our traveling party was growing to quite

the size, but even then, it felt insufficient. We would be leaving many in Falkrum, which meant we'd have to employ local help on-site.

The Kirsten family were sending Achim and a number of aides. Given that Emil was traveling in our company, we agreed to split the cost of guards for the journey between our two families. That said, it was quite the shock for Arno and Emil to see father and I speaking casually again.

"You're bringing quite the amount of luggage with you," remarked Achim. "Have you already settled on a place to live in the imperial capital? The aides and I will be staying at an inn for the foreseeable future..."

"It was our plan to search for a home when we arrived, but the governor general is organizing a place for us. He said it would be best for us to have a temporary home while we find our footing."

"And I assume that Abelein is involved?"

Achim didn't even try to hide his displeasure. He was no fan of Moritz or those who worked with him.

"The key word there is 'temporary,'" I replied. "We intend to move once we find somewhere more suitable. I don't know exactly what we'll be provided with, but assuming there are spare rooms, how about staying together with us? It'll certainly save you on accommodation expenses."

"If you've the room to spare, we may well take you up on the offer."

Achim and the Kirsten aides were only going to the imperial capital for reconnaissance, essentially, and so they would not be provided a home. In any case, whether or not we would even like the house we were provided was another story entirely. I prayed it would be a nice one.

The day of our departure felt like it came in a flash, and just like that, we were looking out at the castle walls that surrounded the royal capital as we put Falkrum behind us. We were a long line of carriages trundling along the main roads, surrounded by guards.

"Wendel, Emil," I said. "You'd best remember this sight. You may not see it again for quite some time."

"Hmm..." murmured Wendel.

"I'll be back just as soon as my study abroad trip ends," said Emil.

All the same, none of us knew in what ways the place might change before our return.

The road that connected Falkrum to the empire was a road well traveled. Merchants and ordinary travelers used it often, and so it was kept in good condition. Small garrisons dotted the roadside every so often, and guards from those garrisons passed us by in either direction.

The plant life that surrounded us was beginning to bloom into color, and while it was a pleasure for the eyes and relatively safe, danger lurked as soon as one left the beaten path. We did the best we could to spend the nights at villages along the way, but couldn't escape some nights sleeping outdoors. Baths proved challenging, but let me be clear: *nothing* was harder than going to the toilet. It was only when I experienced it myself that I felt an awed respect for those who traveled often.

When it came to bathing, one could simply close the curtains of their carriage and make do with scrubbing at grime with a wet towel. Toilets, on the other hand, were not so easy. Naturally, business had to be done at a distance, but not *too* far either. Our guardswomen made that point clear.

"In this line of work, there's a story of a young girl who hid behind some bushes when nature called and vanished entirely." said one. "She was discovered later at a bandit hideout, stripped completely naked."

"Eep... And what became of her?"

"Nothing good, let me assure you of that. So at least make sure I can see your head while you're doing your business, or call one of us over. None of us is bothered by the sound of it, mind you. It's something we're used to."

It seemed that the very times when young maidens wanted privacy were also golden opportunities as far as bandits were concerned. And given that we were traveling in such a large group, word about us would have made the rounds. I was ordered not to go too far from the caravans, and it caused me no end of grief.

But I was so, so, *so* glad to have female guards with us. It was something all of us ladies were beyond grateful for.

The return trip I'd taken from the royal capital to Conrad was far easier than this one. On a fast horse one could make the distance in a matter of days, but with carriages and luggage to think about, the journey was slow going. And while there were many roads that led from Falkrum to Arrendle, the vast majority of them passed through steep mountain ranges. The main road we took was the safest and steadiest, and in truth our carriages suffered little in the way of rocking.

Outside of the villages we passed through, however, it was just trees, mountains, and greenery. There was so little change in scenery it began to get exasperating, but finally the border came into view, and all of us let out sighs of awe and relief. Buildings were connected to a set of large gates, and around it all were inns and eateries. Stalls of various kinds dotted the roadside, giving the place the feel of a small town.

"Wow! I've never seen anything like it!" exclaimed Emil.

The kids were the most excited on the trip, naturally. What adults think of as a long, boring journey, children see as a treasure trove of new experiences. The area around the town was cleared of trees, making for wide-open plains.

"The border gates don't offer much, though," Emil continued. "I thought it would be more lively."

"When I was last here there were still some trees around..." said Whateley. "I have to assume the logging was done because the military are going to set up another garrison."

"It seems a waste to cut them *all* down, though, doesn't it?"

But I understood why—the better the visibility, the farther away the bandits would stay. The area around the gates appeared well-staffed by guards, so our traveling group dispersed for a break. Everyone was so bored they were at their wit's end anyway; a break in the monotony was just what the doctor ordered.

Whateley shuffled off to prepare our lodgings for the evening. Wendel and Emil were left in Hil and Humphrey's care. I decided to go for a stroll with Achim as my guard. We walked around peering at

whatever stalls happened to catch our fancy. The border town—and I'm not sure if that's the best expression for it—was essentially just like any other town, but it was as we were looking around that I noticed somebody stumbling away from the place.

"Achim, do you see that?" I asked.

"See what?"

I couldn't make out the figure clearly, being that they wore the hood of their dirty robe over their eyes, but the hair spilling from it made me think it was likely a woman. I wouldn't have given it a second thought ordinarily, but the woman looked unsteady on her feet. She was shaky, as though she couldn't find her center of balance, and it wasn't at all clear in what direction she was going.

I glimpsed a nightgown under the woman's robe. She wasn't even wearing shoes.

"I think she's leaving the town," I said. "But how dangerous for her to leave in such a state."

"I don't like the idea of getting involved with the likes of her," muttered Achim.

"Oh, come now, we'll just see her back to safety. I'm going to say something before it's too late."

I couldn't bear to just leave her like that. I doubted she was alone, and so I ran over. It didn't take long to catch up to her; she walked slowly, with no particular direction in mind. When I got to her, the woman had stopped in place and was looking up toward the sky.

"Er, a moment please?" I said from behind the woman. "It's dangerous to head out that way alone."

When I got no response, I circled around to the front of the woman. What struck me first were her gaunt cheeks and her far-off gaze. She looked so frail, and she was so shabbily dressed that I almost gasped. Her dried lips were half open as her unfocused eyes stared skyward. But try as I might to get her attention, the woman never tore her gaze from the clouds.

"It's no use," said Achim, sighing. "You're only going to exhaust yourself."

"Do you think she's here with relatives, perhaps?"

"Who knows? She's in bad shape. For all we know, someone might have abandoned her here."

"How awful."

"Lots of travelers pass through this place. It's not outside the realm of possibility."

Now that I stood before her, I could confirm that she was, indeed, dressed in a dirty nightgown. Her fingernails and toenails were darkened with grime, and the pungent smell of urine wafted from her person. Her cloak, though comparatively cleaner, was nonetheless worn from use and in a fairly poor state. With the weather getting warmer now it wasn't so bad, but all the same she was bound to catch a cold at some point.

The woman reacted to none of my words. I felt at a loss for what to do, and it was then that a man appeared from the street. He waved his hand frantically, calling out as he did so. A hand axe hung from his belt, but it looked shabbily made. He was dressed in well-worn traveling garb, but with his scruffy beard one could have easily mistaken him for a rather shady individual.





He rushed to us as fast as he could. I guessed he was in his forties.

"M-My si-sister," he said, dripping with sweat as he struggled to catch his breath. "Has she...disrespected you in some way?"

His face was swollen, and though he too wore his hood over his face, I could see that the only relatively unharmed part of his visage was a single eye.

"Not at all," I replied. "I noticed this woman trying to leave and thought to stop her. You're a relative, I presume?"

"Sh-She's my sister. I'm her older brother. I took my eyes from her for only a moment and she vanished. I've been looking all over for her."

I saw relief flood through the man at the sight of his sister. It was like a glimpse into his heart, and I did not think he was lying to us.

"You came over here to see to my sister, then?" he said. "Thank you for your kindness. Thank you ever so much."

He continued to thank us as he gently took his sister's hand in his own. To see them together like this was to notice just how alike their hair and eyes were.

"Come now, let's go," said the man gently.

I couldn't help myself.

"Perhaps if you are amenable to the idea," I started, "how about some food and water? We are not in short supply, and we also have spare clothing. Perhaps we could offer your sister something clean to wear?"

The man was left uncertain for a moment, but he eventually shook his head.

"I deeply appreciate your kindness, but I couldn't possibly accept. We have nothing with which to repay you. You kept my sister from potential harm, and that alone is far more than enough. We'll take our leave."

"I can't help but notice that, by the looks of things, you haven't had much to eat. You're so pale. Are you going to take your sister somewhere to rest?"

It was all too clear by the man's complexion and the lack of color in his lips that he was malnourished. He clearly did not have the

means to see them both to a satisfactory inn, and in response to my words, the man clenched his fist and fell into silence.

"We are not out to cheat you," I said. "We've shared little more than a brief conversation and so you may decline our offer if you will, but I believe it to be in your best interests to accept."

The man's expression scrunched up for a moment, and he peered at me from under his bruised eyelids as if searching me. But that was only for an instant, and after quickly weighing his own pride against the state of his sister, he spoke.

"It pains me to accept the help of a stranger I have only just met, but if you could at least provide my sister with some food and water, I would be beyond grateful."

"Certainly. Please come with us. Our carriages aren't far from here."

Achim stayed silent, and the fact that he voiced no opinion meant he'd realized the same thing I had. He knew, and that was why he said nothing.

"Ah..." murmured the woman.

"I'm sorry, Chelsea," said the man. "I'm sorry I left you all alone..."

As he continued to apologize, the woman named Chelsea replied with the same "ah" and allowed him to lead her along. I smiled at him, but my thoughts raced. I was glad I'd spoken to the woman, and at the same time I was beyond surprised.

You really do meet the most surprising people in the most unexpected places.

He appeared very different from when I'd seen him in the past, but his eyes and his tone of voice were both very familiar to me. This man was Geoffrey, who had reportedly been executed for the crime of murdering Prince David.

11: Geoffrey and Chelsea

For the rest of Conrad's people traveling with us, it simply looked like I'd suddenly brought two shabby vagabonds back to the carriages. Our aides were brimming with curiosity—and nothing if not on guard—but my gaze conveyed to them that now was not the time for it.

We had a surplus of women's clothing, which meant finding something for Chelsea was easy. The problem was the woman herself, so to speak. The fact of the matter was that Chelsea was utterly *filthy*; it wasn't a case of simply throwing a new outfit on her and calling it a day.

"Let's get you two some food, for starters," I said.

All we had left over was a mix of bread, sausages, and apples, but it proved more than enough for our two new guests. They took the plates we gave them and ate on the ground. I had suggested they at least sit on the rug we brought out for them, but Geoffrey refused, telling us he did not want them to get it all dirty.

Whateley set about securing a room for them at our lodgings, and Wendel and Emil returned from their trip out exploring. They looked upon Geoffrey and his sister with some confusion but bid the two good day despite the smell; they were nothing if not well-mannered.

"You've fed them and you're going to give them a change of clothes. Isn't that enough?" whispered Achim, who had been watching from a distance. "Is it really necessary to provide them with a room on top of it all?"

"There's no point giving them a nice change of clothes if they're in no state to even wear them," I replied.

"Then, couldn't you just give them some money? I don't know how they're still alive, or why, but I don't recommend getting mixed up in it all."

"Aren't you curious though, Achim?" I asked.

"I'm intrigued, of course, but not so much that I'll embrace the potential dangers that come with poking my nose into things. You know as well as I do that if they're still alive, there's no way a certain someone isn't aware of the fact."

"You're right. But I always thought that talk of their execution was hogwash right from the start."

"You what?!"

Geoffrey had killed Prince David and—as far as the public knew—been executed for his crimes. Achim didn't like what I was doing, but he knew I was set in my ways and so he didn't interfere. He looked conflicted as he crossed his arms; perhaps the sight of a former high-ranking military official reduced to less than even a shadow of his former self stirred something in him.

"I've got my questions, but fine, have it your way," said Achim. "Just be aware that showing him kindness doesn't necessarily mean he's going to tell you what you want. He may have fallen on hard times, but his gaze is as steadfast as ever."

"I know. Half of it is curiosity, yes, but the other half is for my personal satisfaction. I meant it when I said this was like the workings of the fates."

"If they do *anything* funny, I won't show them any quarter, no matter what you say."

"I don't think they're the types, honestly."

"Remaining cautious at all times is my *job*."

But enough about Achim's worries. When we brought Geoffrey and Chelsea to their room, Geoffrey reacted with shock. Clearly he hadn't expected us to go quite so far with our generosity. He was reluctant, but I forced him to accept.

When it came to washing Chelsea, however, Geoffrey's assistance was a necessity. I had known that they were siblings from the start, but as it turned out Chelsea became extremely agitated whenever her brother wasn't nearby. For all intents and purposes he was his sister's carer. We managed to get Chelsea in the bath just fine, but it wasn't long before I had to call Rosanne to take a look at her scalp.

"I daresay it's best that you let me cut the lot," she said.

"Let's do that. It'll only make things harder if you don't. Do you mind?" I said, turning to Geoffrey.

"By 'the lot,' you mean her hair...? All of it...?" he replied.

"It will grow back. Leaving it as it is simply isn't good for her."

Geoffrey was hesitant, but I had the scissors brought anyway. I wasn't about to take no for an answer; not when Chelsea's hair had been turned into a palace for lice. In the end, Chelsea was left with something resembling a buzz cut, but at least it rid us of the palace's former tenants.

Dressing Chelsea was a slow process that took far, far longer than I'd imagined. By the time we were done, it was the evening. She had looked like some kind of filthy ghost when we'd met, but she now looked like any ordinary woman in her early thirties, albeit one who was clearly too thin. Once it was all over, it wasn't long before Chelsea was fast asleep. Probably the combination of a full stomach and a hot bath.

"Now it's your turn to get cleaned up," I said.

I tossed a towel in Geoffrey's direction. I'd had a bath run for him while we were getting his sister dressed. While he was doing that, I took to cleaning myself with a damp cloth. By that time Whateley had heard everything from Achim, and with all of our people staying in the same inn, it was practically ours. There was no need to worry about unexpected visitors.

When everyone gathered in the dining room for dinner, Geoffrey arrived, looking much cleaner and in a fresh outfit.

"My sister is still asleep," he said. "She's barely slept a wink on our journey, to be honest. I'm truly grateful for your kindness..."

"That's enough with the thanks," I said. "We'll arrange for Chelsea to be served dinner once she wakes, but for now I hope you'll enjoy some food yourself. You gave your sister most of your share earlier, so I imagine you must be famished."

I felt awkward having a full-grown man constantly bowing and expressing gratitude to me. Achim casually took a seat by my side and sipped at his soup, though I knew that in truth he was keeping a watchful eye on Geoffrey, who appeared to have no possessions save for the clothes we had prepared for him. His face was still

bruised and puffy, but nonetheless he cleaned up nicely. He gave the impression of one of good bearing.

"I do worry about those injuries on your face," I said. "Wendel, would you take a look at them later?"

The boy was quick to assent.

"Sure," he replied. "I'll prepare some ointment."

"Wendel is the most accomplished medical practitioner in our entourage," I said, gesturing for Geoffrey to take a seat opposite me. "He's more reliable than most of your usual doctors, so you can rest easy."

"My thanks. I'm impressed; such skills are admirable, and in one so young to boot. But pay no mind to my face. What you see here is a result of my refusal to accept treatment. It doesn't impair my vision too badly, so whatever ointment the boy might make would be better put to use elsewhere."

It struck me that Geoffrey had a tendency to play his own needs down, and while it caused me some concern, before I could do anything else Geoffrey politely bowed.

"I know you said you were done with thanks, but I hope you'll forgive it this one last time. I know I should have done this earlier, but allow me to introduce myself. I am Geoff; my younger sister is Chelsea. I know I rejected your offer at first, but in truth we were completely out of money and in a very tight spot. I cannot thank you enough for your offer of assistance."

"Sir Geoff, then. My name is Karen. We hail from Falkrum, where I am the acting lord of the Conrad family."

Geoffrey's eyes went wide for a moment when he heard the Conrad name. You might think that perhaps we had been acquainted in the past, but in truth he knew nothing of me. To Geoffrey, I was no more than a relative of the king's concubine. We might have passed one another by at this or that event, but we'd never been formally introduced.

"The Conrad family," he uttered. "Yes, I have heard of you. I see. Though, truth be told, I have no real understanding of the state of things in Falkrum of late..."

"Do you also hail from Falkrum, Sir Geoff?" I asked.

"Until recently, I worked as a guard, but circumstances dictated that I leave the country. I have not returned since."

Dinner was a vegetable soup in which dried meat was simmered until tender and a pasta made with wheat noodles and pan-fried meat. It was all very strongly flavored, and it left one's throat parched. That was the point, really; with all the travelers passing through, the inns looked to encourage them to drink. Still, the bread was perfect; freshly baked so as to be crunchy on the outside and soft and fluffy within. I still wasn't eating much in the way of meat at the time, so the steak on the table was largely for Geoffrey's benefit.

"I took my sister to my hometown, where my parents had lived when they were alive," said Geoffrey, his shoulders slumped as though he carried a boulder on them. "But unfortunately, we couldn't make a living there ourselves. You've seen the state she's in. It was hard going back home, so I called on an acquaintance for a favor, and we headed for the empire. That brought us here."

"Oh, so you have acquaintances in the empire, then?" I asked.

"I suppose you could say we have someone watching over us... I don't know to what extent, exactly, but it's someone who once found me work. We don't know anybody else, but we had little other choice. I hope to make connections upon our arrival."

Geoffrey explained that Chelsea was prone to panic attacks when in crowded places. Sometimes it involved screaming and wailing. He had hoped that the quiet of a countryside village might allow them both peace. Unfortunately, however, Chelsea did not take well to such a life. Geoffrey glossed over the particulars, and so later Whateley would offer something of a translation. The steward thought it likely that the villagers couldn't accept Chelsea and her special needs. Indeed, it wasn't entirely uncommon for families to shut people like her in rooms and leave them there until they starved to death.

In the end, Geoffrey explained he'd looked for work in more populated areas and turned his attention toward finding somebody to look after his sister. He had also planned to work as they traveled so as to ensure they did not run out of money, but as their journey

went on, Chelsea's condition grew more unstable.

Perhaps she came in touch with the nastier side of the human race...

Regardless, Geoffrey was unable to leave his sister's side. Very few were willing to hire a guard who had to take his mentally ill sister everywhere with him, and so the two survived on a pittance. When things grew worse, they resorted to selling their possessions to get by.

"I had heard that one no longer needs a traveling permit to cross between the empire and Falkrum at the border gates," said Geoffrey, "but the border guards have their eyes peeled for those in poor shape. They would not let me and my sister pass, and so we've been stuck here."

The two siblings were stranded at the border, but given their fast-dwindling finances, they couldn't even afford to go back. Geoffrey decided to pay a merchant to take a letter to his "acquaintance" in the empire, asking for assistance. In the meantime, he and his sister had spent their days at the cheapest inn they could find, waiting for a reply. Unfortunately, they'd run completely out of money. Geoffrey spoke no more on the topic, but it was all too easy to see that life on the road had not been kind to him, especially with a sister in tow who could not care for herself and could not even comprehend the concept of danger.

All of it, and especially the idea of nursing, made me think back to the various news reports I'd seen back when I lived in Japan.

"You will cross the border tomorrow, I presume?" asked Geoffrey.

"That is the plan. If you'd like, we'd be more than happy to get in touch with your acquaintance."

"No, I can't let you do that. I'm nothing more than a traveler who's been stopped at the gates, and I don't even carry anything with which to prove my identity. That, and...I would only be causing you more trouble by getting you involved."

He did not say exactly *what* that trouble was, but his expression showed just how seriously he felt about it.

"In which case I won't push you on the matter," I said. "For now, just eat up while the food is still warm. We're happy to order more if

this isn't sufficient, so help yourself."

"Well, if you insist."

I was more open to the idea of eating meat now, but I tended not to only because of how oily it often was. I feared the repercussions of overindulging. On the road, meals were more about calories than quality, and if I even dared try to go for a walk, I was told to stay in my carriage because of how dangerous it was outside.

Which is all to say that I worried that perhaps I'd ordered too much for a man in his forties. But as it turned out, everything that was served disappeared into his stomach. A single mouthful for Geoffrey was the equivalent of several of my own. The food just seemed to disappear from his plate, causing Wendel and Emil to silently stare, their eyes wide with shock. Perhaps it had been a long time since they'd seen someone so thoroughly enjoy a meal. To put it in more concrete terms, Geoffrey's appetite was akin to Achim's when he was still growing. Geoffrey was much more refined with a knife and fork, mind you, and I suppose such good manners were to be expected of one who'd worked in the castle.

"I know this isn't much of a repayment, but I can at least inform you of bandit movement in the area," said Geoffrey.

He went on to tell us about where the bandits had been appearing and gave us the names of the trustworthy merchants at the border. A great many people passed to and from the border station, and that included a fair share of disreputable merchants. They left many a traveler in tears and distraught. Geoffrey had observed the people in the area and at times came into possession of helpful intel.

Whateley took it all in with nods and murmurs. He would have our people act accordingly, and I had no doubt that Geoffrey's information would be put to good use. It would go a long way toward making our journey the following day all the smoother.

And perhaps now that Geoffrey and his sister are all cleaned up, they might be allowed through the gates too.

I mentioned it to Geoffrey, but he said that it was not so simple, and the guards knew to look out for him now. Confused, I asked for the details and was told that Chelsea panicked when the captain of

the guard shouted at her. She'd responded by biting him. Geoffrey hadn't been able to convince them to give him a chance ever since.

"I'm sure your letter must have reached its recipient by now. A little more patience should do it," I said, hopefully.

Geoffrey, however, responded only with a pained smile.

To be honest, what I wanted most was to invite him and his sister to come with us. However, even Achim had quickly recognized the man, and we both knew the risks that came with having them in our party. I could not afford to act too rash. And besides, it wasn't like they were pets I could just adopt; they were living, breathing humans, and one of them was mentally disabled.

The sheer look of him whenever the topic shifted to his recent past showed just how rough he'd had it. He was conscientious and loyal, and given the circumstances it didn't feel like I could just say, "You're not actually *Geoff*, you're a very particular *Geoffrey*, aren't you?" I didn't feel like I could just imply that he murdered one of the princes, and I didn't even know if he would answer me anyway.

More to the point, even if we could travel together, it seemed that he and his sister had been permanently blocked at the gates. I was very intent on us passing through to the empire the following day, but I realized that all of it was just to satisfy my own curiosities. In the end, I settled for giving him enough money to get by for a time, along with some jewelry and medicine. He promised to pay us back, but I was of the opinion that it was wisest to simply assume that loaned money would never return. Without any expectations of repayment to bog us down, it was easier to part on good terms.

The following day, Geoffrey and his sister came to see us off at the gates. The color had returned to Chelsea's face thanks to a good night's sleep, and she stood with her hand clasped in her brother's, though she rubbed at her eyes like a child who wanted only to return to sleep. I couldn't help but smile at the sight as I waved to them from our carriage.

And so, our carriages slowly made their way through the gates and into the empire. But just as the one I was in began to roll across the border, I called for the driver to stop. Achim didn't say a word. Wendel had already read my mind too.

"It's up to you," he said.

Only poor Emil had no idea what was going on, and so his head whipped back and forth between Wendel and me as I alighted from our carriage. Whateley was already waiting for me and at the ready.

"I've prepared enough room in the last cart for the two of them to sleep in," he said with a nod.

He knew me better than I knew myself, and he had perhaps known the thoughts that plagued the proxy lord of Conrad. Geoffrey, for his part, seemed perplexed to see me walking back toward him.

"Sir Geoff," I said. "It looks to me like you've quite a bit of muscle on that body of yours. Do you know your way around a weapon?"

"A weapon? I know basic swordsmanship, yes, but..."

"I'm glad to hear it. You see, we're looking to hire some more manpower. As for your fee, would the amount I gave you this morning suffice, I wonder?"

It was only now that Geoffrey realized where I was going with the conversation.

"Huh? Wait. We..." he stammered.

Oh, come on. We all know you're stuck. These are the best circumstances you could possibly ask for!

I did not wait for Geoffrey's reply. Instead, I turned and walked to the border station guards, singling out the highest-ranking individual among them. The captain of the guard had a stern look on his face as he glanced at Geoffrey and Chelsea behind me.

"Are you going to take those two with you?" he asked as he stroked his beard.

"I've hired the man to work as one of our guards. He and his sister will join us as far as the imperial capital. My standing is a simple enough thing to prove if necessary. I can assume there are no problems, yes?"

I was prepared to roll up my arguing sleeves and get rough if need be. I knew I was dealing with the man who'd suffered through Chelsea's chomping, and so I assumed that he didn't have a good impression of the pair. The captain of the guard, however, took all of those assumptions and promptly crushed them under his feet.

"Understood," he said. "We've had reports of wolves and bears in

the area, so do be sure to keep your eyes peeled. It also gets especially cold in the mornings and evenings, so make sure you all take care of yourselves."

I was in shock. The captain summarily ignored me and walked over to Geoffrey.

"Couldn't be happier for you," he said, slapping Geoffrey on the shoulder. "Good luck on your journey."

And just like that, Geoffrey and Chelsea were allowed to cross into the empire. Geoffrey sat Chelsea down in our last cart, then took a seat next to her, still trying to process it all.

That face of his really does *stand out, doesn't it...*

I took a look around and noticed something in the back of the cart. I didn't know what it was doing there, but there it was: a helmet rolling along the floor and gleaming with a dull, metallic sheen. There was no armor anywhere to be found; it was literally just the helmet, which was a rounded thing with a plate to cover the entire face and jaw.

I took it in hand without thinking and placed it on the still perplexed Geoffrey's head. Then I took to appraising it from a number of angles.

Yes. Traveling garb and a full-face helmet to go with it. Like something straight out of a video game or manga. How very strange to see such a sight in real life. Gives the impression that he's either a truly fearsome individual or a complete buffoon.

Not that it really matters either way.

"Lady Karen, I... What would you have me do?" asked Geoffrey.

"Perhaps you can keep watch over the rear of the caravan, Sir *Geoffrey*," I said.

I heard the gasp from within his helmet. It was the very instant that the two of them officially came under the protection of the Conrad family.

I was surprised to find that the act of hiding Geoffrey's face resulted in a remarkable change in his personality. His general level of cheer was noticeably higher than when he was without headgear. When we'd first met he was like a ball of reserve and restraint, but

he quickly came to realize he was now in the family's employ, and he was quick to get into the swing of things and get up to speed with the other guards.

While Geoffrey was busy doing that, Chelsea simply relaxed within sight of the rest of us. She wasn't particularly comfortable around most men and was prone to panicking when in the company of those who were especially gruff, but she offered her innocent smile to women and children.

When Chelsea felt comfortable she either slept, stared blankly into space, or got caught up twiddling her fingers. She was mostly capable of understanding speech, but her own words were slurred and largely unintelligible.

The now helmeted Geoffrey was nothing if not attentive. Perhaps it was an innate personality trait, or something to be expected of the former Falkrum prince's education coordinator, but Geoffrey excelled when it came to handling Wendel and Emil. I had worried about whether he would get along with the other guards, but within three days he was just another part of their evening fireside conversations. I wondered if he'd developed the ability from having worked under Prince Demyan, but either way I felt it was like a demonstration of how far his communicative abilities outclassed my own.

"I daresay you could learn a thing or two from Sir Geoff," commented Whateley. "Particularly the way in which he uses conversation to build relationships."

"Whateley," I replied, "you *know* that we all have our own strengths and weaknesses. We both know that I am not built for such communication."

"While it may be a temporary title, you are nonetheless the current lord of the Conrad family. How will you ever get by if you don't learn to enjoy conversing with others?"

"Yes, but Whateley, I *am* trying, I assure you..."

"You won't be able to fall back on me forever," he said. "This trip, too, is a chance for you to learn and grow."

The steward had taken to offering me advice more often, and it stung.

As for Geoffrey's identity, only Whateley, Achim, and myself knew

who he really was, though I intended to tell Hil once a good opportunity presented itself. Geoffrey continued to refer to himself as simply "Geoff," and that was what I called him. As such, I'll refer to him as Geoff from here on out, for simplicity's sake.

I had not talked with Geoff about the incident in Falkrum, but he had tried to bring the topic up. Perhaps he felt somewhat indebted to us, or otherwise understood that it was why I had engaged him in further conversation when we first met. However, when it came to actually uttering the prince's name, he suddenly faltered. Even with his helmet on I could feel how difficult it was for the man, and so I stopped him from going on.

"You are Geoff," I said, "a simple traveler I met and employed. That is enough."

Is it, though? I hear you ask.

It is not.

I wanted to know the truth, of course, but I didn't think it was worth forcing it out of the man. And from the way Geoff held himself, it did not seem to me that you could question the loyalty he'd had for Prince Demyan. I wondered if perhaps the problem was Prince David. Just thinking about it wasn't going to get me anywhere, of course, but we were on the road and the only thing to look forward to was the food, so I ended up thinking about it a lot.

Speaking of boredom, Achim and Hil also had something of a surplus of free time on their hands. The two enjoyed spending it sparring, and after some time they added Geoff into the mix. Geoff was just as capable as he'd proven in his duel, and even with just his battered hand axe he was a force to be reckoned with. I got the sense that Achim was impressed, so during one of Geoff's breaks I asked him about Achim's swordsmanship.

"Hey, Geoff," I said quietly. "You've done your fair share of sparring with the others now, so tell me: just how good is Achim with a sword?"

Now that I was his employer, Geoff insisted that I refer to him sans "sir."

"We've only crossed weapons a handful of times," he replied, "but he makes good decisions under pressure and has the skills to match

his wits. His stance mixes the traditional with his own unique flair, though it doesn't hamper him. His teacher deserves some credit, but the lad himself is nothing to balk at."

Though his helmet made Geoff more personable, it also made reading his expression impossible.

"So he's good, then?" I asked.

"He could easily best anybody who doesn't know what they're doing, and I'd rank him higher than most knights too. If he'd been born of the right lineage, I've no doubt he would have been in the castle's employ."

"Well, then...color me surprised," I remarked.

"You didn't know?"

"Achim is my brother's bodyguard, and I've never once run into any trouble when we've been together."

"I'm glad to hear it. Peace is a wonderful thing."

Achim had swung his sword around on the night that Six appeared in my room uninvited, but I'd never seen him in actual combat and so never knew how adept he really was. He was never one for showing off his swordsmanship either. Geoff seemed to understand this about Achim too, and he noted that while Achim took both Geoff and Hil seriously in their sparring matches, he also kept a few of his subtler techniques close to his chest. I was told this was not a concern, however.

"It's not uncommon," Geoff commented. "People like Achim aren't very keen to show their entire hand."

It was an interesting fact, that one. I considered it a little treasure of sorts.

"By the way, are you quite happy to keep using that axe?" I asked. "I'm sure we have spare swords in our supply carts. You're more than welcome to use one."

"I tried them out, but they're a little light, and thus not a particularly good fit. I'm thinking I'd like to get something made when we reach the imperial capital."

"So much depth to it all, isn't there..."

The mornings and evenings were freezing, just as the captain of the guard at the border station had told us they would be. We had

put the forest paths behind us, but still the chill was on another level. The nights were hard when one only had a thin blanket, and on top of that we passed a merchant who informed us that some travelers had been dragged off by bears. Their corpses had been discovered in a horrendous state, and the merchant warned us that the bears had appeared not far from the main road. This sent a shiver down all of our spines and had us all on guard.

Our progress along the roads was rather fast because we were traveling via carriage and cart, but it would have been quite dangerous for Geoff had he been walking the roads with his sister. I couldn't help but wonder then if *that* was the main reason that the captain of the guard had banned them from crossing the border. Geoff, too, was on the same page. I heard it in a whisper he shared with his sister on a particularly chilly morning.

"We must pay them back someday," he said as he warmed her hands with his own.

For all the talk and fear of bears, in the end it was only wild dogs that we met on our travels. But even then, our guards saw to them quickly and thoroughly, returning as if they'd simply been out on a stroll. Geoff assumed that local bandits were well aware of our presence, but he explained they weren't likely to try anything due to the number of guards we traveled with.

The vast majority of our days were spent in transit. Just as we were growing accustomed to the daily grind, the sight of the Arrendle Empire's capital came into view; a huge circular wall surrounded by a vast lake. Watchtowers had been placed sporadically along the wall, and in the middle of the capital stood a giant, thin tower. It was the symbol of the empire, known as "The Tower of the Eye." It was accessible only by the emperor himself.

Horses and carts could be seen following the paths by the lake, which glimmered blindingly in the sunlight. It all served to highlight the stone construction of the wall and the sheer grandeur of it. Taken in its entirety, the sight was like a work of art in and of itself. And for Professor Whateley, it was as good a time as any to hold an impromptu lecture.

"I can scarcely believe they're able to construct such a lake

around the entirety of the capital," I remarked.

"In the past it wasn't quite so large," said Whateley. "It all began when the empire annexed a nation home truly well versed in the field of construction. Thirty years ago, they set about a plan to widen the various districts that make up the capital proper, and it looks to me as though they finished."

"Aren't the buildings of the capital arranged in a circular fashion?" asked Wendel. "Is that how they're expanding it?"

"Indeed," replied the steward. "They expand each district gradually, with what can be gathered and what can be reused. That might sound confusing, but I'm certain it will make more sense when you enter the capital and see it for yourself; you'll find that vestiges still remain of the former outer ramparts, which now separate the commercial district from the residential. However, the lake does mean they are limited in just how far they can expand. Just as there is a town in front of the entrance bridge, it's perhaps only a matter of time before the area around these roads grows into a town of its own."

Whateley went on to explain that the separate districts didn't mean that there weren't any businesses in the residential district or vice versa. Rather, the names of the districts reflected things like the fact that many craftsmen called the place home, or the number of shops was especially large.

"Unlike Falkrum, there are many shared apartments in the imperial capital," said Whateley. "And while you do sometimes find city streets especially for tourists in Falkrum, they're practically everywhere in the imperial capital. The sheer amount of people is beyond comprehension."

Emil couldn't help but groan. He didn't like dealing with crowds and not being able to walk as he pleased. I'm certain that the mere thought of packed city streets left him disgusted.

We passed across the bridge over the lake but were stopped when we reached the capital's gates. This was unsurprising, given the sheer size of our group. We passed our prepared documents to the man in charge, whose eyes nearly exploded from his skull when he gazed upon their contents.

"J-J-Just a mmoment please!" he shrieked.

He dashed over to his fellow guards, after which a soldier among them took off running.

"We've sent a messenger to inform Sir Abelein," explained the captain of the guard. "I truly apologize for the bother, but I do hope you won't mind waiting just a touch longer."

I couldn't believe the man's reaction. Neither could Achim.

"I knew it," he whispered. "We should have sent a messenger on horseback to inform them before our arrival."

"But we're just being taken to our new home," I replied. "I'm sure they don't want to make a big thing of it."

I admit, however, that I *was* beginning to worry that our nervously sweating gatekeepers might completely dehydrate. Fortunately, it wasn't long before a beautiful chestnut-colored horse arrived carrying none other than Moritz himself.

Ah, it's been so long since I've felt his unfeeling, belittling gaze.

"Sir Moritz, a pleasure to see you after so long," I said.

"Lady Conrad," he said, hopping off his horse. "I am glad to see you looking well."

"As I you. I must admit, I wasn't expecting you to greet us personally. I must apologize for the state I'm in."

"I'm sure it was a long journey, and one in which you did not have your usual luxuries. You are guests who have come from Falkrum, and His Highness would prefer you be treated accordingly."

"And here you are. I am happy to see you again."

"Orders are orders," replied Moritz. "I had little other choice."

Ah, and it's been so long since I've had the pleasure of these mostly one-sided conversations too...

Moritz was of course polite, but there wasn't even a hint of emotion in any of the words he spoke. They were nothing more than a formality, that much was crystal clear. He was the same as always, though by the state of his uniform and the extra medals adorning it, he'd received a number of commendations. Not that they did anything for his personality. He glanced behind me at our carriages, his demeanor that of a man who did not want to waste time talking.

"Our reports said you are here with representatives of the Kirsten

family," said Moritz. "I assume you'll all be fine sharing the same residence?"

"Yes, that's our intent," I replied. "Though, depending on the size of said residence, we will of course make extra arrangements at a lodging if necessary."

"Given the size of your entourage, I don't expect it to be an issue. In any case, get a small group together and we can inspect the premises."

He was on his horse in a flash; clearly there was no waiting around with this guy. Still, I would have been far more creeped out if we'd arrived here and he'd greeted us with a bright smile and a cheery attitude. Moritz was Moritz, and it was best he remained exactly who he was. He nodded to his aides, who went to inform the Conrad staff to wait while we saw to our new home.

Surprisingly, Moritz led us away from the gates and on an arcing path along the main road. Eventually another gate came into sight, and one with far less people around. The gatekeeper opened the way for us when he noticed us coming.

It wasn't long, however, before I realized exactly *why* we had come in through a different entrance to the capital. Spread out before us were neat houses basking in quiet; a far cry from the lively and bustling streets that I'd glimpsed from the gates we'd arrived at.

But let me tell you: Each house was *huge* and occupied quite the sizable plot of land to boot. It brought to mind the districts reserved only for the homes of Falkrum's high nobility. Along the roadside were trees and flower beds all spaced at even intervals, along with the occasional bench. The colored stones that made up the roads formed beautiful patterns, and there were even street lamps.

"Street lamps?" I asked. "Does somebody come around to light them *every* single evening?"

"Such things didn't exist last time I was here," commented Whateley. "The winds of change, I suppose."

The street lamps, crafted from both metal and wood, stood easily taller than a full-grown man. Lighting all of them every evening would no doubt be a lot of work, but what puzzled me was that the area which lit up was encased in glass. How did they even light them

in the first place?

Moritz paid no mind to my question, however, and continued onwards. We arrived at a manor. It was of such size that one couldn't help but stare at it even before arriving at the gates.

"You must be joking..." I uttered.

"Is there a problem?" asked Moritz.

"Are you certain that *this* is the place?" I asked. "Are you sure there hasn't been some kind of mistake?"

"Unfortunately, I'm not much of a fan of jokes, Lady Conrad. This is the residence you are recommended."

"May I ask who was assigned the task of selecting our home?"

"It was me. Why do you ask?"

Oh... I see. Moritz picked this place himself.

Which made sense; he *was* the sort of person who could throw around five thousand gold coins as if they were pocket money. I realized then that I should have been more specific about size back when the governor general had first suggested arranging a home for us.

I felt very suddenly like a fish out of water, but who could blame me?

The place was practically a damned *castle*.

12: The Streets of Arrendle

Let's start with the gardens. Naturally, it was just as common in Falkrum for manor gates to open onto beautiful gardens, past which lay the stately view of the residence proper. However, this place was on an entirely different level. We passed through the entrance gates to find grand statues of women holding pots adorning either side of the path ahead.

The immaculately tended flower gardens were like a colorful dress, the beautiful and decorative petals a true treat for the eyes. There were also white sets of tables and chairs perfect for tea parties. Beyond all of this was the main attraction—a sight so resplendent and glorious as to outdo even the garden itself.

And surrounding this place are mansions just like it! It's the very definition *of peace and tranquility! It'd be a shoo-in for the cover of "Homes You'd Want to Live in if You Were Beyond Rich and/or Famous"! I want nothing more than to wake up in the morning, glass in hand, and—still in my nightgown—gaze out at this vast garden!*

And yet!

It was Wendel and Emil and their constant *wow*s and *whoa*s that shunted me out of my thoughts and back into the real world.

"Sir Moritz," I said.

"Yes?"

"I couldn't possibly be more grateful for your work arranging us a home as marvelous as this one. Why, I'm so overwhelmed I'm struggling to hold back the tears. Truly, I am moved almost beyond words."

According to Whateley and Achim, my expression was anything *but* the picture of a grateful young lady, and it looked instead on the verge of complete and utter exasperation. That is preposterous, however. All I can assume is that the two men observed some kind

of optical illusion. I assure you that I was the very definition of modest appreciation.

"However," I continued, "having only just arrived here, we couldn't possibly accept a place so truly, *truly* exquisite. While I'm overjoyed by your endless generosity, would it be at all possible to prepare another location for our people?"

"But sister, don't you think it's just stunning?" asked Emil.

"I like this place," added Wendel. "There's so much space."

Oh, shut up, you two.

Did they have any idea at all how much it would cost just to maintain the place? And though Reinald was kind enough to allow us a certain amount of monetary support, we still didn't have any business ventures going at present, and thus nothing in the way of a steady income. I was doing my utmost to keep us from losing money, and as such this mansion was completely wasted on us.

And besides, upon closer inspection I realized that the mansion even had its own villa. Who was going to live *there*? When someone didn't live in a place, it aged and fell to pieces all the more quickly. With all of this in mind, I did my best to politely decline Moritz's offer of this house, at which point one of his aides approached quietly.

"Given the circumstances, perhaps we'd be best off taking them to the remaining residence?" they asked.

"There's another place?!" I remarked.

Why in the world would you bring us here *first?!*

Moritz looked disappointed, but he hopped back on his horse and led us away. We did not leave the capital walls again, but instead passed through a set of gates into the city, where the streets were noticeably more lively. And while the neighborhood we arrived at was not filled with the impressive mansions of the ultra-rich, it was home to neat rows of two-and three-story houses. The houses were rather close together, but people walked the streets freely; there was a feeling of life being lived.

Moritz brought us to a three-story manor. It didn't have as many rooms as the castle-like mansion we'd just been to, but it was nonetheless very respectable in its own right. It had a certain unique flair that made me wonder when exactly it had been constructed. It

seemed like it had existed for quite some time, though so did all the other homes in the area. Still, all the walls had been neatly mended, which gave the place warmth without sacrificing its original charms.

Unlike the houses with their spacious front gardens, this one had a staircase adjacent to the road that led straight to the front door. The double doors of said entrance opened to reveal a spacious entrance hall. There was a small reception room just off to the side so sudden guests could be received without having them enter the house proper.

The manor had something of a bland exterior, but its interior offered a relaxed atmosphere. It was also very clean. At first I didn't think it had a garden at all, but I soon realized that the garden was located at the back of the house. It was longer than it was wide, and while weeds poked out here and there, it was nonetheless more than appropriate in terms of size. It seemed that all the houses in this district had backyards instead of entrance gardens.

There were rooms even in the basement, which meant that everyone would fit. And while you might picture the dim and the dank when it comes to basements, the rooms had windows near ground level, making for a far brighter affair than I'd expected. Those same windows were sure to also help one to keep track of what time it was outside.

We'd only be able to house those who'd come on their own, meaning that those with families would stay at a lodging elsewhere, but fortunately we had enough room for Achim and the Kirsten aides who'd come with him.

Once we'd done a tour of the whole place, I found myself with zero complaints.

"Oh, what a wonderful house!" I exclaimed. "Sir Moritz, I just adore it!"

"His Highness has said you can choose whichever house you prefer. Shall I assume you've made your decision?"

"Well, though it *is* admittedly a rather difficult choice to have to make, I have to say that this manor far better fits our needs, given our current standing. I thank you ever so much for your concern."

Coming from Falkrum, it *did* feel like our neighbors were a touch

too close for comfort, but that was mostly due to the effect that life among the nobility had impressed upon me. As far as ordinary life was concerned, our neighbors weren't so close that they'd be cause for concern. And in terms of paying for upkeep, this was the far superior option. I didn't mention *that* particular fact aloud, however, and instead smiled brightly as Moritz held out some documents.

"I'll require your signature to make it official. I'll send someone to collect these documents in a few days' time."

Well, I guess that means he's not going to show us around town, then. I suppose I should just be grateful he took some time from his no doubt packed schedule to see us today.

I saw Moritz and his aides off with a polite bow, but as he was about to leave he turned back to me.

"Take the next few days slowly and enjoy yourself," he said. "I do hope that you find life in the capital to be a worthwhile experience."

Huh...?

"Oh, erm... Thank...you...?" I replied.

It was just so odd for Moritz to offer kind words out of nowhere. I couldn't help but notice that Moritz's aides were just as shocked as I was. Before I could say anything more, however, he was gone. And with Wendel and the others calling out to me, there was no more time to think about it either.

By the time we had called for our carriages and carts and carried everything inside, the sun was setting. We paid the guards working for us until the following morning and took to unpacking. Before I knew it, a new day had begun.

"Miss Karen, I've come to let you know about our neighbors," said Whateley. "The house to our left is empty, and an elderly couple lives in the one to our right."

"The place *did* give off that vibe," I commented. "So it really is vacant, then."

"And for quite some time, it would appear. We've introduced ourselves to the local neighborhood, and nobody seems to carry any prejudices against foreigners. The couple next door appear to be most affable. I hear they're fond of children."

"When I learned that Moritz picked out the locations, I trusted

that he would find us safe ones, but all the same it's a relief to know for sure. Thank you, Whateley."

"Merely doing my job, my lady. As for you visiting the neighbors to make a personal introduction..."

"Yes, I thought it best to do the same too. But I don't have anything to give them, so I thought I'd take a look around town and pick up a small gift of some sort while I'm out. That said, if you need my help with anything I'd be happy to do it later."

"All that's left is to unpack, and I doubt you'll be needed for anything in particular. Head out as you wish."

Greeting your neighbors was one thing, but taking treats with you was quite possibly a purely Japanese tradition. Still, there was a reason I wanted to take a look around. While our new home wasn't nearly as lavish as Moritz's first offer, it was nonetheless located in what appeared to be an affluent neighborhood. The houses all had a certain sense of history to them, and one got the impression that the families living in them were no different. If I went to a different district, I was bound to see another side of the imperial capital.

"I haven't seen Achim all morning," I said. "Has he gone out with the others?"

"Yes, they left as a group to visit the city. A few of our own aides went with them."

"So Achim is out, and you've got to keep an eye on things in here. I assume that Wendel is going out later, then?"

"Yes, he said he wanted to go with Emil to see the roads that lead to the school. Hil has hired a local to show them the way, so it should be fairly straightforward."

"He found someone to show them the way?" I asked.

"Before we left, he asked one of our merchants. We've been working with them a long time and they're trustworthy. I see no reason to doubt them."

"Oh, I should have asked if they could show me around too."

"I'm certain you still can. They'll make time for you, I'm sure. Shall I send word?"

"No, I'd feel bad about how sudden it all is. I'll just wander around and see things myself."

Hil and Humphrey were looking after the boys. I crossed my arms and dropped into thought. I wanted to introduce myself to the neighbors fairly quickly. After all, I felt like we'd made quite the racket the previous evening with all our moving and unpacking, and I wanted to make sure things went smoothly between us.

"Do you mind if I take Geoff with me?" I asked. "I'll have to ask one of the others to look after Chelsea. Is that okay?"

"That won't be an issue. She's grown quite fond of Ben. More importantly, shall I have Rosanne or Louisa accompany you? You'll be doing some shopping, I assume?"

"Don't worry about that. I'll make preparations on my end if I end up needing help with it all. It's best if everybody here puts our new home first anyway. It's a beautiful place, but you're going to clean it again just to be sure, yes?"

I was only going on a stroll through town. I didn't want to make things harder on everybody here. As for the aforementioned Geoff, he and his sister were officially staying with us. There were a few reasons, namely that we had a room to spare for the two of them, but also because on our journey to the capital together, I'd seen that he was a capable, trustworthy sort. Geoff was open to my suggestion that he stay because it meant he would be working at a location where his sister was looked after. There was also the fact that looking for another job wasn't guaranteed to be smooth sailing.

We agreed that a portion of Geoff's salary would thus go to the servants who spent time looking after Chelsea, but I guaranteed him a fair living wage. With that, the working arrangement was settled. Rosanne and Louisa shared the bulk of the babysitting between them, but both were more than happy to look after Chelsea as necessary.

"She was quite the wildcard at first, and honestly I wasn't sure what we were going to do, but she's so calm and tranquil now that she's settled down," said Rosanne.

"She's grown so fond of Ben too," added Louisa, "so it's not like we'll be alone. If Geoff were to leave now, it'd only leave us all sick with worry."

The two women had such generous hearts. And it was for this

reason that I could ask Geoff to accompany me without hesitation. The condition was that he wear his helmet whenever we left the house, but he was already well aware of the importance of his headgear so it wasn't an issue. That said, he seemed to really like the thing, and he tinkered with it constantly. He'd even made it so he could eat by opening only the area around his mouth.

We might just be going for a stroll, but I wonder if we'll be okay... I mean, Geoff will probably stand out like a sore thumb...

Once we arrived in town, however, my worries vanished completely.

"Oh, this will be just fine," I remarked.

"What will be?" asked Geoff.

"Oh, nothing."

Perhaps a brief summary of Arrendle Empire's imperial capital for you, yes? Put in the most basic terms, the place was like a Baumkuchen, sliced from top to bottom. Imagine one cut into the shape of a fan for ease of consumption. Picture that, but huge and split into districts. In the empty center of the Baumkuchen, you had the emperor's court district. That was where the emperor lived, but also where governance was conducted. Ordinary citizens were prohibited. Military guardhouses were set up in each district, and garrisons could be found outside of the capital. That covers the basic shape of the place, I imagine.

As for the capital's citizenry, it was a very multicultural mix. This was largely thanks to imperial expansion and annexation, which in turn meant for a dense population in the capital. There were countless shared residences much like apartment buildings, and even smaller living spaces for people living alone weren't uncommon. On the outer side of the capital walls were a countless number of cheap inns along with pubs and eateries frequented by travelers and mercenaries alike. A district had been developed especially for foreign visitors to make it easier to gather people from abroad. It was perhaps no exaggeration to say that it was the most bustling and lively location in the capital.

For me, however, the most surprising thing I encountered upon arriving in Arrendle was the difference in fashion. Many women

walked around with their arms and legs on full display, and nobody batted an eyelid. I spotted a number of women in fairly short shorts paired with nothing more than a camisole. But even then, they simply melted into the crowds, chatting away casually while armored mercenaries and cloaked travelers walked by like something straight out of a fantasy manga.

To put it simply, it was a hodgepodge of different styles and trends, and Geoff fit right in. The two of us simply looked like what we were; a young girl out with her guard. Nobody paid us a second glance as we passed among the crowds, and so my worries about Geoff's appearance vanished quickly.

"It's very crowded," commented Geoff. "Perhaps we should have brought more guards?"

"I'm not a big fan of traveling in an entourage," I replied. "And it's not like anybody knows either of us here, so what's the harm? There are plenty of city guards on patrol, after all. It all looks very safe and secure."

"The main roads, perhaps, but please refrain from going down any side streets. Who knows what's down there."

"Yes, yes, very well."

How many months had it been since I felt so free? One couldn't call it *completely* free, given that I had a guard with me, but even then, it felt *so* good to walk around without fear of those around me. Geoff was happy to indulge me, and I'd seen in the way he approached Wendel and Emil that he was nothing if not patient and generous. He *had* served Prince Demyan, after all.

I wonder if that's part of the reason he hit things off with the other guards so quickly too...?

"And look at all the bathhouses," I said. "It's just like I'd heard; they love baths here."

"According to Sir Whateley, the government manages the public bathhouses. But there's quite a lot of smaller ones too, considering..."

"I wonder if they have private baths for individuals? Either way, isn't it wonderful to think you can just take a dip when you want one?"

Geoff looked about as uncomfortable about the idea as Achim had when I'd said something similar to him. His eyebrows had furrowed into an expression nigh unreadable. When I asked what the problem was, he revealed that he didn't like the idea that you weren't allowed weapons in the baths. The mere thought of that, combined with all the people who frequented the baths, gave him the shivers.

Wendel and Emil were unfamiliar with the idea of public baths, so they weren't particularly excited about them either. In fact, only Whateley had direct experience with the empire's baths, to which he had commented, "They're surprisingly nice."

Geoff was in the Achim camp. It probably bothered him that he had to take off his helmet.

Speaking of baths, our new home came complete with a brand-new one. Whateley believed it had likely been installed because we were so unfamiliar with the empire's public bathing culture. However, because we only had one bath with readily available hot water, the house was currently in discussions regarding when it would be used by whom.

Public bathing aside, everyone who'd come with us from Falkrum marveled at the fact that the baths didn't require you to boil any water *or* pump the water you needed from a well. Much like the lamp posts I'd seen all over the place, the systems that allowed for water in the imperial capital were still unknown, though in time the facts would become clear.

"It even has a functioning sewer system. Isn't it just so convenient..." I said, and then, when I noticed Geoff's attention was elsewhere, I asked, "Geoff? Did you see something over there?"

"What? Oh, it's nothing. Let's move on."

For me personally, the public baths trumped all else. As much as it was wonderful to have a bath of your own, in truth I was very much looking forward to trying something far more spacious.

Geoff and I chatted about this and that as we made our way down the main street, and we eventually found ourselves in front of a store covered in pretty and colorful decorations. There were a number of tables and chairs outside where men and women alike

were simply whiling the time away. We'd arrived at a patisserie that Whateley had directed us to, but I realized now that it also functioned as a café.

I walked in through the open front doors, where my nostrils were hit by a collection of sweet, mouthwatering scents. The baked cakes and treats on display were a delight for the eyes, and they came in so many colors and patterns. Those in line waiting to order were enjoying themselves just deciding what they wanted.

All of the serving staff were very busy, so I wandered around looking at the boxes they had on offer, which included a mix of different cakes and whatnot. I'd actually just found a very nice one and was thinking about buying it to take home when I noticed someone standing next to me. I glanced over and saw that it was a woman dressed in fine silk and jewelry. I made to get out of her way when she decided to speak directly to me.

"How unsurprising that, just like your outfit, you lean toward the most *boring* sweets here."

Wait. I know that voice...

But I hadn't heard that particular voice in quite a long time. I rifled desperately through my memories as I took stock of the woman before me. Her clothing revealed her naked shoulders and brought attention to her voluptuous chest. Her brown hair was done in a single braid, but some of it flowed down around her neck, accentuating her slightly bared chest in a seductive fashion. Her heavy makeup and droopy eyes hit me with a fierce nostalgia, and I found myself simply gaping at her.

"Well, go on then, say something," the woman said.

"Oh, um, I do apologize, but who exactly *are* you?" I asked.

Her right eye twitched in agitation, and it was then that her identity clicked into place for me.

What? Are you kidding? Seriously?

"Marie?" I uttered. "What are you doing here?"

But she's the daughter of the Dunst family, head family of the Kirstens!

"What? Are you saying I don't belong here?"

"No, not that, not at all, it's just... I heard you had gotten

married...”

“Oh, so you heard about that, did you? Not that it matters. More importantly, could you be dressed any *more* like one of Falkrum’s completely hopeless country bumpkins? I *thought* it was odd when I saw some bumbling potato farmer’s daughter staring at sweets.”

I didn’t think her marriage was so simple a topic she could just brush it off the table, but between Marie’s glare and her bold confidence, I could do little more than simply answer her question. She was just as sharp with her tongue, perhaps even more so than before. She glanced at the box I was looking at then draped a look of contempt over me as she closed the fan in her hand with a snap.

“Am I to assume this selection of brown cakes is for home, or do you intend them as a gift? You’re going to introduce yourself to your neighbors with something as plain as *these*? You’ve never met them before, and you’re going to hand them these drab, colorless pastries? Did they fall on hard times? Did something horrible happen to them recently?”

“What? No, but the others are so colorful I thought they might not whet the appetite...”

“Are you aesthetically colorblind? Ugh, fine. Would someone please help me a moment?”

No sooner had she called then a server came running. Marie pointed to this and that and gave her instructions. In an instant, the matter of the sweets was settled. It was a mix of yellows and reds and blues... In other words, a *truly* abhorre—

Ahem.

A truly *colorful* variety of pastries. Yes. That’s what they were.

“Marie, isn’t this a little...?” I started.

“Oh hush, spud girl,” she said, immediately cutting me off. “I’ve been here *far* longer than you have. Now please, get it into that thick skull of yours that you’re buying a *gift*. Your goal is to make the receiver happy, after all.”

She spoke with such confidence that I really couldn’t get a word in edgewise. But just how long *had* Marie been living in the capital? Regardless, she was so...brazen that I just found myself caught up in it all. This included when she eyed me from head to toe and made

no attempt to hide it, I might add.

"Come with me," she said, gesturing with her jaw.

Geoff was left carrying our sweets as I trailed after Marie. Her presence demanded attention the moment she set foot out of the shop. She was dressed in what looked to be designer clothes, and she carried herself with a bold confidence wrapped in the seductive charms unique to beautiful women. She took me to an apparel shop. Not a tailor for order made outfits, but rather a place that sold readymade clothing. Marie was a regular, a fact made evident by the smile on the face of the shopkeeper.

"Can you put something together for the bumpkin here?" Marie asked. "Yes, that's right, dress her up so I'm not completely humiliated simply walking by her side."

"Er, Marie," I said. "You keep calling me a bumpkin and the like, but I really don't think I'm dressed all that inapp—"

"Ha! Even before you stepped into that patisserie it was obvious that you were an out-of-towner. If you don't look comfortable here then you'll only make yourself an easy mark for swindlers. That means at least getting the clothes right."

"What do you mean 'before I stepped into the patisserie'?"

Just when exactly did she notice me?

Instead of answering my question, Marie clucked her tongue and pushed me toward the shopkeeper.

"Enough talk. Time to get changed. That man you're with is for carrying your things, yes?"

So, under Marie's guidance, I bought a new outfit, which I changed into. With her job apparently done, Marie made to take her leave, but I wasn't going to let her get away so easily.

"Begging me for the reason I'm here in the capital, I see," she murmured.

"You can't just force a girl into a shopping spree only to make a break for it," I said. "And what's the harm in telling me?"

"I did what I did because of the way you were dressed. You were practically *begging* for it. But fine, let's talk."

Marie looked nonplussed but saw how dogged I was and resigned herself to her fate: a chat over a cup of tea. I was dressed in a knee

length skirt and boots. Ready-to-wear apparel, yes, but quality and durable goods all the same, and very elegant in terms of design, I might add. The other customers in the café stole glances in Marie's direction, and it was obvious that she was used to such attention.





"In any case, there's no great mystery to it all," said Marie. "First, my husband passed away. The very idea of returning home nauseated me, and moving to the countryside was out of the question. I wasn't going to let myself just be married off to some nobody out in the middle of nowhere, so here I am."

It all sounded rather gloomy and a bit heartbreaking to me, but Marie saw the look on my face and literally brushed the very idea away with the shake of a hand.

"Unlike your husband, over whom a great many shed tears, my former husband was nothing more than a lecherous, perverted old man. His death came as a relief to all of his wives. I am nothing if not enamored of my present circumstances, so save me your pity, yes?"

"All...of his...wives...?" I murmured.

It seemed that Marie had been married into quite the family.

"That said, Arno was aware of it," she said, resting her head on her hands. "I lost a husband, after all. You never heard anything?"

"Nothing at all," I admitted.

"I see. In which case, he either didn't have the chance or assumed it wasn't necessary. He *did* reach out to try and help me, however, so there's no doubt he knew what I was going through."

Marie continued as if she didn't have a care left in the world.

"As I said, I had *no* intention of returning home, so once my husband died, I ceased correspondence with my family entirely. I don't think even Arno knows that I'm here. So you're not to speak a word to anyone, am I clear?"

"But some of the Kirstens are here in the capital. They came with us..."

"And if they find me, *I'll* deal with them then. I'm asking that *you* don't go talking to anyone."

"Um...but isn't it fine as long as the Dunsts remain unaware?"

"Yes, I don't mind as long as the news doesn't get back home. But I don't want it getting to anyone with loose lips."

Marie was hellbent on staying away from her family. But ever since I'd seen them that one time so long ago, I hadn't heard a single peep.

"Are you certain?" I asked. "I'm sure they must be worried."

"Worried? I won't shed a single tear for a family that sold away their own daughter for their love of money. Let them die in a gutter somewhere, I couldn't care less."

The words came easy for her, and she clearly held no regrets for the decisions she'd made. Gone was the meek and sheltered girl I'd seen at that party so long ago.

"You left your husband's family, then," I said. "How do you make a living now?"

"I don't do anything in particular. After I left my first husband's family I remarried fairly quickly, but then my second husband died not long after. It's all about how to while away the time, now. The whole reason I'm humoring you with this cup of tea is just to kill some more time."

Now *that* was something of a bombshell fact, but at the same time I was relieved. And yet, Marie's outfit struck me as rather risqué for the middle of the day, and I couldn't help wondering if her work was of the nightlife variety, perhaps encouraging others—namely *men*—to drink.

Marie had no patience for my concerns, however, and she snapped her fan shut again, pointing it toward her voluptuous breasts.

"Perhaps over *there* I might be mistaken for a prostitute," she said with a charming pout, "but *here* this is just a fashionable way to dress. I enjoy dressing this way, so I beg of you, raise your mind from the gutter, please."

"Oh, right. I apologize," I said.

"How am I supposed to slap you back down to earth when you *insist* on being so understanding? Ugh, you're so boring."

"How does apologizing make me boring?"

"I thought that after all you've been through, you might have changed a little, but you're exactly the person you always were."

"Marie?"

I was puzzled. Perhaps she craved the intensity of an argument or quarrel. In any case, we talked for a little more and I discovered that while Marie knew that Falkrum had come under imperial control

and that the king was dead, she knew very little about the state of her former home. She lived mostly free and as she pleased, though she had heard whisperings that Falkrum's nobility were moving into the capital's upper district, and through that she had discovered that I was a part of it.

"One of my lovers is a man with his ear to the ground," she said somewhat discontentedly. "Apparently you've a reputation for being an insufferable snobby young vixen with loose morals when it comes to men."

"Huh...? Marie, I don't suppose you could explain that for me, could you?" I asked.

"You're a money-grubbing witch, in other words. You betrayed your home, then sold your body and your family to the crown prince like a streetside whore."

"Ugh, I wish I hadn't even asked."

"But that's just the sneering opinions of the more wicked. I doubt that most think so horribly of you."

But gosh, those wicked types are so *merciless.*

"You shouldn't be so surprised," said Marie. "The Conrads are under the protection of the crown prince, after all. You'd best remember that many are jealous of that."

Having said as much, Marie finished the rest of her tea in a single gulp, thanked me for it, and left. It was only then that I realized I hadn't asked how to keep in touch with her, though I wasn't sure she'd have given me her address anyway. I sat there a little dumbfounded for a time.

"That young lady was watching us before you entered that store where she first talked to you," Geoff said softly, stirring me from my stupor. "I had a feeling there was something to it, but it turns out she's a relative, yes?"

"Store? You mean the patisserie? You noticed her?"

"It is my job, my lady," he said calmly.

Geoff hadn't warned me because Marie had simply been watching us and appeared harmless. In his judgment, making me aware of her presence might have only caused undue concern.

"Then I wonder if she was eyeing a good opportunity to talk to

me...?”

And if that’s the case, it means she perhaps has a surprisingly charming side to her personality.

It was only moments later that I rued that very thought, however. She’d left me the bill for the tea, *and* she’d had me pay for her own treats at the patisserie. I’d been happy to run into a familiar face after so long, but now that feeling had been ground into dust.

In any case, on the way home we ran into a small issue of sorts. It happened while I was looking to hail a hansom cab to take us home.

“Hey there, lovely,” came a man’s voice. “I haven’t seen you around here before.”

Whoever it was, they had guts, what with Geoff by my side. Either that, or they were blind to him entirely for some reason. It wasn’t quite sundown yet, so I thought perhaps the man was on a break. He was dressed in the uniform of the imperial military, and at his table were a number of men grinning and chuckling over bottles of wine.

I tried to keep away but he got far too close for comfort and grabbed a hold of my shoulders. He wouldn’t let go even when I told him I wasn’t interested in joining him. Just as Geoff was silently putting down our shopping to act, help arrived on the scene.

“You there,” said a man who looked to be in his late twenties. “If you’re going to speak to a young woman, then you should at least show some manners.”

The man was dressed in the same military uniform as the others but was bigger and looked to be stronger than all of them. His every word carried a quiet confidence, and in fact, the man who’d catcalled me responded with a grimace.

“If you’re looking for playmates, I suggest you look elsewhere,” continued the man. “It’s because of incidents like this one that people are calling us uncivilized.”

“Oh. N-No, I j-just, you see...” came the stammering reply.

“I’m not saying you can’t speak with ladies, but as a fellow man, I won’t stand for your approach. Give it some thought; I’m sure you’ll see what I mean. It’s rather crude to take aim at one you know will

struggle to turn you down, no?"

It seemed to me that there was a clear difference of rank between the two soldiers. The higher-ranking man—the one giving the lecture—gave a pat on the shoulder to the younger one, who turned tail and fled. The man watched him go, then turned to me and offered a polite nod.

"My apologies for the less well-mannered among us," he said.

"Thank you very much for your help."

"Not at all. It is *we* who offended *you*, after all," said the man, turning his gaze on the men sitting at the table with their bottles of wine. "They may have less class, but we all share the same uniform. They must be fools to think they can trouble a young lady within view of the rest of us."

The men at the table seemed to visibly shrink under his gaze.

"We'll see that they get the lessons they deserve, so I ask for your grace in the matter."

The man's words were directed at Geoff, who offered a slight nod in reply and began picking up the bags he'd placed on the ground.

"My thanks for your understanding," said the man, offering a smile. "On behalf of my captain, you have our gratitude."

And with that, he turned back toward his own table. I had essentially watched over the flow of events without so much as lifting a finger, but now my gaze was drawn to a table farther back, hidden deeper in the eatery. Around it sat another group of soldiers, and one among them drew my attention; a middle-aged man being served by a woman. He had brown hair so dark it looked black, and noticeably slanted eyes that gave him a look of subdued elegance. The woman, however, seemed only to be there as his company, and she smiled at him as if lost in his spell.

"I see," muttered Geoff, flagging down a hansom cab for us. "So they were inside the whole time. They probably didn't like the idea of simply watching things play out, and so they took action."

For a moment, the middle-aged soldier caught my gaze, and he flashed me a playful wink and raised his glass. It seemed he was used to being in charge. He looked to be the highest-ranking soldier at the table, and my guess was that he was the "captain" that the

other man had mentioned. I offered a polite bow in reply.

I feel like I've seen him somewhere before, but where...?

I tried to comb through my memories for his face, but soon enough we were home, and Whateley was greeting us with a somewhat troubled look on his face. All thoughts of the past were promptly brushed away entirely.

"A messenger arrived while you were away," he informed me. "They came from His Highness. He has called upon you for lunch at noon tomorrow... Oh, did you do some shopping?"

An invitation from Reinald. I had been thinking that at some point I would need to see him, but I had never expected that he might call upon me himself. In that sense, perhaps my chance meeting with Marie had been fortuitous; it was something of a relief that she'd been able to look over my wardrobe.

"Miss Karen...?" asked Whateley.

"Yes? What is it, Whateley?"

"It's your face... You appear troubled. If the timing is inopportune, we can arrange for your absence, but with all due respect I recommend you attend."

I hadn't realized it, but a look of confusion had crept into my features.

"Oh. No, I'm fine," I replied. "It's nothing. Please send word that I'm happy to accept his offer."

"Understood."

But why is my heart suddenly racing? Perhaps I'm nervous. I hadn't dreamed of visiting the capital's central district within days of our arrival. I'll need Whateley to give me a refresher course on the appropriate etiquette before I leave.

13: The Questions of the Reincarnated

Things were odd, even at the start of the day. You might think me not unlike a grade-schooler excited for a school excursion, but yes, though I *was* prone to sleeping late on most occasions. I was up so early that even Whateley was surprised. As such, I shared breakfast with the rest of the family, and while it was rather nice for a change, it came with its own unique pain points too.

"Surely it's not because we forgot to report something, is it...?" I mused, wondering aloud why Reinald might have invited me to lunch.

"I very much doubt it," replied Whateley. "We've been doing our utmost in service to His Highness, so unless he's had a sudden change of character of late, I doubt he's called you for any criticism."

"Yeah, I don't know," commented Achim, throwing doubt over everything. "He's risen to quite the rank now, so it would be wise to prepare for the worst."

"While Achim *does* raise a valid point," added Whateley, "I very much doubt he'd have changed so much in such a short time..."

"Could you perhaps *not* burden me with further worries?" I asked.

"Fine, fine. My apologies," replied Achim.

He looked to be in something of a foul mood as he chewed on a crispy slice of bacon. Perhaps it was that I'd had him change his schedule so he could accompany me as my bodyguard. But what other choice did I have? Helmet or otherwise, I couldn't take Geoff with me.

"There's no need to worry," said Whateley. "If a city like this could change a person *that* much, I daresay it'd spell the end for all of us."

The laughing steward frightened me.

"Oh, that reminds me," I said. "Are you certain that the house

next door is uninhabited?" I asked.

"To the best of my knowledge, yes..."

"Ah! That's bothering me too," added Wendel, raising his hand.

So he heard it too.

The day after I'd visited our elderly neighbors to introduce myself over a cup of tea, I'd gone to bed and heard strange sounds in the middle of the night. Wendel had woken up because of it too, and he seemed to have heard exactly what I had.

"People were shouting at each other in the middle of the night," he said. "Our rooms are on the third floor, and you wouldn't think we'd hear *anything* given how big the house is, but whoever was out there was *very* angry."

"So it wasn't just me, then?" I mused. "Based on where all the commotion came from, it seemed to emanate from the uninhabited house next door."

"Right? That's what I thought too. After a while, the voices stopped and I fell back to sleep, but still... Emil, Achim, did you hear it?"

"I didn't hear a thing," replied Emil.

"And I don't really get it," added Achim. "I wouldn't think you'd even be *able* to hear that kind of thing."

"Yeah, but... You heard it too, right, Karen?"

"I'm sure of it," I replied. "It was impossible to ignore, though I didn't look outside because I didn't want to get involved."

"Yeah, it was pretty scary. I didn't open my windows either."

A note on the rooms at the new house: Wendel and I were on the third floor, which was reserved for the lord's family. Whateley and our guests occupied the second floor. I'd told Emil he was welcome to a room on the third floor while he was staying with us, but he'd opted for a room on the second. "I don't want to take it for granted that you're looking after me," he'd said, though I didn't think he needed to be so reserved, us being family and all. For that reason, I had plans to eventually move him up a floor.

In any case, it was only Wendel and I who heard the shouting.

"Hm...then, perhaps some drunkards decided to stay the night next door?" offered Whateley. "It's uninhabited, yes, but worrying in

any case. I'll have it looked at."

"And I'll take a look when I'm next free," said Achim. "If anybody's been in there, they'll have left footprints."

"But no breaking and entering, please, Achim," warned Whateley.

"I hear you. Let's just call it an investigation, then," laughed Achim.

With those two on the case, I felt it was only a matter of time before the problem was solved.

"In other news, you're in a good mood today, Karen," said Achim.

"I suppose I'm excited to see the palace," I admitted. "A section of the library is also open to the public, so perhaps we can stop by on the way home."

"I wish I could go too," said Wendel.

"How about joining us partway?" I offered.

"No thanks."

"Why not? You're welcome to come along, of course."

"But you already have a new outfit and I don't. I'll go when I have something new to wear."

"Do the boys here dress all that differently?"

"Of *course* they do. It'd be obvious to you if you just looked."

"But is it *really* all that different?"

"Ugh, you may as well be blind," muttered Wendel, sipping at his tea with a sour look upon his face.

The fashion didn't look all that different as far as I was concerned, but for Wendel the differences were obvious. Perhaps it was just how sensitive the young were to such subtleties. It was for that reason that Wendel planned to go shopping, while Emil spent the day going over his school transfer preparations with Whateley.

"As the lord of the family, Lady Karen is already an honorary citizen," Whateley explained to Emil. "That means having her son, Wendel, come with her proved a smooth process. In your case, however, there are various documents to complete."

Whateley was obliged to explain as much to Emil, given that he was handling it all. In my brother's case, things would take a little longer. I couldn't help wondering if it all felt like a bother for the boy, who I knew had shopping of his own to do, but it turned out he had

gone to Whateley himself to learn more about it. He told me that shopping was boring, so he'd entrusted his share to Wendel to handle. As his older sister, I thought it worth sitting him down for a talking-to, but given that Wendel was completely fine with the arrangement, what else was there to say?

"Are you sure you don't want to go, Wendel?" I asked. "If you'd like to say hello, today's the day."

"No, I'm fine. The imperial messenger never called for me, and besides, I want to see the city."

"Lady Karen, would you mind taking a look at a few documents before you leave?" asked Whateley.

I'd seen to my nails the previous night, combed my hair and patted it down with floral oil, and applied just a touch of white and red powder to my face. I didn't need much more than that. In terms of dress, I wore what Marie had picked out for me, which gave me a nice balance between not-too-extravagant and not-too-plain. Emil had asked me "Do you not need to dress up for the occasion?" but as far as I was concerned, I *was* dressed up. I didn't see any issues, at least; it wasn't like Reinald had called upon me to be his eye candy.

We still didn't have an appropriate carriage or a driver, nor did we know the roads or the palace grounds very well. This of course left the question of "Well, how in the world are we going to get where we're going?"

The answer, of course, was that our ride came to us. It was a finely crafted four-wheeled carriage decorated with intricate golden designs and pulled along by two horses. It was elegant without being showy, and one could see how healthy the horses were even from afar. A not quite elderly gentleman knocked on the door and bowed politely, informing us that he was our chauffeur.

"Well, I'll leave the rest to you, then," I said to Whateley as I left.

I noticed that one of the guards for our carriage was a broad-shouldered woman with a graceful manner to her. I knew her: she was Sofie, the soldier who had watched over Wendel and me during the fall of Conrad. She stared ahead, her face blank, but Sofie must have felt me looking at her because for a moment our eyes met. I

waved a hand in greeting, and her gaze softened. It made me happy to think that she remembered me.

What made the carriages of the empire interesting was that unlike those in Falkrum, they came in a number of different varieties. There were carriages with roofs that could be opened and closed to allow one to feel the breeze in their hair, and there were even sightseeing carriages capable of carrying large groups. The windows in the carriage that had come for us were large ones that could be opened and closed, which was sure to make the scenery that much more enjoyable, but oh, how I someday wanted to try a convertible carriage.

As we neared the central district, the city around us changed. Those who lived near the palace were of family lines that had long been part of the empire, and all appeared considerably affluent. At the same time, we saw an increase in the general size of the buildings, along with an increase in the number of guards. The place was nothing if not secure.

And as for the central district itself, well, it boasted a fence and moat all of its own. Plant life floated on the surface, and even the occasional fish could be spotted among it all. Getting inside involved crossing a drawbridge which was lowered during the day. All it took for us to get by, however, was merely giving our names at the guardhouse.

I had expected that we would follow the many other carriages heading deeper into the center of the district, but our carriage instead slipped from the main road and went left. The stone-constructed imperial palace, as seen from my window, was a formidable sight, and while new buildings spread out around the area, the Tower of the Eye was ever present at the district's center. The scope of it all was well beyond anything in Falkrum. Unlike the city spaces I'd visited earlier, the area was dotted with plant life, all of it neatly trimmed. No matter where you looked, it was a treat for the eyes.

I was taken to a small entrance way at the back of a building. I say small, but I should note we're talking palace-level in terms of size, and the building we were in was easily as big as my former

home of Conrad manor. As expected, the interior was filled with expensive furniture and art hanging on the walls. My feet echoed on the marble floors as I was led to a room with a floor-to-ceiling glass window, perhaps for sightseeing or casual meetings. In a corner of the room, near a set of thin white curtains by the window, was a table and chairs.

This was where my lunch with Reinald was to be held, though I was politely told to wait as he had yet to arrive. I couldn't help thinking that to book a room like this in Japan would cost quite the sum of yen. All of it served to impress upon me that Reinald had moved up in the world, perhaps somewhere among the clouds.

I had written him my letter in the usual casual fashion, but I felt that, given the location and the circumstances, I should play things with some reserve. It was as I was mulling on this very point that I heard footsteps, followed by the doors opening. At the head of the group that entered was Reinald. Our eyes met immediately, and we shared a smile.

"It has been a long time," he said. "I hope you've been well."

"Yes, thanks in large part to your generosity," I replied. "It really has been an age, hasn't it?"

Reinald nodded and turned to address the people who had come with him.

"I won't need all of you in here," he said. "Only the bare minimum."

Four of the men bowed their heads and left. The remaining two disappeared behind a screen at the far end of the room.

"I apologize if it's a little stifling or overwhelming," Reinald said. "They worry, you see."

"Pay it no mind. It is their duty to see you protected. I, of course, mean you no harm."

Reinald cleared his throat and gave the screen a pointed look. The moment we took our seats, servers arrived as if out of thin air to pour wine into our glasses. As soon as they were done, they left. Reinald had told me not to worry, but naturally it would have been difficult to have people around us the whole time. I was glad that our help only arrived when they were needed.

That said, working out when to enter during such meetings must be a nightmare for the servers...

"I'm sure you've already heard from Sir Moritz, but we arrived just a few days ago. It shames me to think that you invited me to lunch even though I still haven't reached out to contact you myself."

"Don't let it bother you; I wasn't here anyway. That aside, it's only natural that you'd want to rest after such a long journey. It is a relief to see you looking so well."

"Why, thank you. Though to be honest, I think all of us spent most of our first day here asleep and recuperating. The journey took a toll on us all, I suppose. When it's a simple holiday you take only what you need, but moving house is an entirely different endeavor. I wasn't expecting it to be such an ordeal."

"It can't have been easy, leaving the lands you called home to relocate to a place you've never even seen before. No doubt it took more of a toll than you expected."

"Oh, and was that true in your case too, Your Highness?"

"I must admit that it wasn't good for my sleep. On another note, would you refrain from calling me that? I don't like the ring of it; it sounds like you're making fun of me."

"Sir Reinald, just what sort of a person do you think I am?"

It was a line said in jest, yes, but it was true to say that I felt very much the same way.

"Ah yes, far more natural," he said.

"Then if you insist, that is how I shall refer to you."

The wine was delectable. It had remarkable clarity and a very low alcohol level. It was neither too strong nor too sweet: it felt like drinking silk.

"This wine is beautiful," I remarked.

The comment brought a smile to Reinald's face. I wasn't used to his warm gaze, but the wine allowed me to play it down. He wasn't dressed in his usual military attire, but instead wore a tailored black shirt with a beautifully patterned white jacket. One only needed to glance at him to know he was now a man of very high standing.

And while his entrance had given me the impression that he was now a different man, my worries proved completely misplaced. After

all, he had even been kind enough to select a wine that matched my tastes. I knew for a fact that he preferred drier, more acidic wines, a fact made clear at the ball when he'd made fun of my own preferences.

"I am glad to see that your change in status hasn't changed *you*," I commented.

The words slipped from me before I could catch them. Reinald reacted with surprise, but it lasted only an instant. He sipped from his own glass of wine before replying in a soft voice like that of a gentle breeze.

"As I am glad that you, too, remain who you always were."

There was nothing particularly deep in the words, but there was a certain color to his tone of voice, as though he were reminiscing on the past. It would have been a simple thing to ask if recent days had taken their toll on him as well, but I didn't want to spoil the moment when he'd been so kind as to arrange for this lunch.

"In any case, it has indeed been a long time since we last met. Let us put formalities aside and enjoy our food."

Put simply, I very much enjoyed the nature of imperial cuisine. In Falkrum it was commonplace to bring out one dish at a time, but in the capital they brought out everything so that diners could pick and choose as they liked. Whateley told me that in many cases more food was served than could be eaten. Leaving leftovers was a sign of affluence and proof that you were of the ruling class. Everything served was subtly crafted not only to bring out each key ingredient but to be just as much a treat for the eyes as the tongue.

In this case, however, we were each served a dish with a set amount placed upon it, perhaps to keep servers from constantly coming and going. It was quite the serving, it must be said, but it also meant I didn't feel like the vast majority had all gone to waste.

The flavor of the stew, in which beef had been simmered until tender, was to die for. I couldn't help but smile. I don't think there's a person alive who can't take joy in something that tastes phenomenal, and it reminded me of the Japanese food I'd so missed.

"This is delicious," I remarked. "The flavoring is wonderful."

"Many who visit from abroad find the flavors of imperial cuisine to be too subtle. I'm delighted to hear that you enjoy it."

"The seasoning is indeed quite different. I suppose it's because they make so much use of salt and various spices in Falkrum? However, here in the empire seafood is often a common ingredient in dishes, is it not?"

"The empire is fortunate to have canals and ports among its territory. We do not lack for seafood, no. It's likely that many of our dishes aren't seen in Falkrum at all."

I wonder if they eat octopus and squid here too?

Reinald was surprised when I asked, though not for the reason I expected.

"Yes, we do fish them here," he said, "though they're not really my preference. That said, octopuses are a common foodstuff in the areas around the fishing ports. You're quite knowledgeable on the topic, Miss Karen."

I laughed the comment off.

"Oh, you know me, always reading books. I'm just full of useless trivia."

I wonder if they do sashimi somewhere here? But even if they did, what would be the point without soy sauce and wasabi? And until now, I haven't discovered raw fish dishes among any of the food the imperials consume. A topic that warrants further investigation, I'd wager.

The actual meal was surprisingly calm and uneventful compared to the last times that Reinald and I had met. As such, no time was given to the topic of work.

"How is your new home?" asked Reinald. "I left the matters of the house to Moritz, and I imagine he arranged something rather luxurious, no?"

"Ah, so you heard about it. Yes, the house was so extravagant that I couldn't quite believe it even existed."

"I received a report. I heard that a second residence was arranged in the case that you did not accept the first offer."

That second residence—the place the Conrad family now called home—had been arranged by none other than Elena, which

explained how different the two places were. What surprised me even more, however, was to discover that our next-door neighbors were in fact Elena's grandparents.

"I visited them to introduce myself," I said, "but Elena didn't come up at all."

"Knowing her, she probably forgot to tell you both about it. Try asking them when you return home; I'm certain that's who they are."

Elena?! If I'd known, I would have prepared a better gift for your grandparents!

"Which is to say that the first home we were brought to was the one that Moritz arranged, yes? It was far too grandiose a place for the likes of us, so we had no choice but to turn it down. Why would he offer us such a...gigantic mansion?"

"That is one of his villas," replied Reinald.

"One of his what now?"

Just a villa? What does his actual house look like, then? And why would he offer us one of his villas?

Reinald wore a mischievous grin that brought to mind a certain someone who wasn't with us at the time.

"I recall him once telling me that he was having trouble selling one of his villas, and that the upkeep alone was a real pain. The man abhors wasted expenditure, you see. Perhaps it was his plan to push the house onto you so that you could shoulder the upkeep of it."

"You laugh, but if we'd chosen to live in that villa of his, our finances would be nonexistent."

"I daresay the man still holds something of a grudge against you for the trade rights you negotiated. If there's an opening to recoup some of his losses, you can bet he'll look to take it."

"You seem to be enjoying this whole debacle, Sir Reinald."

"I can't help it; it's just so much fun to see the guy unable to exact revenge and racking his brains for an opportunity. All the more so because his target is you, and you're so much younger."

I...see... So Moritz is keen on getting his five thousand coins back, is he? I'll have to be careful how I tread in future.

"Quite the irreverent one, aren't you? Though that said, I suppose it's always been there, hasn't it? In any case, you're clearly quite close to Moritz, I take it?"

"Oh?"

"The way you talk about him. It's like you're friends, not just colleagues."

I hadn't once heard Reinald refer to Moritz as something as casual as "the guy" while we were in Falkrum. He'd never revealed how close they were before, and so it took me by surprise.

"I take it you don't know, then? Moritz and I go back more than a decade. I've known him since I was a boy; we know each other very well."

"I had no idea you shared such a long past," I remarked. "You must trust one another implicitly."

We moved on from the topic of house and Moritz to Wendel and then to other, much smaller matters. Though it was not a promise in writing, Reinald offered to help see both Wendel and Emil settled in their new school, which would no doubt take some weight from Whateley's shoulders.

Time flew by as we chatted, and dessert was served. In Falkrum, this usually meant baked treats, but here in the capital it meant a custard-like cream served with frozen sweets covered in a red syrup. It had a fluffy sweetness and melted in the mouth, and I felt suddenly envious of all the imperials with their easy access to it. Later, I asked how it was made and discovered that it wasn't just custard-*like*, it *was* custard. I'd been thrown off by the fact that they used some other spice in place of vanilla essence.

I was happily nomming my way through dessert when Reinald asked what I had planned for the rest of the day.

"I'd like to visit the districts I still haven't seen while it's still light out," I said. "The capital is so vast, and I'd like to get more accustomed to it all as soon as I can."

And as long as I didn't go wandering astray, I'd be able to go walking on my own in future. So, while I had Achim with me I wanted to get a feel for the main streets.

"Is there any place in particular you'd like to see?" Reinald asked.

"Not specifically. I just want to develop a sense of where I am when I'm strolling around."

It was then that a most unexpected offer was uttered.

"Would you mind if I showed you around?" Reinald asked.

"Oh? Er, no, not at all, it's just..."

...isn't that impossible?

I mean, walking around with Reinald was going to draw a *lot* of attention.

"I'm sure you have prior engagements," I said, "and it would be lots of trouble for your guards..."

But while I was speaking, Reinald reached into his chest pocket and pulled forth a slip of paper no larger than the palm of his hand. It was so thin I expected it to be crushed in an instant as he pinched a corner of it and shook it. It was then that the strangest thing happened.

The piece of paper turned into a bell.

I blinked, thinking it was an illusion, but there it was. It was an actual bell. It was only the size of Reinald's palm, but it had transformed from a loose sheet of paper into a three-dimensional object. Reinald rang the bell a few times, but no sound echoed from it. When he was done, Reinald closed his fist over it, and when he opened it the bell was a slip of paper again, which he placed back in his jacket.

I was trying to work out exactly what had just happened when I heard a knocking at the door. It opened before anybody could respond.

"You called?" came a voice.

The man who appeared was one I knew, and one who was—to put it bluntly—the epitome of *dubious*. I was used to him looking different every time I saw him, and on this occasion Six was adorned in a long-sleeved cloak lavishly decorated in gold and silver.

"Ugh," I uttered, unable to control myself.

When Six's eyes met my own, he hunched over like an old man as he approached.

"I *thought* it was decidedly rare of you to disturb my nap," he said to Reinald. "So *she's* here, is she? Long time no see, my lady. The

last time we met was...the colosseum, hm? Wasn't that a mess?"

"A mess? *That's* what you'd call it...?"

"We'd like to go outside, Six," said Reinald. "Can you provide us cover?"

"Oh, the usual, then, I see? You're not alone this time, though. A tryst, is it? I can recommend a good inn, if you like? Or are you perhaps after sweets with a slight bitterness to them?"

"We're not—"

"Yes, yes, I know, I know," muttered Six, cutting me off before I could finish. "I'm still sleepy, so let's just get this over with, shall we? Hmm, so there's your guards and hers. That won't take much."

How does Six know about the guards behind the screen?

But even if he did, why hadn't any of the guards sprung into action to stop Reinald?

"Okay, we're done," said Six, taking a brief look around. "Ah, I'm still half asleep. Perhaps in future you might refrain from whipping the elderly into action out of their slumber? You're not Wilhelmina, you know. And to think that such pleasant dreams awaited me. I saw the reunion of a black kite—you know, the bird of prey—and an eagle, and before them was a hawk, being speared through by an arrow. Can you think of anything more moving?"

"I'll keep it in mind," replied Reinald, before turning to me. "Well then, shall we go?"

"Huh? What?" I uttered.

Reinald stood from his chair, while Six...

Wait a second. That sofa wasn't there earlier.

Six yawned as he fell upon the new piece of furniture.

"I am *so* done with talking," he said. "Off you go. Run along now."

"Huh? Wait," I uttered. "What just..."

"Miss Karen, we're leaving," said Reinald.

"Oh? Oh! Okay!"

Reinald was already halfway out the door. I gave chase, still unable to grasp what was going on but powerless to do anything but follow. Reinald's stride was confident as he passed boldly down corridors that I knew I was not allowed access to myself. On our way, we passed by palace servants who did not even glance in our

general direction.

On a bench in the courtyard sat Achim, his legs crossed as he waited patiently for my lunch to end. He of all people should have noticed us, but his gaze instead passed right through us.

"Please don't speak to him just yet," said Reinald. "You'll only alert him to our presence."

"But...he's my bodyguard," I said. "He'll be beyond worried when he realizes we're gone."

"My people will notice my absence soon enough. I trust that they'll explain things to him. Please don't worry, it won't amount to much."

I followed Reinald down narrow paths which, judging by all the grime and weeds, were not paths the imperial family often (if ever) walked. Servants rushed by with buckets of washing, while frustrated maids held cleaning rags in hand as they stomped around. None of them noticed us.

"Would I be right to assume that you've done this before, then?" I asked.

"Only on a handful of occasions," came the reply.

Anyone could see by the way he carried himself that Reinald was a repeat offender. I pushed for details but did not get a clear answer. All the same, judging by Six's attitude, this was definitely *not* Reinald's first time making a getaway like this. He had always struck me as the very symbol for adherence to duty, and so I found myself a little shocked.

As for the strange lack of a reaction in everybody around us, Reinald explained that Six had cast a spell that essentially shrouded us from people's perception. They recognized that we were there, but saw us as just another person who was supposed to be in that place at that time, or someone they'd expect to see in such a location.

"It's not perfect," Reinald said. "If Nika wanted to find us, for example, she'd need only look closely for us to become apparent to her."

Put the opposite way, nobody else noticed us because none of them were looking for us. It was a subtle piece of magic, but

ingenious all the same. Think about it: nobody expected to see a member of the royal family just strolling the city streets. And as expected, when we left the palace and crossed the bridge into the city, nobody paid us any mind.

We headed to a decidedly less lively district, which Reinald told me was where much of the ordinary citizenry lived. The district was filled with apartment buildings and the streets were lined with eateries and drinking establishments. I was more accustomed to this area now, and so I took the lead and looked around. The streets were a mess, but no one stopped me, and Reinald simply followed.

I know it's unbecoming of a lady, but my heart leaped at the experience. It had been so long since I could walk the streets freely without having to fear anyone looking upon me with a pointed gaze. I could go wherever I wanted, and it was such a joy.

"The city truly is so vast," I said. "Over in Falkrum, people frown on the drinking of alcohol at lunch, but look at all the people in the pubs."

"I daresay they're all people who work the night shift," commented Reinald. "Keep on this road and you'll reach the public cemetery."

"You have dedicated land for cemeteries?"

"Not...land, exactly. What you'll find is an entrance to the cemetery, a guardhouse, then a state-managed institution and herb garden."

"But the graveyard proper is in the city?"

"Most of them are located outside of it, but some people wish to be buried here. An underground cemetery was thus constructed."

"An...underground cemetery... Um... Like the type where holes are dug into the walls for the dead to rest?"

"Yes, exactly that. Did you study about it? I know that's not how things are done in Falkrum."

"Er, yes, I did. I'm relieved just to know I didn't have things mixed up."

Truth time: I learned about those underground cemeteries from television. Underground cemeteries—otherwise known as catacombs—were places I had little familiarity with and no real desire to

explore. I mean, we weren't talking ancient ruins, we were talking a still fully functioning cemetery, you know? This place had a drier climate than the often-humid Japan, but all the same, I was fine not seeing any actual catacombs for myself.

Reinald wanted to avoid the guardhouse, so we opted to change course, at which point I thought to ask something that had piqued my curiosity.

"You mentioned an herb garden. Is that also managed by the state?"

"For the most part, yes. Mages, herbalists, and doctors all fall under state purview. They are not allowed to do business without official licenses."

"So when you say 'for the most part,' you mean that this is not always the case?"

"The capital is home to a great many people, and some who are undocumented open their own shops and offer their services. They are often more trustworthy than official doctors, some of whom hold documentation despite being rather horrible at their job."

There was a cynicism in Reinald's tone that conveyed to me he was telling the truth.

"The imperial capital is flourishing," he continued, "but it is for that same reason that life for those in poverty is all the harder. When a child from such poverty is injured so badly they are left on the verge of life or death, it is not the 'official' doctors who reach out to help them, but those of their own community."

Each word was spoken with a chilling calm, such that I could not read Reinald's emotions. All the same, I knew it was no joking matter.

"In which case, I hope that people can learn to see things differently."

"Differently, you say?"

"You will be in a position to oversee governance, and I can only imagine you have an unbelievable plan to see change in the people of these lands."

I had not meant anything strange by the statement, but Reinald looked stunned by it.

“Oh, my apologies,” I said. “I completely forgot to congratulate you on your promotion to the position of crown prince. Congratulations.”

Reinald was no longer just the imperial prince, you see. He had been awarded the rank of crown prince, which made him the emperor’s heir apparent. Reinald nodded at my words but did not seem particularly happy.

Oh?

“My apologies,” I said. “I did not mean to offend you.”

“No, I... I’m just surprised, is all,” said Reinald. “By the way, you said that you didn’t notice any strange behavior in Falkrum before you left to come here...”

“Indeed. There was no suspicious activity to note. Some ill will toward the empire, yes, but all of that is in the report we wrote.”

“Yes, I saw it. To get a little deeper into the matter, it would appear that the Kirsten family is considering new trade opportunities; should I assume that they, too, fell under your sphere of observation?”

“Yes, but why would my brother... Has something caught your attention?”

I had not been expecting the Kirsten family to pop up in conversation. But I had no reason to lie, so I spoke honestly. It was strange to have work suddenly appear in the midst of our stroll, and for a moment I worried that perhaps I’d overlooked something important.

“Given the current precarious state of Falkrum, the Kirstens are also considering moving their base of operations,” I said, finding that once I had started, the words just kept tumbling from my mouth. “Naturally, the change of government left some in the family with grievances, but their current lord wouldn’t even *dream* of opposing the...”

“Miss Karen.”

I fell silent. Reinald must have sensed my worry, and his gaze looked to calm my nerves.

“There is no need to be concerned,” he said. “I merely wanted to confirm a fact. It is not my intent to rebuke your brother.”

Then why bring up the Kirsten family at all?

"It would seem..." Reinald started.

"Yes?"

"It would seem we are out of time."

I followed Reinald's gaze to a carriage, approaching us slowly.

"They're here far quicker than I had expected," I commented. "I wonder how they do it?"

"I tried asking them, but they refused to say."

"Surely they realize you'd only use it against them."

As the carriage neared ever closer, I thought to broach one more topic.

"There's something I'd like to ask of you, and I hope you won't be mad. I've been thinking about it a lot."

We were out of time for getting into anything particularly meaty, which meant I would have to save the topic of Arno for the next time Reinald and I met. However, there was still time for me to touch on an important matter of a personal nature.

And, well...yes. I hadn't really worried about it until now, but now that I was here in the capital I felt very much like it was something that needed correcting.

"It's just that, while I'm completely fine with it on a personal level, I'm no longer unmarried, so to speak, and our circumstances have changed since we first met. It's, er...a touch embarrassing to have you call me by the same term, even here in the imperial capital."

Excuses could be made while we were in Falkrum, but for all intents and purposes I was a wife who had lost her husband. A widow, in other words, and one who had remained a part of her husband's family. I was also a stepmother, and so it felt strange for Reinald to still be calling me "Miss Karen." And while I would forever feel that Doctor Emma was the margrave's true wife, I nonetheless felt little other choice than to take the stance I did.

"So what I'm trying to say is that perhaps it would be best if you called me Lady Conrad, as it would be far more natural..."

"Hm? If you'd like me to refer to you differently, then won't just Karen suffice?"

"Oh? Well, I..."

He'd shut down my request in a single neat sentence. On the one hand, I was grateful, but on the other I did not think that the imperial nobility would be particularly pleased to eventually learn that I was on a first-name basis with the crown prince. I mean, he was *very* good-looking. Wouldn't people get the wrong idea?

All the same, Reinald paid my worries no heed and looked at me the way he always did as he went on.

"I much prefer the sound of that, personally. And while I don't think that changing how we address one another will have an impact on our relationship at this stage, I'd feel more at ease calling you by your name."

The carriage came to a stop before us. One of the curtained doors opened, revealing Nika and Achim, the latter of whom could not hide his displeasure.

"Your Highness," said Nika, "we've come to collect you. We didn't want to make a big scene of it, so I hope you're fine with this."

"Impressive," Reinald remarked. "Is this the quickest you've found me?"

"Let's just say it gets easier after the fifth time. Being that you also have company, we came as fast as we could."

Nika looked nothing if not apologetic.

"I'll bet His Highness dragged you along for the ride," she said. "You have my apologies. He quite often leaves us without so much as a word. Calls such outings 'inspections.'"

"Oh, no," I replied. "I had a wonderful time."

"Please board the carriage, Your Highness," said Nika. "People will start to notice."

"But what a wonderful time it was while it lasted," he muttered.

"You've no time to be out strolling around," replied Nika. "The emperor has summoned you, so we must hurry. It's lucky I found you before your bodyguards. They'd be causing a right scene if it was them here and not me."

Oh, my. That really is a pressing matter.

The summons of the emperor was not something that Reinald could simply shrug off and ignore. He entered the carriage, at which

point I decided to excuse myself.

"You will be attending your meeting with the emperor from the moment you return to the palace, I assume?" I said. "In which case I will take my leave here. You should hurry."

"Yes, but..." started Nika.

"If we return with you, it will only give you more to worry about. You have already brought my guard with you, and it was my intent today to explore the capital anyway. I see no problem with the current arrangement."

Nika seemed troubled for a moment, but Achim was already out on the street by then, at which point she gave us both words of apology and thanks. Reinald smiled at me when our eyes met. It was a short walk we had shared, but an enjoyable one nonetheless. To escape the palace by way of magic was an experience I would not soon forget.

"I apologize that we cannot see you home," Reinald said.

"Until we meet again, Sir Reinald."

"And to think it was I who invited you to meet today," he continued. "I will see to it that you receive the appropriate apology in the coming days. Until then, Karen."

"Until then."

I didn't think there was any need for an apology. If anything, I was thankful that I could continue my stroll. That said, I was admittedly a little embarrassed to have him call me simply "Karen" in front of the others.

Just as they were about to leave, Nika looked over toward the direction of the cemetery.

"Go past the cemetery and you'll find a blue building," she said, speaking quickly. "It's a research institute, and it's where Ern Quach is working. Feel free to use my name if you have to; it'll get you inside, where you can talk with her."

"Ern? Nika, do you mean...?"

"Quach already knows about you coming to the capital. I hope this makes up a little for our leaving you on the street like this."

"O-Of course it does! You're amazing! Thank you!"

I had been wondering where Ern was living in the capital, and

now I could ask her myself! The carriage door closed and took off at remarkable speed. I stood quietly watching it as it faded into the distance...

...and all the while I knew that at some point I would have to turn around to face my company.

"Well?" asked Achim.

It was one word, and it was ice-cold.

Funnily enough, I felt like I'd been in this very same position before. Unfortunately, however, all the excuses I'd thought up in advance came crumbling down around me.

"I'm sorry!" I cried.

"Let's just head somewhere a little quieter, shall we?"

Achim practically dragged me to said quieter location which, perhaps inevitably, led us nearer the graveyard. When he discovered a bench by the roadside, Achim slumped upon it. He was very agitated.

"Er... Shall I explain?" I said.

"Oh, you think that an *explanation* is going to cut it, do you? You, who thought it would be fine to just thoughtlessly leave the palace with the *imperial prince* and *abandon* her own protection?!"

I didn't really have a retort to that. Though, what choice did I have at the time? I'd been powerless. Although actually...I *could* have said no. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a *little* intrigued by the prospect of wandering the capital's streets together with Reinald.

I understood why Achim was so mad. I did. And so I took his lecture on the chin. It was rather short, given the fact that I offered no excuses, but Achim's anger still lingered afterward.

"I was sitting there waiting for your return, and all of a sudden I'm told that you and the prince have just vanished. Do you have any idea how that made me feel?"

"It was thoughtless of me, I know. I can't tell you how sorry I am."

"Thankfully, Nika and the prince's guards quickly realized what was going on. All the same, if that had gone badly the Conrad relationship with the empire could have been crushed in an instant. Do you understand that?"

"I just thought it would be fine because I was with Sir Reinald..."

"What?"

"Nothing. It's nothing. I'm so very sorry, Achim."

My sudden disappearance would have left him horribly flustered. Nika had let him join her on their search, but he was right; if things had gone badly, then, as my protection, he could have ended up imprisoned.

"Maybe *this* time things didn't erupt into outright chaos, but to hide your tracks and slip out the back door with *him*? Rumors would spread like wildfire! Just thinking about it gives me the shivers! I *told* you! I told you a long time ago! *Think* about who you're spending time with!"

"That's exactly my intent."

"If it *was*, you wouldn't have done that!"

"Right."

How many times had Achim scolded me just like this? I very much doubted that Arno ever made Achim this mad. For a time he sat there, ruffling his own hair to such an extent I didn't think he'd ever calm, but eventually he raised his head to glare at me.

"Given what has just transpired, I am going to ask you straight," he said. "Do you like him?"

Well, that *came out of nowhere.*

"By him, do you mean Sir Reinald?"

"Who *else* would I mean?"

It wasn't like Achim to ask such a question. The answer was yes, naturally. I wasn't so crazy that I'd go walking the city streets with someone I hated. I told Achim as much, but it only resulted in his shoulders slumping.

"That's *not* what I mean," he said. "Think about the circumstances. You *know* what I mean."

"You don't mean like him as a *man*, do you?"

"What else could I possibly be asking?"

"Why?"

"Because he called you Karen! No Miss! No Lady! No title!"

"That's it?"

"That's it."

Achim wore a very bitter look on his face, but what was he driving at? It was by good fortune that I'd come to meet Reinald and receive certain favorable treatment, but in no way did I think that came from a place of romance. I'd talked about this very thing with Gerda; Reinald appeared to show no interest in love, and even if he did I could never imagine him looking at one like me as a prospective partner.

Well, I could *hardly* imagine it. So while I tried to hold myself with confidence, I won't deny that the thought caused my brow to furrow.

"The very *idea* is unfathomable," I said. "My reputation is practically in tatters. I've nothing to offer him, and his position comes with considerable dangers. Not that he's shown any interest whatsoever, I might add."

Reinald had some reason for bringing down Falkrum, and achieving the title of crown prince was not in and of itself his dream. Why would he pick up some widow from a ruined nation on his way to whatever it was he was striving for? I knew full well that Reinald should choose the hand of someone better, though he himself had no plans to get married.

"It is my duty to look after Wendel until he comes of age," I said. "I've hardly the audacity to try anything more."

Achim remained unconvinced. His rage had subsided, but his arms remained crossed.

"I've no intention of lying to you," I said. "Do you really place so little trust in me?"

"You've made a very clear case for yourself," Achim replied. "However—"

"However?"

Achim looked at me carefully, then turned his gaze skyward.

"I see," he murmured to himself, and then to me he said, "You make things so much more difficult on yourself. Not that I mind. I actually find it helpful."

"A bit late to be saying that, given the difficult path we've chosen to walk."

"That's not what I... Well, yes, I suppose you're right."

I promised Achim that I would not abandon him again, and that was enough to settle things.

"So are we going or what?" Achim asked, gesturing to a cluster of buildings with his jaw.

It seemed he remembered what Nika had said.

"If you will allow it, I'd very much like to," I replied.

"I don't mind. I already decided that my time is yours for the day, which means going anywhere you like. Can you imagine just abandoning someone who would do such a thing? Someone so praiseworthy?"

"I said I was sorry, didn't I...? It's the blue building, right?"

On our walk, I happened to see the entrance to the public graveyard. There were two wooden doors, upon which were carved the image of a woman. The motif had likely come from Arrendle's first emperor. Surrounded by plant life, the place felt dignified and solemn. It was nothing like the gloomy location I had imagined.

"While I was waiting for you, I decided to strike up conversation here and there to kill some time..." started Achim.

Getting up to date on the day's rumors, in other words. The topic of the day was that of Reinald's path to becoming crown prince, which was even stranger than I could have expected.

There wasn't a person in the empire who did not know Reinald's father, Karl Noah Balderas. He had complete authority over Arrendle, to the point that he had named it as per his wishes. Many considered him a fool among the nation's past emperors, but he differed from them in one noticeable way: He had not submitted to a puppet government, and instead took power for himself.

Emperor Karl was the youngest brother of the emperor before him, a position very much at the far end of heirship. When that emperor had passed away, the quarreling over a successor resulted in Karl's ascendance to the throne. Rumors swirled that he would be nothing more than a puppet leader, but Karl defied such expectations.

I'll spare you the details, as they do not directly concern the topic of Reinald, but suffice it to say that there was once a privileged upper class that controlled the imperial family like puppets. Karl had

them put to death or otherwise sent to prisons on largely uninhabited isles. The people sensed the dawning of a new age in the new emperor, but what arrived with it was decadence.

Karl began his reign by having a mausoleum crafted—along with statues—to pay tribute to past emperors. Much like the image on the double doors of the public graveyard Achim and I had passed, the emperor spent much of the national budget on celebrating and idolizing the past.

Next, he surrounded himself with women. Karl was fond of all women, married or single, and called any who interested him to his bedchambers. He had some twenty concubines at present, but in the past he'd had as many as fifty living in the palace. Though, even then, it was not at all uncommon for him to indulge in one-night stands with other women too.

There was much in the way of bribery rumors, but all the same, he remained emperor because of his competence. He revised national law, poured energy and finances into the education system, and reinforced the military budget. One could not say that he hadn't done his part to improve the standard of living.

The biggest issue with Emperor Karl was his *eccentricities*.

He was known for dancing nude when drunk, setting pitfall traps to dispose of subordinates he detested, and attempting to spread new and depraved "games" of a sort across the lands. And that was just the beginning. While most simply spread through the populace as "the latest in Emperor Karl's escapades," he was said to have awarded the keepers of racing horses noble ranks for the mere fact that he liked the sound of their voices. He also pitted unarmed humans against huge wild beasts in cages, once set a rare tome alight for no other reason than that "the text was difficult to read," and put national treasures in furnaces.

In short, he was the epitome of unpredictable.

Reinald's ascension to the position of crown prince, too, was at the emperor's word. He should have been nothing more than an imperial prince, not a direct heir to the throne. The queen and many other ranking officials opposed the emperor's decision—more than half of the government, no less—which put Reinald at a terrible

disadvantage.

"Your boy is in quite a bind, it would seem," said Achim. "To make matters worse, even though the emperor himself promoted Reinald to his current position, he also saw fit to saddle his heir with a number of impossible tasks."

"In which case, he'd have absolutely no time for galavanting around town..." I uttered.

"Or so you'd think... From what I've heard, the crown prince's detractors are just lapping all of this up. They can't get enough of it. But even then, the guy seems so calm. What is up with that?"

As for the impossible tasks Reinald now carried on his shoulders, they were as follows: First, to fully map and control the imperial waterways. Second, to restore trade with a desert nation and recapture a stronghold city. Third, to wipe out the anti-imperial rebellion. That wasn't even the end of it; there were various other tasks too.

"Desert nation...?" I muttered. "But the Allied Nations of Yaw aren't on good terms with the empire. I mean, I understand the third task, but why the underground waterways? Does the emperor have them mixed up with the sewer system?"

"I was curious about exactly that same thing, so I asked. You won't believe the state of things."

It was well known even outside of the empire that the imperial capital had an underground sewer system, but this was the first I'd heard of any waterways. It was true that a sewer system ran below the streets, but in actual fact it was a complicated series of waterways not unlike an entire labyrinth unto itself. Many said that one wrong turn often meant that escape was impossible, and even the imperial family—who managed it all—did not understand the waterways in their totality.

"The construction of the waterways began with the first emperor," said Achim, "but as they neared completion a bloody feud broke out, and everybody working on the waterways was killed as a result. Nobody's had a handle on it since."

Apparently, paths existed even below the waterways, but these were made even more difficult to find due to the lack of light. Some

still believed that secret passages and escape routes still existed in the imperial palace.

"I was told that the waterways have been abandoned ever since the time of the first emperor," said Achim.

"And now the task of comprehending it falls on Reinald?"

"Well, he's got a reputation now. He's a crown prince who brought down Falkrum without any bloodshed. As for the desert nation, the whole reason there's a foul relationship there is because of the emperor himself. Looks a lot to me like Emperor Karl is just toying with his son."

This left everybody simply to watch and observe the ways in which Reinald dealt with the tasks assigned to him. Wilhelmina was simply waiting for him to fail, apparently.

"They weren't joking when they called the tasks impossible," said Achim. "It's like the emperor has lifted Reinald up to great heights just so he can see what it looks like when he falls. In that regard, even *I* can feel a little sympathy for the guy."

The beautiful, fair-haired crown prince had appeared like a shooting star and was growing popular among the people, but even Achim couldn't help but feel sorry for him. But if all of the rumors were true, it meant that Reinald had things even tougher here than he had back in Falkrum.

I wonder if he'll be okay...

As I mulled over everything Achim had told me, we entered a district filled with greenery. The path broke into three, and we followed the one that led to a blue-roofed building, which revealed itself to be an impressive five-story structure. There were guards posted at the entrance, and they replied with looks of exasperation when I mentioned Ern's name.

"We've told all the others, and we'll tell you too: It doesn't matter who you are, you need an appointment if you want to meet with Professor Quach. My apologies, but you'll have to turn back."

"We're here by way of Miss Nika Saganov," I said, "though if you give her my name, I'm certain she'll make a little time for me."

As it turned out, the name "Saganov" alone proved more than enough. The guards stood a little straighter immediately.

"I'll confirm things with the professor immediately," said one. "Please wait here for a moment."

It was not long before he came running back with a reply, his face one of utter shock.

"She said she'll see you. Please head inside."

The interior of the building was nothing out of the ordinary, though it did seem a bit lifeless, for lack of a better word. Some of it stank of dust, some of it looked rather aged, and here and there the floor creaked loudly.

We were led to a corner room. On the door was a nameplate that read simply "Quach." I knocked on the door, which brought to mind my school days.

"Enter," came the reply from within.

It was a voice I knew oh so well. I opened the door expecting to see a familiar face but was instead met by a surprising sight. A few desks had been pushed together, and countless plants filled the space along with stacked documents and tools that made little sense to me.

"Ern?" I uttered.

There were three people in the office. Two were men I'd never seen before. They stared blankly at me, the sudden visitor, while the girl farther in the room remained bent over the book in her hands.

Wait, is she at the head of their table...?

Ern was exactly as I remembered her, right down to her braided hair, her friendly face, and her somewhat severe gaze. Today, however, she wore a monocle as she flipped through the pages of her book. I waited for a time.

"Uh... Ern?" I uttered.

"Wait," came the curt reply. "I'll be with you in a moment. I just have to finish this."

She wanted me to sit tight.

"How long is 'a moment'?"

"Ten pages."

"But that's so long. Do it quickly."

"The more you talk the longer it'll take."

"Would you prefer that I repeat your name incessantly, then?"

Ern hated it when people interrupted her reading. I saw her brow furrow as she stood to her feet.

"That's some nerve you have after barging in here without an appointment."

"But if you let me in, it means you've time to see me, no?"

Ern was dressed in a long-sleeved cloak, which was to be expected of researchers, or actually mages, if we're getting down to it. Ern told the two men that she was going out and promptly did exactly that. She told me to follow her, so I asked Achim to wait for me as we headed to the building's garden. I spotted people here and there, perhaps on their breaks.

That Ern, she's so brusque and to the point, but always so calm and cool.

"Hey, Er—" I started.

"You. Stupid. Idiot!" cried Ern.

Ow!

Ern clutched both of my cheeks in her hands.

Ouch! Why? Oww!

"Huh? Erwun! Iw hwurss!" I mumbled.

"That's the point! Idiot!"

"Erwun! Leggo! Owowow!"

But struggle as I might, Ern did not quickly release her grasp. Even when I looked to passersby for aid, Ern's fierce gaze kept all at a distance, so I continued to make a scene until finally I was free—albeit with bright red cheeks.

"Ow, that really stung. You're awful, Ern..." I muttered.

I couldn't stop the tears. Ern simply watched me sniffling. I tried demanding an apology but received only a gruff snort and crossed arms in response.

"You ignored my warning, and look at where it got you!" she said. "I risked my life to send you that message. Why don't you ever do as you're told?"

"It's not like I forgot," I retorted, "but it wasn't like I could just drop everything and flee either!"

"I couldn't care less what was going on! I know how you might have felt, but you had to know that I wouldn't send word unless it

was really serious!”

“One scrap of paper and I’m supposed to understand my whole life is going to crumble around me? *You’re* the real idiot!”

She almost tears my cheeks off and she has the nerve to say that? *I risked my own life walking a tightrope of my own to get here, damn it! At least be a little happy that we’re finally reunited!*

I took a hold of Ern’s biceps in my hands and squeezed until she let out a toad-like croak.

“Ugh, Karen...” she said in a low voice.

“Urgh...” I replied. “Not the...cheeks again... Oww...”

There we were, two girls having an all-out catfight under clear blue skies. The only reason we stopped was that the pointless scuffle left us both exhausted. And so it was with heaving breaths we both released one another. As we sat there catching our breaths and wondering how things came to this, Ern held out a small wrapped object.

“Candy?” she said.

“Okay...” I murmured.

I didn’t think a single candy made up for things, but I was tired and I craved the sugar hit. A gentle sweetness slowly filled my mouth and calmed my nerves.

“Nika called you Ern Quach. What happened to your full name?” I asked.

“I’ve been just Ern since I got here. Only my parents call me Ernesta. I don’t expect to be calling myself that again, though. Keep that in mind, please.”

“Okay. I saw your name on the room’s nameplate. Is that your lab?”

“I was promoted, and I got my own lab as part of it. The two guys are my assistants.”

“Wow, all of that at eighteen years of age?”

“Well, you’re no slouch either. You hijacked a married man’s family at roughly the same age.”

“It wasn’t a hijack. Don’t get it twisted.”

“I know, I know. I’m sorry.”

Ern had grasped the broad strokes of my circumstances thanks to

Elena. It wasn't something to go into detail about here, but I was glad for Ern's consideration.

"You had it rough, huh?" said Ern.

"Yeah. But thanks for your protection. It saved my life."

Ern handed me another candy. In it were the messages "You're welcome" and "I'm sorry." I put it in my pocket while the two of us got caught up on recent events.

"You hardly chose the easiest path for yourself," commented Ern.

"It wasn't like I wasn't thinking about the pros and cons," I said. "I just couldn't leave everything and everyone like that. But what about you, Ern? If you've been given your own lab, that means you must be doing something impressive, no?"

"You could say *doing*, you could say *did*... In any case, I'm pretty sure I've got a little renown now. Probably."

"What the...? Why won't you just come out with it?"

"Because...it's strictly confidential!"

She was being deliberately evasive, but it was obvious that she was exceptional. She had assistants, after all! This left a question: What was she researching? I tried asking, but Ern only looked awkward and avoided my gaze. If she didn't want to talk about it, I didn't mind, but something about her expression tugged at my mind.

I can't just leave things like this...

"Are you hiding something?" I asked.

"No... Oh, by the way, there's this thing that's been on my mind for ages now..."

"And now you're dodging me..."

I tried to close in, but at that point there came a puff of smoke. Nothing dangerous, just a sudden burst of confetti. I sat there shocked for a moment until I felt something fall into my lap.

"What is this?" I asked.

"It's chocolate."

"What?"

"All the ingredients exist here. All that was missing was the recipe. So I taught some people and they refined it. It's a luxury item at the moment, but I don't think it'll be long before it reaches the general public."

Ern explained that she simply taught people how to make it, but that it was the people of the capital who actually went about doing it and innovating on the idea.

"I know you don't like the idea of sharing our home world knowledge here, but I figure this much is fine."

"You've got it all wrong," I said. "I never said I was *against* it, even when we were in school. I'm beyond happy to see chocolate again, and I'm all for expansion in the world of sweets."

I corrected Ern immediately on the matter. We both felt differently about it, and what it came down to was this: putting aside whether or not it was actually possible, imagine for a moment that you were all-powerful and capable of anything. Would you dump the knowledge of modern civilization on the people of the new world you were reborn into?

I was of the mindset that doing so suddenly and in excess was a bad idea.

It had all started for me back when I first tried to invent the umbrella. My various circumstances had seen the attempt end in dismal failure, and that was when I shifted my perspective on things. It would be nice to look back and laugh at the idea that my grand dreams had been crushed under the weight of reality, but it was more like an embarrassing stain on the otherwise pretty dress of my past.

Back then, you see, I had still placed so much hope and so many dreams in my rebirth in another world...

"But every time I came up with an idea you found a way to pick it to pieces," countered Ern.

"All I asked was that you really think through your ideas becoming reality. Take cars, for example. You talked about them all the time, but even if you were to make one, this world doesn't have proper roads for them. And they're useless until people know how to actually drive them. You never talked about more manageable things like chocolate; your ideas were always extreme."

"I gave up on cars. There's no potential fuel for them, and this world doesn't have a high enough level of steel processing."

"All you're telling me now is that you *did* plan to make them..."

Ern and I had both been reborn here, and we'd talked a lot about what might happen if we shared certain ideas and concepts. Through such conversations I came to understand that Ern was the sort of person who wanted to enrich general life. As far as she was concerned, if you had the knowledge, you should use it.

But no matter how much we talked about it, we couldn't come to a consensus. Ern called me a coward, and I called her a fanatic. I thought that if she at least called me cautious then I'd switch to calling her progressive, but no such revisions to our titles had ever been made.

I unwrapped the little package, in which was a small brown shape. The moment I put it in my mouth I knew it was the real deal. It was chocolate, and it was delicious. It was so good that my brain went numb, and a contented sigh escaped my lips. The tongue in my current body should have been unaccustomed to the taste, and yet it brought me the most nostalgic joy as it melted in my mouth.

"You like it?" asked Ern.

"It's amazing. Thanks, Ern."

She observed my expression carefully, then nodded to herself.

"I've noticed gradual changes in you for a while, but you're much easier to read now, Karen," Ern remarked.

"Easier to read how?" I asked.

"You're more expressive. Even if we set aside your Japanese heritage, you show a far wider array of emotions now. How do I put it...? It's like you're acting your age."

"You think so? I'm used to people thinking I'm scheming and impertinent, but more expressive is a first."

It was easy to forget, but my rebirth in a new world meant that in terms of my mental age, I was very much an adult. This wasn't like getting to thirty after dreaming and planning it since childhood; it was more like I'd blinked, and suddenly that's what I was. All the same, those extra years of experience were the very reason I'd been able to endure the fall of Conrad and everything else that came afterward.

"I'm not making fun of you," Ern said. "And it's not just you either. It's true of me too."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm talking about whether our minds are shaped by the body or the soul. I've been thinking about it a lot as of late. Unsurprisingly, you're the only person I can talk to about it."

She flashed me a deft wink. It was quite a natural expression for her, particularly when we were both in school, and it was the very picture of an adorable young girl.

"When I was younger my parents always told me that I was very conscientious," continued Ern, "and that I was wise beyond my years. They called it a gift from the heavens. I'd been trying my best to play the part of a girl my age, but even then, my parents could feel I was different."

"Ah, I see. I think I get you. My servants used to say I lacked the charm of girls my age. Even my brother's bodyguard told me I wasn't cute like the other girls."

"Yes, that's what I'm talking about. When I look back, I can see that it was probably because we were forcing the act, you know? Oh, and don't worry about people listening in on our conversation; I've got that covered."

Ern picked up a piece of confetti and toyed with it with a finger.

"But it's the strangest thing," she said. "My mother says I look like I'm enjoying myself more. I told her I'm just the same as I've always been, but she thinks it must be because my work is fulfilling. She's not wrong, but it just made me think back on things and, more to the point, who I've been until now."

"And what did you find?"

"That I'm more a kid *now* than I've ever been. I'm living like I'm my age."

It was clear that Ern's words were exactly how she felt. She couldn't have given a clearer answer if she'd tried.

"Which isn't to say that my memories or experiences have vanished, or anything like that, just that as the years go by my behavior is more in harmony with my appearance. I was more cynical about life as a baby than I am now."

"I get that. We were far more pessimistic about the world as schoolgirls, weren't we?"

"Well, everyone around us treated us like kids, and I think we leaned into that."

But the environments we inhabited shifted and changed. I felt suddenly impressed, despite myself, at the human ability to adapt to changing circumstances.

"And you...don't really talk about the blessings of the lord anymore," I said.

"I suppose so. I think because I'm the one embodying the miracles now, though to be honest, it's no longer very clear to me."

Ern looked up at the sky, her eyes twinkling like a child's as she gave words to her doubts.

"In any case, it's strange. If we have new bodies like these, then it stands to reason that the soul exists apart from its vessel. And so I started thinking about whether it's the body or soul that sways the mind."

"You think the mind and the soul are separate, then?" I asked.

"Of course. Humans are made up of three components, after all... Oh, right. You're an atheist."

"I suppose, but I know what you're going to say, so it's okay."

I wasn't especially knowledgeable about religion, but I'd picked up the gist through manga and the like. Still, I'd never expected that Ern and I would be sitting down to discuss this particular topic, so it wasn't especially easy for me to keep up. Perhaps it was because my days were so hectic, but the thesis of the reborn felt like a very distant, disconnected topic.

"It's such a complicated topic," I said. "And to think I read stories beyond the human experience without even really giving them a second thought."

"I wasn't in a position to enjoy such luxuries, so I can't really speak on it. But we both feel similarly about the here and now, so perhaps it's safe to say that the body is the deciding factor."

Which is to say that, regardless of the soul, the mind is shaped by its body and the environment surrounding it, then?

"But at this stage, the only real advantage that being reborn gives us is our age..."

Ern sat a little straighter, her nostrils flaring with pride. I pulled at

her ear in exasperation.

Yes, yes, I know that you *were born with tremendous magical abilities...*

I thought that if Ern was so concerned with matters of the body and the soul, then perhaps she could speak to her fellow mages about it.

"Couldn't you brush over the exact details and bring your hypothesis up as a topic of discussion with your peers?" I asked.

"Ugh, no," said Ern, frowning. "I'd be a laughingstock."

I could tell she really didn't like the idea. And if that was the case then I wouldn't push the point, but it did make me wonder about something else.

"Hey, Ern. Do you have people you can talk to here at this institute?"

"Huh? Where did *that* come from?"

"Oh, I'm just curious... I mean, we're both alike in that we don't really have a lot of friends, you know? Having someone to talk to or not having someone to talk to... That alone can make a big difference, right?"

"This is my workplace, Karen. I didn't come here to make friends."

"I know that! I do! That's why I just said 'someone to talk to'!"

I wasn't going to tell her to make friends; I just wanted to know she had someone to go to when she needed to talk. When I'd said "peers," I'd noticed a slight frown flash across Ern's face, and I didn't like the feel of it. She was brimming with confidence, for better or for worse, and so I just worried whether or not that had left her isolated. I liked the idea that perhaps she had a senior she could rely on; someone who looked out for her.

"Nobody here can understand anything, for the most part," said Ern.

Given that I knew essentially nothing about the place, I couldn't really offer much substance in my reply.

"Yes, perhaps so," I uttered. "But, uh... I don't know, what about Six? I mean, he *is* extremely well-versed in the ways of magic. Pity about the personality, but still."

I knew that the mage's name was essentially taboo as far as Ern was concerned, and I'm not even exactly sure why I brought his name up in the first place. However, I was strangely confident in my belief that if the topic of rebirth were brought up, he wouldn't simply laugh it off.

Ern, unsurprisingly, replied with a gag.

"You must be joking," she said, her lips twisting into a grimace. "Nobody could possibly be less trustworthy... I mean, how can you not even know?"

Not even know what? Is there something else?

"He's got more secrets?" I asked.

"I don't know if you'd call it a secret. It's pretty much public knowledge. But for some reason it hasn't spread. The people who *know* know, but I don't know what the standard is for *letting* someone know."

I couldn't make heads or tails of Ern's answer. When I asked her to explain, Ern looked suddenly uncertain.

"Sorry. I jumped the gun," she said. "You're under the crown prince's protection, and you've met Six yourself, so I just assumed you knew. But you don't, huh?"

"Ern, I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Of course you don't."

Ern crossed her arms and dropped into thought. It was perhaps ten whole seconds of silence, after which she looked me in the eyes and said the following.

"Six...at...from..."

I heard the word "Six," but everything else was clouded over, as though it were something far away and distant. It was the strangest sensation. A sudden stinging pain ran through my skull, and I closed my eyes against it.

"Did you hear it?" Ern asked.

"What *was* that?" I asked. "It's like my ears went under water."

"So you remember me saying it, but you couldn't hear any of it. That means that if I tried talking about it, you wouldn't understand," said Ern, offering only a shrug. "That's how it works. My guess is that because you know Six and you've met him, you remember that

he’s the topic of what I was trying to tell you. But usually, if someone gets curious about the guy and the incident and asks someone about it, the question will simply vanish from their minds. Either that or they lose interest in Six entirely.”

“Wh-Whoa... Hold on a second,” I uttered.

Ern didn’t seem particularly confident, and I guessed this was because she wasn’t entirely sure of her own hypothesis. I got the gist of it, but it was still so ludicrous that I couldn’t completely comprehend it. I mean, I knew that Six was in the possession of extraordinary powers, and that as a mage he was nothing if not mysterious, but this secret that Ern spoke about was like nothing out of the sword and sorcery I knew.

“So basically... Ah, I think I’ve got it,” I said. “You mean to say I can’t probe into his very existence.”

“Right. The people I know who know this secret have no intention of telling anybody else about it. Why would they? They know that the moment they do the fact will be forgotten.”

“But isn’t that the weirdest thing ever?”

“It’s undeniably odd. He’s just so creepy.”

The secret could be written down, but once read the words were forgotten. Ern told me that the quickest way to get a hold of the secret was to ask Six directly.

“As long as you don’t get on his nerves, he’ll happily tell you,” she said.

“I don’t even know what magic *is* anymore,” I said.

“Ordinarily, it’s exactly what you think it is,” said Ern.

In other words, what we talked about at school.

“You mean like fire and ice from wands, making objects appear, and that kind of thing?” I asked.

“Exactly. Put a broken vase on a magical seal, speak the right words, and the vase is mended. Though you’ll need some clay and water to go with it,” said Ern with a chuckle.

I hadn’t heard that before. I guess the vase won’t just repair itself.

Ern told me she had to return to her research and got to her feet. But as we were parting, she said she had a present for me.

"I'm going to send you something great," she declared. "Get excited! You won't believe it when you see it!"

And let it be known that the girl did wear quite the mischievous grin. I asked where she lived, and she told me she was staying at the institute's dorm and didn't leave the district often. I also found out that Ern's parents ran a delicatessen in the commercial district, and I made up my mind to visit them soon. They'd been so good to me.

"And by the way, about your current research..." I started.

"Oh! Would you look at the time!" remarked Ern. "I'll have more gifts next time we meet!"

"There she goes..." I muttered.

And far too fast for me to catch her if I tried.

"That friend of yours, she's changed," said Achim as we were leaving. "When I last saw her in Falkrum, she was just an ordinary girl, albeit one with a little extra pluck. But she's every bit the distinguished mage now."

"Yes, well, it's been quite the journey."

"That's the capital. You can't be a kid forever. Oh, by the way, did you know they call her a prodigy around here?"

"You really are quite adept when it comes to intel, aren't you?" I remarked. "Prodigy, huh? Well, I shouldn't be surprised; she's been amazing ever since we first studied together."

Talking to Ern had taught me something important. Though the two of us were both adults in younger bodies, both of us still had room to grow. Which isn't to say that I was hopeless in my previous life, or that I hated who I once was. But even then, I sometimes thought of the people who had influenced my life, like the margrave, who had been both kind and wise. I thought of how they had changed me, and how I had come to inherit what they had left me. What they had entrusted to me. It helped make the future feel brighter, and in that I found some joy.

I'm so glad I got to see her and talk with her.

In truth, I had a certain inferiority complex with regards to my rebirth. It was a trifling thing, really, born of the fact I'd never be a prodigy the way Ern was. When I saw her, I felt just a tiny sliver—

just the tiniest smidgen! For the slightest instant!—of envy. Sometimes I was saddened by the fact that I myself wasn't blessed with some fantastic ability, but I was proud of the fact that I occupied a space the two of us could share; I could talk to Ern about all sorts and understand her.

"Would you stop grinning like that? It's creeping me out," said Achim.

"Oh, but I was just thinking about how glad I am for who I have around me; Conrad's people, and Arno, and you too, Achim."

"If it's a treat you're after, just know I'm a bit short on cash, okay?"

"I would never. No walking and chomping on snacks for this young lady."

The outfit that Marie had chosen for me was—perhaps intentionally, as a kind of rude poke—a bit on the tight side compared to my usual garb. It was my intent to make walking a habit that might see me slim down some. Perhaps it was the water, but imperial cuisine was utterly delightful, and I couldn't help fearing for my future waist.

"On the topic of food, I wonder what we should do about a cook...?" I mused.

"Yes, given that we're still having our food delivered from local restaurants at present. And what about a driver? You don't want to hire too much help, do you?"

"Well, it's not like we really have the space for a carriage anyway, and acquiring a location will only be a pain. I'm thinking that, at least for the time being, we simply hire transportation as it becomes necessary. Hansom cabs are quite common around these parts and easy to get a hold of."

As far as the allocation of duties went, Whateley handled all clerical matters, Ben saw to the garden and odd jobs, and Hil, Humphrey, and Geoff were on protection and any heavy lifting. Rosanne and Louisa were on household chores but also served as Whateley's errand runners; getting them to cook would simply be giving them more than they could handle. After all, they also looked after Chelsea when Geoff was out.

The aides who had come with us to the imperial capital resided on the second floor of our abode (which was where Achim and those from the Kirsten family were also staying) but were planning to move to new homes in the following days. Those with families were also on the hunt for homes of their own, with Conrad supporting them all financially.

I've mentioned this before, I know, but you can see how much money we were spending, given all the people we'd come with. The days had been busy and hectic, and all I really wanted to do was just curl up in bed and stay there. That said, the size of our home meant that we could only really hire two people at most.

With that in mind, I was thinking it would be nice to have a cook and someone to help keep my life in order. Someone knowledgeable, who might also teach me etiquette and such, just as Mrs. Henrik had. Whateley had told me that Wendel and Emil could do with a tutor, but even if they weren't living on the premises, we still had to find someone suitable.

"I've heard that there's a place in the commercial district that acts like an employment agency. Do you mind if we head there?" I asked.

"Your wish is my command, my lady."

"You know, it's fine every once in a while to mention places you'd like to visit, Achim."

"Then at least take my arm, would you? Helps to soothe my lonely heart."

"Very well, here you go."

With Arno now so far away, it was only Achim with whom I could be at ease in this way. His presence really was a balm. In that sense, I felt fortunate for the bonds that had continued through my time in the Conrad family. I had met so many people now, and I'd formed relationships the likes of which I never could have imagined before being reborn.

"There's much left to do," I declared. "And I'm going to have to give it my best to keep up with Ern!"

14: The Old Former Diplomat

I was all set to spend the rest of the day relaxing at home, but fate had other plans for me, and things were about to get far rowdier. It started with a strange carriage parked in front of our home. I walked inside, curious as to whether we had visitors, and was summarily met by a sight that was entirely out of the ordinary.

"It's been decades since we last met, and this is how you treat me?!"

"Oh, shut it, you worthless imbecile! Leave this place at once!"

Some man I'd never seen before was in the midst of a heated argument with Whateley. A vein pulsed at Whateley's forehead, his face twisted into a most uncharacteristic rage. Emil was keeping an eye on things from afar, but I'd walked straight into it through the front door. I couldn't have hidden even if I'd wanted to.

Whateley responded with flustered shock the moment his eyes met my own.

"Oh, dear!" he cried. "Is it that time already?!"

The man with Whateley spun at the steward's words. He was an older gentleman whose shoulder-length hair was neatly tied behind his head. He offered me a graceful smile as he took my hand.

"If I'm not mistaken, you must be Lady Karen of the Conrad family, yes?" he said. "It is an honor to meet you."

"Oh, uh, yes, that's right," I stammered.

"Lady Karen! You mustn't speak with him!" cried Whateley.

The elderly gentleman paid no heed to Whateley's ire.

"Remarkable," he said, chuckling. "Let us ignore that outburst just now. I apologize for the sudden visit. My name is Claude. Claude Badinter. I'm little more than a private investigator, but Whateley is an old acquaintance of mine, and you might once have even called us best friends."

"'Once'?" I asked. "As in, no longer?"

"Oh, heaven forbid! We're as close now as we ever were!"

I'd never met this Badinter fellow before, of that I was certain, but I *had* seen his name somewhere. I rifled through my memories for it while Whateley pulled Claude and me apart.

"You good-for-nothing fool! And here I was thinking that perhaps you'd grown a touch more respectable... Just *try* meddling with my family! I won't stand for it!"

You could hear the emotion dripping from Whateley's every word. He and Claude really *were* acquainted, then. Whateley's reaction was the hint I needed, and my vague memories grew suddenly clearer...

Ah, the letter. The diplomat who helped end the war between Falkrum and the empire.

"You're Claude, the former diplomat, aren't you?" I said.

"Lady Karen!" said Whateley.

The poor steward was at his wit's end.

And...was it just my imagination, or did I see a glimmer in Claude's eye?

"Delightful! This will all go much quicker seeing as you know who I am. It's been decades since I was a diplomat. Ancient history, really. You must be rather knowledgeable to have remembered events from so very long ago."

And you must have been quite the man-about-town.

Claude pulled my fingers forward slightly, feigned planting a kiss on them, then stepped back with a gracious smile. He looked a touch older than Whateley, and one look at his outfit showed he was nothing if not a fashionable old man. He wore a shiny black suit, the vest of which was embroidered with gold thread. His scarf and suit pocket handkerchief, too, were decorated with the same thread. To complete the look, his belt and the handle of his cane were crafted with gold. Perhaps most shocking was that for as gaudy as it was, Claude wore the look well.

Deep lines were carved into Claude's face, in which one could see the vestiges of the dashing, handsome man he once was. He wore cologne, but not so much as to be unpleasant. He behaved in a manner that showed he was well accustomed to female company, and his voice had a most pleasant ring to it. He was an older man,

yes, but one different to the likes of the margrave and Whateley.

"Mr. Badinter," I said, "I must ask—just what business brings you to our home today?"

"No business to speak of, my lady. I merely wished to make your acquaintance."

I should also mention that Claude was of a cheerful and bright disposition. Case in point: It wasn't too often you met an old man who could get away with winking at you.

"I had planned to visit when things settled," he continued, "but I happened to be passing by and just couldn't brush away the memory of an old friend. Why, I just *had* to see how he was doing."

"I see. But your reunion happened to be a rather loud one..."

"All a misunderstanding, nothing more. A miscommunication leading to a most tragic misunderstanding, yes. That said, I must admit that it left everyone in the house rather shocked, and for that I offer my humble apologies."

"Oh, please, there's no need to bow so deeply."

"Lady Karen, you mustn't place your trust in one so...senile like this man," warned Whateley.

"*Senile?* I'll have you know, I happen to exist on the young side of that spectrum."

"Oh, shut it, old man."

"Would you *look* at yourself? That's white hair growing from your head. Or perhaps you haven't noticed it with your eyesight fading in your twilight years?"

Whateley was flustered and panicked, a far cry from the ease with which Claude held himself. I worried that the blood vessel bulging from Whateley's head might pop, and I thought to step in. Before I could, however, Claude backed down.

"In any case, I only wished to introduce myself and make your acquaintance," he said. "And to pass you this to commemorate the occasion."

He gave me a slip of paper, which I knew at a glance was a business card. It had his name and address written on it. It looked as though he resided in the common residential district.

But I didn't think business cards were in use at all in this world...

"Investigator for the...Badinter Detective Agency?"

"From looking for people to looking for pets, I do it all if my client so desires. A bit on the pricier side, I must admit, but I'm nothing if not conscientious about my work. And yes, the office location is perhaps a little more lively than places the nobility usually visit, but...it also makes it easier for a wider variety of clientele to visit for a consultation."

"Claude, don't tell me you're up to your old tricks..." muttered Whateley.

"Oh please, don't make it sound so shady. Many of the capital's influential make use of my services, and I often take work not unlike what I handled as a diplomat. It's respectable work, I guarantee it."

So he's not only introducing himself but also giving me something of a sales pitch. Quite the aggressive approach...

"I'd be happy to speak more about it should another opportunity present itself. All secrets are safe with me, so feel free to send word should you ever need to discuss something."

Claude flashed me an easy smile and left, though not before bumping into Wendel, who had just arrived home.

"I'm back," Wendel announced, looking rather confused. "I just met an old man out there who stopped to introduce himself. Who was that?"

"Nobody to concern yourself with," replied Whateley. "You're much better off steering clear of his type..."

Emil looked about to burst with questions, but he couldn't find a way to enter the conversation with Whateley showering apologies on me.

"I am so very sorry. I really *did* think he'd mended his ways, which is why I let him inside..."

"I don't mind," I said. "He seems like quite the character. In any case, I'm starving. I daresay our meals are about to arrive. Let's all have a chat while we eat, and that means you too, Whateley."

"Oh, but what about serving it all...?" he started.

"You always say that kind of thing and act all reserved. Eating out is one thing, but in this house what's the harm in enjoying our meals as a family?"

“Be that as it may, the only person who can brew a good pot of tea in this same house is me.”

“We’ll take turns brewing the tea from now on. It’ll be a good chance for Emil to learn how to do it.”

“What?! Me?!” protested Emil.

“Wendel and I both learned how to do it. It’s easy once you get the hang of things,” I shot back.

Emil wasn’t sold on my reasoning, but the way I saw it, every young man from a good family should at least know how to brew a pot of tea. In his case, however, I also wanted to add cooking and cleaning to the list.

“You don’t mind if Whateley joins us, do you, Wendel?”

“If the family lord’s order isn’t enough,” replied the boy, “I’ll gladly issue one as the heir apparent.”

Nobody else opposed the proposal. Whateley had always kept a slight distance when it came to this sort of thing, but I knew he wouldn’t mind. After all, he’d called us his family earlier.

Naturally, the conversation topic of choice was Claude and his agency. It seemed obvious he was a private detective, though it was not a profession I had ever seen in Falkrum. As it turned out, that was because such a profession didn’t really exist there. According to Achim, while tipsters and information brokers were common, he’d never known anyone that specialized in investigation.

According to Whateley, Claude had arrived to say hello, then invited himself inside. Talk had turned to the past, at which point Whateley admitted with some embarrassment that he’d flown into a rage. He was not one to let his emotions get the better of him, though between you and me, seeing him look so sheepish was the cutest thing. Wendel wanted to know more about what had caused Whateley’s kettle to boil over, but the steward refused.

“We can handle cleaning up the kitchenware and cutlery,” I said to Whateley, “so I want you to take things easy for the rest of the day.”

“Oh, come on...” muttered Emil. “You’re going to make me do the dishes too?”

“Emil...” I uttered, taking a stern tone.

"Okay, I'm sorry. I'll do things the Conrad way, fine."

"I'll make up some herbal tea for you once we're done," said Wendel. "Make sure to drink it before you go to sleep."

"Understood," replied Whateley. "Thank you all so much for your kindness."

I was being stubborn on the point, but Wendel likely felt the same as I, which was why he took the opportunity to move in and help care for our steward. The truth of the matter was that I worried Whateley was working too hard. He was the oldest of all of us, and I did not want him to push himself too much. Work would come to a screeching halt without him, and so when it was time for rest, that was exactly what I wanted him to do.

"But why do I have to learn to brew tea...?" muttered Emil.

"Oh, come now," I said. "It'll go a long way to helping you win over ladies in the future."

And that was it for dinner. As for Claude's business card, I decided to keep a hold of it—you never knew when a private detective might come in handy, after all.

In any case, we couldn't let Whateley do everything. That meant I'd have to get my act together and be of some help. That was what I told myself, though I knew all too well that my own personal pledges so often amounted to very little. That said, while I was working on a number of tasks—necessary documents to allow us residence, paperwork for the aides who were moving out, etcetera—I came down with a fever. It came on slowly, but by the second day of it I was awfully run-down. This left me bedridden and muttering complaints from under the covers of my bed.

"Why am *I* the only one who comes down with fevers?" I groaned. "Why am *I* so prone to them?"

"It's just who you are," replied Emil. "You've never had much in the way of a strong constitution."

"You're so lucky. You and Arno both..."

Emil prepared me some warm water with practiced ease. He'd become quite good at the nursing thing and was stopping by my room periodically to check up on me.

He's just entering the springtime of his youth, and he's such a

sweet little thing, my brother.

"Dad and the others warned me about this," Emil said.

"Warned you about what?"

"About the fact that you come down with fevers. They told me to watch out, and Gerda even insisted I take some things to help should you come down with one."

There's nothing like family.

By the third day, I'd settled into a light fever and was told to remain quietly in bed and to rest. Everybody was out aside from myself, Louisa, Geoff, and Chelsea, so naturally Louisa was rather hesitant when she came to inform me that a guest had arrived.

"A lady by the name of Elena Kokoska is here. I told her that you're unwell, but she won't go home. She says she won't take long."

"Elena? That's fine," I replied. "My fever is far more manageable now. Let her in while I get changed."

"But Whateley and Wendel have been very strict about ensuring you don't push yourself. I hope you don't mind me asking, but is Miss Kokoska a friend of yours?"

"Hm? Oh, yes, something like that."

"In which case perhaps you might have her return in a few days' time? You may be feeling better, but you *do* still have a fever."

"Oh, but that would be so rude of me..."

"Be that as it may, getting changed will likely only exhaust you," said Louisa. "Whateley was insistent, so you must understand that I can't let you push yourself."

Louisa was a servant, yes, but she also doubled as one of Whateley's personal assistants. As such, she refused to budge. And to think she was usually so generous. She put a hand to my forehead to double-check my condition.

"You see?" she said, looking rather troubled.

Admittedly, I do feel rather lethargic still, and getting dressed seems like such a bother.

"In which case, can you see Elena to my room? That is, if she doesn't mind."

"Oh, but..."

"Tell her that I've got a fever still. I doubt she's going to make my condition worse. But if she knows I have a fever she'll keep things short, I'm sure of it."

"Understood. But if you start feeling any worse you wrap things up immediately, okay?"

"Okay. And thank you. Before you bring Elena here, tell Geoff to take Chelsea to her room, please."

To Louisa, it would have sounded like I wanted to ensure Chelsea wasn't disturbed by anybody she wasn't already comfortable with. In reality, I wanted to make sure that neither of the two met with anybody they shouldn't. Not that I could easily and quickly explain that to Louisa.

I put a stole on, and a few moments later there came a knock at the door. Elena was so meek and pale she looked like she might collapse at any moment. She had a package with her that stood easily as tall as she did: a rectangular wooden box.

"It's been so long, Elena," I said. "I apologize for the state I'm in."

It was her day off, apparently, and the first time I had ever seen her in a skirt, though with her loosely tied hair flowing freely, she really was stunning. It made the box she held all the more conspicuous, in fact. In response to my greeting, Elena took a timid step forward, looking on the verge of tears.

"Oh Karen, I'm so sorry," she said. "Really, I am. I know you're under the weather and I should just come back, but if I didn't get this to you today it would be quite some time before I'd have another opportunity."

"The fever is mostly gone now," I said. "And I'm not doing anything to exacerbate it, so please, don't worry."

"I'm so sorry! Really, I am!"

"Please, you needn't shed any tears over it..."

I had not imagined that our first meeting after some time would be one of tears and their accompanying sniffly noses. Apparently she'd only just returned to the capital yesterday after having been at a distant port district elsewhere. She was given one day off, after which she would be off again on horseback. She told me it was another long stint, and she looked rather tired of it all.

"One of my superiors reminded me that I hadn't even told you about my grandparents living next door, and I knew I should do something about it but I just couldn't get away from work..."

"Don't let it bother you. I was glad to discover that our next-door neighbors are people we can trust. And I must thank you too; I never imagined you'd prepare for us such a wonderful new home."

"Oh, it was nothing. I merely remembered that the house next door to them was empty. I'd much prefer a trusted acquaintance move in than some weirdo."

She went on to explain that both our house and the one next door had been vacant for quite some time. Someone had moved into our current home a while ago but had moved out again rather quickly.

"I thought I would drop in and see you, or at least pay a visit to my grandparents if you weren't in. But then Ern asked me to bring this along if I was going to your place..."

"The box, you mean?"

"Yes. She said it was important to hurry before you got glass lamps installed. She really gave me a kick up the backside about it. Even when I told her it wasn't nice to go using people to run her own errands, all she said was that she didn't want to see them stolen. Can you believe that girl, using me as her errand runner like that?"

I wondered why she'd singled Elena out? All the same, the way Elena spoke of it made the contents of the box sound rather important. Upon removing the box's cover, we found some five or six lamps, snugly secured. They were a little smaller than your ordinary lamp.

"You mentioned glass lamps," I said. "Did you mean the type you put on the walls?"

"Yes, perhaps you've seen them in the upper-class district? They turn on all by themselves when night falls."

Ah! The lamp posts I saw when we first arrived in the imperial capital!

I'd wondered how exactly the lamp posts were lit, but now I knew that they lit up automatically. The imperial house of magic had

developed the technology, and it belonged to the empire.

"And you're telling me these are for our house?" I asked.

"Indeed they are. They were meant for the imperial palace, but all the excess were placed in storage. We received word to move them."

"So I'm looking at luxury items on the level of the imperial palace?"

"All the paperwork is done, so there's nothing to worry about. This is a housewarming present from Ern. Didn't she tell you she was going to send you something?"

"Now that you mention it, yes, she did. But we couldn't possibly accept these, Elena. They're meant for the palace, after all. Surely we can't even be *allowed* to accept such gifts..."

"Like I said, the paperwork is all done, and these are all excess. But I guess that's not quite selling my point, is it? Ern said she has rights to them as the inventor, and her higher-ups have already bought some of the leftovers themselves, so she's entirely free to use them as she likes. It's very much like friends splitting leftover candy between themselves."

Wait, what?

"Inventor's rights...? You mean Ern *invented* these?"

"Yes, exactly. You didn't know?" replied Elena, her head tilting inquisitively.

I didn't. How could I have known?

"I don't know the details," said Elena, "but Ern's accomplished all sorts of things. She gets into lots of arguments too, but she's achieved her current rank in return for agreeing to teach the houses of magic her production methods."

She was a person of some renown now. A young rising star. She was famous!

Although that doesn't quite sound right. I feel something different, like...

I didn't get a chance to finish my thought. I didn't want to just ignore Elena while she was speaking.

"These lamps here are improved versions," she went on excitedly. "They turn on whenever somebody walks by and extinguish when

they're gone. If you run into any problems, you need only contact the house of magic, who will send someone to fix them immediately."

So basically, they're like sensor lights...

"If my hunch is correct, these are quite pricey, aren't they?" I said.

"Let's just say that when someone offers you them, you should take them. I mean, think of how much you'll save in oil."

"Yes, it's just...these are far too expensive for a housewarming gift."

"Ern was delighted to have someone she could finally give them to. She wouldn't have had me bring them otherwise. And if you don't accept them, then I have to take them all the way back. So please accept them, for me."

"Oh, okay."

"Thanks. Wouldn't want to go tripping over your own feet in the middle of the night. It's better to have them."

She looked very serious about that last part. Elena stood to leave, but I stopped her.

"Um, Elena," I started. "I don't suppose you know a Bertrando Lorenzi, do you?"

"Lorenzi, you say...?" asked Elena, her features growing suddenly stern. "It's not a surname you hear often here. Yes, I know him. He was a former corps leader, and the adopted son of a very well-known and distinguished family. Also the captain of the famous tenth regiment, and known as 'Hundred Slain.' But I've heard little word of him recently. Did something happen?"

"I was just curious."

"Really...?"

"What else could it be...?"

Elena's probing gaze was a fierce one, let it be known. I'd asked as casually as I could just for the sake of some light intel gathering, but I felt very much like perhaps I'd bitten off more than I could chew without realizing.

And "Hundred Slain"? Talk about terrifying.

Later, I would look back on this moment and realize I'd been

most careless. Blame it on the fever.

"He's infamous for his womanizing," said Elena. "You're not mixed up with him, are you?"

"N-No! It's nothing like that! I was just curious, I swear!"

Elena's eyes continued to search me, but she let up quickly. Reluctantly, but quickly, which came as a relief.

"Okay. He's famous for his escapades," said Elena, "but I've never heard of him getting mixed up with young maidens."

There were still questions hovering in her eyes, so I quickly searched my memories of recent events in an attempt to change the topic of conversation. I felt it imperative that Elena forget the topic of my (potential) real father.

Something recent, something worth talking about... Ah, there it is.

"There's one other thing I wanted to ask you," I said. "The vacant house next door. Is it *really* vacant?"

"Yes. It's been that way since I was little."

I asked in utter seriousness. I'd been in the midst of my fever the previous day, but even then, I'd woken to that same cacophony in the middle of the night. It was still just Wendel and I who were bothered by it, but who wanted to deal with such a thing? I *had* considered peeking out the window, but I was terrified that I might get spotted, a prospect that was all the more scary if those arguing were shady oddballs. I relayed all of this to Elena.

"I know I shouldn't have, but I had some of our people keep an eye on the vacant house's garden. And yet, it still seems like there's nobody there..."

"And only you and Wendel can hear it? The two of you, on the third floor?"

"I don't think we're just hearing things, if that's what you mean. And if they're really arguing, then it's hard to believe that it might be thieves or people attempting some kind of break-in. It's just that the voices keep getting louder, and it's really getting to be a bother. I've begun wondering if it's something known in the area, and I thought to ask your grandparents about it."

If things kept up, I'd have to resort to waking Achim and Geoff in

the middle of the night. I hoped that maybe Elena might have some idea of what was going on, and sure enough her eyes went wide as she remembered something.

"Do you have an idea of what it might be?" I asked.

"Er, well...um..." Elena murmured.

She'd gone pale again. She was suddenly flustered, too, which was rare for her. Something was bothering her, and gradually it manifested on her face in a puzzled expression.

"Karen," she said.

"Yes. What is it?"

"I am going to investigate this matter, but if you hear shouting next door tonight, you are *not* to go outside. And no opening *any* windows from the third floor."

"Huh? Oh, that sounds fine, but why..."

"And be sure to make all this clear with Wendel too. No matter how loud it gets, you aren't to leave the house. *At all*. Promise me!"

"Er, uh... Elena?"

She continued to hound me until I actually said "I promise" aloud.

"I'll see this handled in the next few days," Elena declared. "I will return soon, that I promise."

"But I'm sure you've got a busy schedule..." I started.

"I told you I'll see to it, and I don't break my word! I'd best hurry, so I'll take my leave. I know I barged in here, but you just make sure you take things easy for the rest of the day and get some sleep."

Her voice was so loud it was like she was possessed. She marched to the door, but before leaving she spun to me.

"And don't forget your promise!" she said, hammering her point home one last time.

True to her word, a few days later a number of high-ranking people descended on my humble abode. None more so than the first to arrive.

"I apologize for intruding in the middle of the day," said Reinald, "but I'd like to ask that you offer us some refuge until it's time."

Ordinarily, it would seem unthinkable to have the nation's own crown prince knock on your door and ask for such a thing.

"Oh, Sir Reinald," I uttered. "What are you doing here?"

The servants of the house stood dumbfounded, unable to fully comprehend the arrival of one so beautiful to our house. He wore a cloak with the hood covering his head, and his hair was tied back so as not to get in his way, but even then, his good looks were impossible to hide. Before I could invite him inside, the man behind Reinald pushed his way in through the door.

"Allow me to explain!"

It was Six, looking very bright and cheerful. Today he was dressed a little more simply, in more rugged clothing than usual.

"But before I do that I'd like to come inside," continued the mage. "We managed to slip away, but it'll take a little time for the others to get here. The carriage would only stand out if we were to just wait there, and hiding it with magic would be a real pain. We've matters to discuss with you anyway, so a little hospitality, please."

"I've no reason to turn you away," I said, "but this is so very sudden. Would you kindly wait there for a moment?"

"We can have our discussion right here if you're happy to bring some chairs," replied Six.

"You really think I'd do that? Rosanne, please ask the staff in the garden to return to their rooms. We don't want their noise disturbing our guests."

"Oh, certainly, my lady," came the prompt reply.

The house was rather empty on this particular day. Whateley and the boys had gone to visit their prospective school, Ben was out shopping, and the Conrad aides were either in the commercial district or otherwise at the port. I hated to leave the crown prince waiting, but I couldn't have him potentially run into Chelsea. Thankfully, we had a small reception room located directly next to the front doors, and so I thought that the best place to avoid the worst from occurring.

"Ah! While we're here let's take a look at the place next door," announced Six. "Right this way, Reinald. Over here!"

Wait!

Six was pulling Reinald's clothing and leading him out into the garden...right when I'd sent Rosanne out there to tell Geoff and

Chelsea to hide.

First-time guests aren't just supposed to make themselves right at home anyway!

Without thinking, I clutched both Reinald's and Six's sleeves and pulled them back. I could tell that Reinald was shocked, but I didn't have time to apologize immediately.

"D-Don't go out there!" I cried. "Please! A little patience, I beg of you! It's a complete mess out there, and it's in no state for guests to see!"

"I'm sure it's far better than the downtown inns," said Six. "I really don't care."

"But *I* do! I won't have our guests bearing witness to such a sorry garden. Please!"

All the while, however, Six was still trying to pull Reinald toward the garden.

Why you little...

"Six," said Reinald. "Do not forget that we essentially forced our way in. And I would like the two of you to stop pulling at my clothing. It'll only get wrinkled."

"Oh! I'm sorry," I said.

"Ugh, what's a few wrinkles?" said Six. "Just get changed later."

For all his complaints, Six did as he was told. I couldn't have been more grateful.

"Would it be okay for us to wait in this room here, Karen?" asked Reinald.

"Yes, the reception room is totally fine! That's *exactly* where I'd like you to wait!"

Reinald took Six by the collar and dragged the mage—still muttering complaints—into the reception room.

Reinald, my savior! Not that I've forgiven you for turning up without even so much as a single word!

I prepared tea and brought it to the reception room, but by that time Six practically owned the place, judging by the way he lounged on the sofa. Reinald was careful to mind his manners. One who didn't know the two men would probably have trouble working out which of them was of higher rank. Six chuckled as he sipped at his

cup of tea.

"Not bad," he murmured, offering a too-honest and unasked-for appraisal.

Nobody else here makes tea as good as Whateley, and while I know that all too well, I don't need somebody telling me!

"I heard from Elena that you had come down with a fever," said Reinald. "I'm glad to see you looking well. Are you fully recovered?"

"Yes, mostly," I replied. "But just to be on the safe side I've opted to stay home and rest today. Oh, and by the way, I must thank you for the recommendation you gave the school on our behalf, Sir Reinald."

"I did very little, honestly. Your son and younger brother will have no trouble enrolling, I assume?"

"Both will soon be attending their scheduled school thanks to you. In fact, they're out today visiting that school to have a look around. I intend to have my younger brother thank you himself in future. His enrollment proved a touch more challenging than Wendel's, but it was approved so quickly it left us all shocked."

"Transfers for new residents can take time, yes. I'm glad I could be of help."

"My dearest lady Karen," said Six. "I can't help but notice that you won't even look in my direction. I don't suppose you detest me, do you?"

Oh, how wonderful it would be to answer, "I merely feel you are the sort of person best avoided in every possible way."

I shrugged the mage's comment off with a friendly smile but was very aware that I couldn't just keep talking about everyday life with the crown prince. I had to know what he was doing here and why they needed to wait.

So naturally, I asked. The answer I got was most surprising: they were here to investigate the vacant house next door. Even Nika, Elena, and some others were scheduled to come. It was quite the gathering.

"Does this have to do with all the noise I told Elena about when she last visited?" I asked.

"In a manner of speaking, yes," replied Six. "Though the reason

we've arranged such a large group is because of what we heard from her. Put simply, we're concerned with what it *might* be. Hopefully nothing dire. We only have an inkling of things, really."

"What it *might* be?"

"Yes, might. As in potentially. A troublesome thing, if memory serves. A real shit, if we're being blunt. Case in point, a most irritating hunch!"

Six's replies made absolutely no sense to me. None. He was not about to say anything more, however, and he even made it obvious he was keeping things extremely vague. In an odd turn of events, it was Reinald who played the role of mediator.

"If you're not going to tell her, then don't make things more confusing," he said. "Karen, given that Six has no intention of answering your questions honestly, don't think too deeply on what he says. That said, his words do have meaning for us, and that is why we have come."

"They have such meaning that you saw fit to come personally?" I asked.

"I... Well, let us say that I am intrigued by it."

Six laughed.

"I kidnapped him, you could say."

Reinald's silence was telling.

Is Six telling the truth, then?

"I was of the understanding that you have a terribly busy schedule, Sir Reinald," I said. "Was I mistaken?"

"When I heard that you were unwell, I thought I might come to check up on you."

"Oh, why thank you. As you can see, I'm in relatively fine health. If you'd have sent word that you were coming, I could have dressed more appropriately for the occasion."

"I didn't want you to go to any extra trouble. You are adorable as you are."

His sucker punch caught me completely off guard, and I had to hide my embarrassment behind a few coughs. I could not work out whether he was being honest or just using the compliment as misdirection. This bothered me.

Six was careful with his choice of words because of what he did not want me to hear, but he seemed happy enough to simply sip at his cup of tea. Despite his appearance, there was something of a childish innocence to him which struck me as odd.

Still, they're here to investigate the house next door. If they've actually chosen to take action, is it possible that this has something to do with the tasks that Reinald has been burdened with as the crown prince?

That can't be right, can it...?

"Let's get down to things, Lady Karen," said Six. "I'd like you to tell me, if you would, what you've been hearing from the vacant house."

"The shouting, you mean? Well, it's a man and a woman... Yes, it's a heated argument between a man and a young woman."

They were *always* bickering. It was just deafening. Why was he so curious about it?

"Hmm. While I'm not too concerned with exactly what they're arguing about...can you give me any firm details as to the subject of their arguments? Has anything jumped out at you?"

"Details...? Well, erm..."

I thought back. It was the middle of the night, and there was a high-pitched woman's voice followed by a man shouting her down. But I couldn't seem to remember *what* exactly they were arguing about.

"Oh, uh..." I murmured.

"Is something wrong?"

"I apologize, but I can't seem to remember," I said. "It's so strange. It happens almost every night, and it's always so loud, and yet..."

It really *was* odd. Wendel and I had talked about the shouting match with everyone, but we'd never gone into any detailed descriptions of it.

What were they shouting about?

"I...I'm sorry," I uttered. "I swear I'm telling you the truth. I've been woken up by it many times now. I'm certain it's real. I just... I can't remember what they argue about."

"I see. In which case, don't worry about it."

"Six," said Reinald.

"It's fine. I don't suspect her of anything."

Six then decided to lay down. He announced that he was taking a nap, and of all the things he could have possibly done next, he chose to use Reinald's lap as a pillow.

"Wake me when the others get here," he said.

It was not long before his breath fell into the rhythm of slumber.

"He's...really asleep," I uttered. "Shall I have a pillow brought in?"

"It's fine. I'm used to this now."

"You're used to him...using your lap as a pillow?"

"He is not unlike an animal. Like a cat or a dog, he doesn't listen no matter what anybody says. And when we consider him like a pet, what harm is there in lending him a knee?"

"He's an imperial mage, isn't he? I had expected him to have more in the way of decorum at the palace, but is he usually like this?"

"Yes. But he is obedient. You could say he has to be, though he treats life with care, at least insofar as I have seen. You do not have to be so on guard, Karen."

"Oh? I-I'm not on guard. I just feel as though he's different around you."

The comment was, in its own way, misleading. Reinald, too, was somewhat more relaxed in Six's presence. Back in Conrad, Six had called Reinald his friend, and I got the sense now that he had meant it when he said it. There was yet more to the mage than I knew.

Reinald and I spoke of nothing in particular while Six slept, but nobody returned home as we sipped our cups of tea and, in fact, it was our next guests who arrived first. Elena walked in just as Six woke.

"I want to see the garden," he said with a yawn.

"I want to explain things to Karen," said Elena. "Will you give me a moment?"

"There's no need. Talk to her if it turns out we're right. We don't want to frighten the girl for kicks if we've no proof. More importantly, with all of you here we're going to stand out all the more."

What could he mean by "frighten"?

As curious as I was, Six was clearly the one in charge; Elena could do little more than apologize. Not that I was about to berate her for it. Six took me, and only me, out to the garden. Chelsea was long gone by that point, which left only the light of the sun warming the pleasant space. A path ran the length of the garden, with empty patches here and there where old Ben intended to add color.

Six moved to a spot where we could see the second and third floor of the vacant house. He stroked his chin as he observed the windows and terrace. It just looked like walls to me, but perhaps Six saw something else. We stayed there for about a minute, after which Six hurried back inside.

"Something's hiding in there, I'm certain of it," he stated to Reinald and the others.

He spoke with such severity that for a moment I couldn't actually believe that the words came from Six himself. By now, around ten people had arrived, with Nika, Haring, and others hiding in the carriage sitting at the front of the house. Everybody was a person of high rank, and I recognized two of the guards from the palace.

"Your Highness, let's see to this before it gets out of hand."

I had expected to simply watch them go, but Six turned back to me as they were leaving.

"You too," he said.

He was insistent to the point of pulling me along by my arm. Reinald frowned, while Nika told him to watch his tongue. I resisted, but Six still wasn't having it.

"Six, she's a civilian," said Nika. "She's not to get involved in our investigation."

"I know that. I do. However, I sense we might be dealing with one who could make a slippery getaway. Consider the fact that it's here in the capital and I never even noticed it. I have a feeling it's best that she comes with us."

"I don't understand why I'm necessary..." I tried to say.

But by then the door to the house was unlocked and open before us. Like my home, this one had a few stairs leading up to the front door. Inside, the place was bereft of furniture, and the floors and

walls were worn and damaged in places. It had clearly been vacant for a long time.

Meanwhile, Six was still dragging me along with him.

"At least tell me why I'm supposed to be here," I said.

"Think of it like fishing," he said. "You understand fishing, yes? Throw a line and a hook out into open water and you won't catch anything. You need *bait*."

"That's about the most disquieting thing I've heard all day. I think I'd like to go home immediately."

"There's no need to worry. Just hold on tight..."

Haring was in the lead, followed by Reinald and the others. Then Six followed after them, and as I walked in with him, it happened. It was as if my vision warped before my eyes. All I heard was the mage pulling me along.

"Oh," he uttered, like a total idiot.

"Oh"? What do you mean, "Oh"?

A dizzy spell hit me and I fell to my knees, unable to sense where my legs were in space. I put a hand to my chest as it grew suddenly constricted, and I shut my eyes tight in a vain attempt to cope. Slowly my breathing calmed and I took a few moments to catch my breath.

"Huh...?"

It seemed it was my turn to sound like a total idiot.

Where am I?

I was alone, and no longer where I'd been a moment earlier. I should have stood at the entrance to the vacant house. The street should have been behind me. But as I looked around, I found myself in a rather small room.

"Er... Six? If this is a joke, I don't..."

But I did not go on. The words caught in my throat and the blood drained from my face. The room was dim, but a little light filtered in through the window, offering some visibility. The floor was covered in a fluffy carpet, upon which was an intricately carved desk and a four-poster bed complete with lace curtains. It seemed like quite a nice room, though the four-poster bed was completely out of place; it was far too big.

I gulped silently and stood to my feet. Without thinking I took a step back and met with the wall, but I didn't have the space of mind to think about it. The dusty air prickled at my nose, threatening a sneeze, but I squeezed it shut with such force it hurt.

What do I do? What am I supposed to do?

I couldn't tear my gaze away from one particular point in the room. It was at the desk. On it was a doll and a vase in which sat withered flowers. As to be expected, the desk came with a chair, and on that chair sat "it."

I couldn't see its face because it was hunched over, its head resting on the surface of the desk, and its hair hiding any expression it might be wearing. Given how hard it was to see in the room anyway, I wasn't going to be able to make *anything* out unless I got closer.

Ah. Its face is hidden. It can't see anything.

It also wasn't breathing. Hadn't I just learned recently what it meant when such a thing was so completely silent? When a body was so completely still?

So it's not scary. It can't be.

But I don't want to be here. I can feel the tears coming on.

I couldn't find my voice. I knew that I should look for help, but I felt trapped by the idea that if I made the tiniest peep, "it" would wake up.

What even is going on? I don't get this.

I stared at it. It hadn't moved at all since I'd first noticed it. Its pajamas were faded and old, and the neck and arms that poked from them were unnaturally thin, as if they were nothing more than skin on bone. The skin, too, was a near unbelievable shade of black, and as my eyes grew used to the darkness, I noticed black shapes covering the floor. I had even stepped on some. They were dead flies.

The meaning of it all began to coalesce in my mind.

Wait. Wait, wait, wait! Not yet! I'm not ready!

I put my hands to my mouth and fought to steady my breath. As I lowered my gaze, I saw a glimpse of white leg from its pajamas. It was just a trick of the eye, I told myself. It was a way to explain the

trembling and the goose bumps. The air felt cold, but a warm breeze brushed against the back of my hand. There had to be some mistake. I shut my eyes tight.

Ah, that's it. It's a mistake. I'll open my eyes and it'll all be gone.

I told myself not to think about it. Not to put the pieces together. I was starting to panic, and then I noticed the door. I reached for the doorknob with a hand so shaky I almost wanted to laugh at myself, and it let out the slightest click as I turned it. I couldn't explain the logic to it, but the sound made me flush with courage.

I did my best to keep my eyes from what lay at the desk, and I slipped out the door...

...only to find myself back in the same room.

To be continued.

Side Story: Where the Branches of Fate Intertwine

She had a secret she could share with no one.

It was something she could not share even with her adorable sister.

It was the moment her husband—in other words, the king—had confessed his love for her.

"My wife... Er, no, actually...in this case it would be a concubine, wouldn't it? I, er...you see, well..."

For the king of an entire nation, he seemed like nothing more than a charmless old man.

They had met at a lunch. Gerda was fortunate to have been allowed to attend one of the king's own luncheons. For Gerda—and for the relatives who had seen to her invitation—it was a chance to meet a prospective marriage partner. She was of age, after all, so perhaps such intent was only natural. An arranged marriage was an option that had always been on the table, but Gerda longed for a marriage that bloomed from romance, and perhaps she thought the seed of such a flower might be found at such an event. In any case, for this reason she was excited to potentially snag a nobleman of reasonable rank. She wanted a position of some authority with which she could set about restoring her younger sister's honor.

And then the king fell in love with her.

She didn't realize when they first met. She thought it odd when she was invited to another lunch. Upon the third meeting, however, it became clear that the king was interested in her.

In a word, Gerda found the very idea *repugnant*.

He was a man in his fifties. A girl of her age would only willingly choose such a man for political reasons. Under ordinary

circumstances, a girl would avoid such a man and have her parents deny his advances.

However, when Gerda saw her father's grim, pale expression, she knew such things were not an option.

"Well, I guess I'm screwed, then," she muttered to herself.

She was to become the king's young concubine, and she thus believed herself cursed. For a brief instant, she considered leaving home, but she understood better than anyone that she knew only the lifestyle of the nobility.

Gerda was hesitant, but she tried to soothe her battered spirit by telling herself that an older partner usually passed away rather soon, and that perhaps her child might grow up to be a person of some authority.

It was around this time that the king confessed his love. He told Gerda that he wanted her as his concubine. As a member of the middle-class nobility, Gerda was in no position to decline, and yet the king spoke as if he had no understanding of this. Rather, he practically begged the way one might to their first and only love.

"I would not be surprised if you thought this just the whim of an old man," he said, "and perhaps there is a more suitable hand for your own. But I need you."

Gerda smiled at the king, tormented though he was by the act of expressing his feelings.

"How could I possibly refuse such a request?" she said.

The joy in her voice was a lie, and in her heart Gerda wept. She did not want this, and she could not fathom why she had to endure it. And so she put space between herself and the king, insisting that it was only proper they live separately. She also made it clear to him that she expected her sister's honor to be restored.

Then there came the relationship with the first prince. For the most part, it was forced upon her. She did not like the man—that much was true—but it was also true to say that had she reached out for help in stopping it, she would have received it. That she didn't was something that caused her father great worry and grief.

"If the king was to learn of this..." he murmured. "Gerda, I *know* you are no idiot. You know as well as I do what would come next."

"Do I? I feel that a smile would be enough to see things through." she replied.

"In any case, it ends here. Be grateful to Arno and Karen. Even given your position, such behavior would not have gone unpunished. This rash conduct must stop."

"It wasn't rash."

"You must know how much it pains me that I could not deny the king's demands," said Gerda's father. "But be that as it may, I do not wish to see you walk a path of self-destruction."

"You've got it all wrong."

And so Gerda's tryst with the first prince came to an end. It was around this time that she received a letter from her mother. Gerda refused to lean on her mother for support, but this had not stopped the woman from trying to contact her daughter. From time to time, she sent Gerda letters, and while Gerda never replied to them, she at least did her mother the courtesy of reading what she had to say.

In this case, her mother saw through her. She knew that the reason Gerda kept out of national politics and largely refused the king's lavish gifts was because she wanted anything but to concern herself with the man. The people said that Gerda's adherence to a simple lifestyle even as a royal concubine showed her modesty; her mother, however, knew the truth.

The letter could be summarized as follows:

"I will not tell you how to feel, but I will offer a single warning in the hope that it will save you from breaking. Do not let your contempt guide you; take an honest look at your partner."

It felt like too little, too late, but Gerda nonetheless felt guilt for the trouble she'd caused to those around her and began to think of her circumstances differently. Perhaps it would also be true to say that Gerda accepted her mother's advice because she had tired of a life filled with so much change and tumult.

When Gerda did attempt inroads with her new husband, she found that while there was indeed a great difference of years between them, the king was not such a bad man. Theirs was a marriage that Gerda could not refuse, but the king was good to her. Perhaps there was a certain guilt to it; she was younger than him,

but he was obedient and submissive in her presence, and though her selfish requests sometimes troubled him, the king accepted it all with a gracious smile.

His was a smile that was always kind and often awkward, though she could not say she disliked it.

"Recently all I ever do is cause you trouble," she said to him one day. "Why do you never scold me for it?"

"For you to say as much means you are aware of it, then," he replied.

Gerda's cheeks flushed red. She had indeed interrupted him during his work, only to tell him to his face that she wasn't feeling well and asking him to leave. The king, however, thought her behavior all the more lovable.

"I suppose it is like this," he began, expanding on his reply. "You have given me that which I most wanted, and yet it feels as though I have so little to offer in return. Indulging your whims feels like the best that I can offer. That, and..."

"And?"

"Smile for me. Being run around by your selfish requests brings me great joy."

The king's own smile in that moment was like that of a boy in the presence of his first love. And for Gerda, it was perhaps the first day of their marriage on which she *truly* saw him as her husband. It was also the day on which the servants at Saburova manor felt that the couple had begun to get along. And for Gerda, it was the day on which the somehow always oppressive rooms of her manor finally felt more like a home.

"In which case, I have a request to ask of you," she said to the king.

"Anything," he replied.

"I have never been in love."

The king was taken aback by the sudden confession. He was on the verge of thinking that he had ripped the girl's future from her when she clarified her statement.

"So, Your Majesty...which is to say, my husband. Will you walk that path with me?"

Their relationship had proceeded as if in reverse order, but it was here that the two came together. In time, Gerda came to love the king, whose love for her only deepened. That Gerda became pregnant was just a natural part of the growth of their bonds. The king was even happier than she could have possibly expected, and it was all she could do to stop him from planning celebratory events across the entire nation.

"But this is your first child," he said, "and your father's first grandchild. What could be more worthy of celebration? We must do *something*."

"Celebrating among ourselves is one thing, but get too excited and the princes will lose face entirely!" countered Gerda.

The discussion of celebrations thus came to its natural conclusion. Later, Gerda would look back on this period of her life and think of it as the time in which she felt most fulfilled. She thought of this in the past tense because it was not long before her husband was gone, their happiness shattered.

The depression that draped itself over Gerda in the aftermath of this loss was crushing. She made it through on the thought of her future child and the support of those around her, but had she been without them she wouldn't have had the strength to even leave her room.

The loss bred in Gerda a hatred. A resentment toward her younger sister. Gerda had been nothing but worried sick about Karen when Conrad fell under attack. But when she learned that the girl had sided with Reinald, the murderer of her husband, something changed in her; she found herself thinking that none of this would have come to pass had her sister never returned.

Loathing filled Gerda's heart, and her sobbing racked her entire being.

Gerda's distress began to manifest physically, and she feared that it might even cause the loss of her yet unborn child. But even then, her sorrow refused to leave her. She became unstable, her hatred blending with guilt as she wondered if all of this was some kind of karmic punishment for her past infidelity.

She did not know how to rid herself of these horrid feelings, but

after days of crying into her pillow, a possible answer arrived suddenly.

"Revenge..."

Could she allow things to continue without taking vengeance? Reinald was beyond her reach, but that was not to say she couldn't yet find a closer target upon whom she could impress her emotions. Someone like her sister, who would never see such a thing coming. How simple it would be. Gerda took the nearby fruit-peeling knife in hand, but an instant later a moan escaped her lips. Tears fell from her face as she threw the knife away, unable to even look at it. She sobbed uncontrollably as she apologized to the life growing within her.

"I'm so sorry," she uttered. "Your mother is spineless, a coward. I'm so sorry..."

At the mere thought of killing another, she thought of her husband. She thought of the chill of his body during her last goodbye, and she pictured his past smiles vividly. She remembered words he had spoken to her.

"Oh, how I love your smile. That is all it takes to make me happy."

When Gerda had taken that knife with ill will in her heart, the very thought of harming her sister—of the girl's body turning as cold as a corpse—filled her with terror. She remembered Karen's innocence as a child, her fierce pouts when they argued, and the two of them snuggled in bed with the rest of their siblings.

Gerda's heart filled with memories and emotions, and in that moment she knew. To lay hands on her sister would be to never smile again, and to cease being the woman that the king had so adored. *This* was why she had thrown away the knife.

"I will no longer think of Karen," she said. "I will no longer think of the country of Falkrum. I will live only for my pledge."

Somewhere in her heart, she understood that Karen had her reasons for making the decision she had. All the same, it would take time for her to be able to look her sister in the eyes, and so the best she could do for now was live by the conclusion she'd come to until such a day arrived.

Gerda would live so as to greet her child upon the day they were born.

And yet, the day she and her family finally came to understand one another was the day upon which they parted.

Side Story: Of Baths and Etcetera

A few days had passed since our arrival in the imperial capital, our new home in a foreign land. A few days was not enough time to understand the entirely new nation of Arrendle—particularly for those who had never left Conrad—but even then, the conveniences of the location made themselves readily apparent. The females, in particular, were enamored by the availability of hot water. Louisa and Rosanne were, quite literally, jumping for joy.

"The cold weather is going to persist for a time, yes? Oh, how much simpler work is going to be when we don't have to light a fire for our hot water! And that's not all! Oh my gosh! The bath! Think of the bath!"

The two servants had originally been housewives, not manor servants. And while it was part of their official duties, it was nonetheless hard work heating water for the lord of the house and ensuring it was of the right temperature. In the short period during which they'd worked in Falkrum, the two servants had come to understand the pains that came with preparing the bath.

"In Falkrum it was so much work," I said. "You had to heat the water every time. Now we can bathe every day. What could make a girl happier?"

"You're going to take a bath every day?"

"Yes. It feels *so* wonderful to soak in a bath full of warm water."

Louisa tilted her head quizzically.

"Oh, that's what you mean," she remarked. "It's a bit of a foreign concept to us."

This was the difference between Conrad's ordinary populace and the nobility... Though actually, it would be more accurate to say it was the difference between the people of Falkrum and *me*, a young woman formerly of Japanese descent.

I'd talked with Elena about baths before and so I knew the

imperial capital was flush with an abundant water supply, but there simply wasn't a culture of bathing among Falkrum's common populace. Though the nobility were fussy about cleanliness, everybody else was content to wipe themselves down with water in a small tub, and they mostly avoided washing their hair every day. This was all the more prominent during the winter. When I'd been living in Conrad, people looked at me with raised eyebrows for washing my hair every evening and had even come to secretly call me a clean freak. Not that it was enough for me to give the habit up.

"Ah, yes," I said, thinking over Louisa's comment. "I have to talk to Whateley about that very thing."

I was the acting lord of the Conrad family, but even then, I never really forced anything on anybody. It wasn't my way. However, now that we'd arrived in the imperial capital, there was one rule I wanted everyone in the house to adhere to.

"You'd like everyone to take a bath once a day, or at least once every two days?" asked Whateley.

The steward had been busy when I'd called him, and reacted with some confusion to my most serious request.

"Yes," I replied. "I won't insist that everyone soak in the tub every day, but I'd like everyone to be conscientious about washing their hair and bodies and maintaining good hygiene habits."

"I know what you mean, but I fear it won't be so easy for those unaccustomed to such a routine."

"It won't take long for them to get used to it. The capital offers public baths, and everybody takes them like it's a matter of course. That, and from what I've heard, our people are worried about the difference in lifestyle habits between nations. We must endeavor to take good care of ourselves in this regard. We're new arrivals from a fallen nation, after all."

This was the long and the short of it. It was a conclusion I'd come to as a former Japanese person, and after having talked to Elena about how the imperials loved their baths. I'd been a little worried that convincing Whateley might be an ordeal, but it wasn't in the slightest.

"So in short, you'd like for people to acclimate to the imperial way of life, starting with the finer details?" asked Whateley.

"Y-Yes. Exactly that," I said, going along with the idea. "I'll ask the others to do some shopping for the necessities. And as for those working for us... I know that our guards wipe themselves down after they finish training, but I do admittedly think it would be best for them to take baths too."

"I see. Yes, our current home is not particularly spacious, and in the past we were able to split the place up more thoroughly."

As expected, Whateley could not outright say that the smell was an issue. And yes, I *did* feel a bit bad because I *knew* that our guards were doing their best so as to see us all protected!

In this way, the order was given that everyone was to bathe once a day. There was some confusion about it, admittedly, but everybody went along with it because it wasn't a big deal. Wendel, however, was clearly a bit bothered by my order.

"No, it's fine," he said when I asked him about it. "It's just, *that's* the first order you give as lord of the family when we arrive in the capital?"

"But it's so important!" I replied.

"Yeah, but...couldn't you have started with something along the lines of 'Let's all give this new life the best we've got,' or the like?"

"Oh, I suppose that *was* an option."

My order would have required quite the effort to see to fruition in Falkrum. What made it work here was that we didn't have to go the lengths of boiling water every single day. I was nothing but grateful to Moritz and Elena for giving us a fully furnished home.

Still, though much of the headache that came with bathing was gone, there were still areas of concern. Namely, shampoo and conditioner. The world I now existed in didn't have hair dryers, and that meant one had to be careful in their efforts to ensure their hair retained its sheen after washing. Scented hair soaps and oils were a good example of this. Fortunately, the imperial capital's economy was far and away better than Falkrum's, and so people were more interested in luxury goods, which in turn meant they were generally cheaper.

Everybody was going to be nice and clean, and I'd have the luxury of a bath every evening. Talk about lucky! Still, given that *I* was the one who instigated the new bathing rule, I was intent on making sure that everyone outside of myself enjoyed it. This of course meant buying a healthy variety of bath salts, soaps, and scented oils (which I paid for out of my own pocket!).

As for *when* exactly I did this shopping, I did it on the way home after buying sweets for the neighbors. Yes, it meant a lot of bags to bring home, but that aside it was fine! Everybody was doing their best to turn our new house into a home, and seeing the bathroom shelves jam-packed with soaps and whatnot brought me great joy. It brought Wendel, who was passing by, great shock, however.

"What's with that mountain?" he asked.

"It's soaps and bath salts."

"Yeah, but not *all* of it, right? I don't believe it."

I giggled.

"Well, you better," I said. "Isn't it just wonderful?"

Rosemary, rose, chamomile, lemon, mint; I'd picked up some of *everything*. I knew it was a bit of an impulse buy on my part, but you have to understand just how good it felt to go on a bit of a spending spree after the stresses of such a long journey.

"What's with that look?" I asked Wendel.

"You *clearly* went overboard. We can make soap ourselves if we have all the ingredients. You even learned how to do it yourself and then went completely wild making all sorts of weird combinations."

"I know full well the joys of making soap," I said, "but look at this! The wrapping and the containers for them! They're so pretty! Now we have the joy of *opening* them to look forward to as well!"

"I'm not saying they're not pretty..." grumbled Wendel.

"Don't we all just want to end the day feeling and smelling nice as we drift off to sleep? And besides, I don't think you're in any position to talk about spending too much. I heard all about your shopping spree and the sweets you bought."

"But I bought them for everybody to share."

"Rosanne told me you bought so much she can't even fit all of them on the shelves. Then there's the seeds and the books and the

clothes! You bought whatever caught your eye, it seems."

"Clothing is a consumable we need to replace, and seeds can be stored. The treats we'll all get through in no time. They're things we can all make use of."

"And that goes for all of this too," I countered.

Wendel was never much of an exorbitant spender at the best of times, and I had to think he felt the same stresses that I did. We'd been reserved on our journey here and our access to luxuries was limited.

"I must say, however, it's quite rare for you to purchase sweets," I remarked.

"They don't make them too sugary here, which makes them much easier to eat."

"Then just be careful not to overindulge. They mightn't use too much sugar, but I'd wager they use a good deal of butter all the same."

The vast majority of Falkrum's sweets were, to put it mildly, sugary heart attacks. You could squeeze one of their more popular cakes and watch as the syrup dripped out. It was enough to make your teeth rot on sight. It was quite common for people from Falkrum to feel that imperial sweets were lacking, but Wendel liked them just fine.

Still, "not too sugary" for Wendel was still too sugary for your everyday Japanese citizen. As far as I was concerned, imperial sweets were still sugary all the same. I also wished that someone would do something about all the gaudy coloring...though I suppose that was a matter of taste.

Wendel took one of the soap packages in hand and sniffed. His features wrinkled into a look of displeasure; perhaps a scent he wasn't a fan of.

"The food is another matter," he said.

"I quite like the food here," I commented. "Everything was so strongly flavored in Conrad."

"I think the cuisine here is nice; I just think they need to bring out the taste of it more."

"All the same, I don't think it's a good idea to drown your food in

salts and spices the moment it's brought out to you, Wendel."

Food was saltier in Conrad due to the fact that most people farmed or otherwise spent a good deal of time moving about. It wasn't a problem there, but Wendel would be spending far more time at a desk for his studies, so we needed to keep an eye on his eating habits. That went for all of us. Wendel was still very much in the midst of growing into his body, but that wasn't true of the older ladies among us or old Ben.

"By the way, this new bath rule of yours, does that include the people on the second floor?" asked Wendel.

The rooms on the second floor were currently occupied by Achim and the Kirsten family's aides. They spent most of their time away from the manor, but all the same things were bustling at our new home.

"Outside of Achim, no."

"Okay, but can we work out some kind of schedule? Yesterday it was a whole ordeal because some of us decided to take baths around the same time."

"You'd like me to handle that, I assume?"

"Whateley is so busy. It's only appropriate that you oversee it."

He was basically telling me I was flush with free time. I had a mind to call him out on it, but if he'd asked me if I was half as busy as Whateley, the answer would have been a resounding no. Still, Wendel had a point. The two of us had things easy because of our positions in the family, but this was not so for the others. There was only one bath too; it wasn't enough for everyone, no matter how you planned it out.

"I suppose I'll ask those who are willing to go to the public baths," I said.

"Eww," muttered Wendel, clearly not a fan of the idea.

"What's the issue? I've been thinking about going myself."

"But it's public, right? So everybody strips off and gets in the bath together?"

"I daresay it would be weirder to bathe clothed."

"That's not what I mean!"

Wendel, much like Achim, was apprehensive about the public

baths. But whereas Achim was uncomfortable entering unarmed, Wendel's problems came from a place of general embarrassment.

"I can't just get undressed in front of people I don't even know," he said.

"The men's and women's sections are separated, so it's not like anybody's going to be gawking."

"I still don't like it. The very idea of sharing bath water with a complete stranger..."

"The water is always flowing, which means new water is pumped in all the time."

"Look, it would be one thing if Whateley were saying that, but why are *you* so quick to adopt all of this foreign culture? It's confounding."

Confounding was a bit much, if you asked me. Still, Wendel's response was understandable, what with him being a young boy thrown into an entirely new environment. I thus decided to take a generous view of his choice of words.

"You totally looked like you were about to snap," said Wendel.

"You're just imagining things, I assure you. And anyway, like I said, those who are *willing* can visit the public bath. I'm not going to force anybody to do it."

It seemed that there were many who wanted to avoid the public baths. I opted to be a public bath user to open up space for someone else, but Achim objected.

"No. The lord of the house should at least have access to their own bath," he said.

"Oh, it's not about that," I said. "I'm very curious about the culture here."

The idea of going to a public bath after so long made me a touch embarrassed, but my curiosity won out. Achim still didn't believe me, and Whateley looked a little concerned.

"Which bath do you intend to visit?" he asked.

"The big one, a short walk from here," I replied. "I heard that it's popular with the locals."

"The locals... Yes, I see. Well, as long as it's not too far away, I don't foresee any problems."

He was worried about me going too far, and he had researched the baths in advance to locate one used by the middle-class nobility. It was only upon my return home, however, that I realized why he was so concerned about the distance.

To cut to the chase, I wasn't even allowed into the baths.

The bathhouse was built from stone and differed from Japanese hot springs in a number of ways, but the feel was quite similar. I walked in through the front doors and entered a main hall, at the far end of which were the changing rooms for the men's and women's bath. Benches were placed here and there at which people relaxed. It was nostalgic for me, and almost like déjà vu, and it was while I was lost in the feeling that someone called out to me; a middle-aged lady who introduced herself as a manager. She was a touch overbearing, and she struck me as the type of person I usually didn't like dealing with.

"My apologies, but might I ask your name?" she inquired.

"My name? I don't mind at all, but might I ask why?"

"Because I've never seen you here before."

It was all a bit odd, but I gave the lady my name and she fell into a short silence. I hadn't done anything wrong, and I knew the bathhouse to be under the jurisdiction of the state. As far as I knew it was also free.

"I'm very sorry, ma'am, but I'm going to have to ask you to leave," said the lady.

She'd said the line with such formality I couldn't control my response.

"Huh?" I blurted out.

This only served to further displease the manager, who heaved a sigh.

"I'm asking politely that you leave," she said, repeating herself. "You're one of the foreigners who just moved in a few days ago, yes? I can tell by the name. This is a place for the people of Arrendle to relax. It is not built for young maidens hailing from foreign countries. If it's a bath you're after, please visit one built especially for tourists."

Were I exactly what I looked like—a young girl in her late teens—

I'm certain I would have simply left.

"It's my understanding that this bathhouse isn't privately run," I said. "It's managed by the state."

"That it is. And I am one of that state's citizens. It is my job to ensure that our citizens get the relaxation they expect when they visit."

"Are there rules regarding who can and cannot enter?"

"There are not. However, we do not accept those from foreign countries. It is our goal here to give our clientele the relaxing time they deserve."

She was looking down on me; that much was clear in her gaze. I could have argued back, but my better judgment told me to shut my mouth. Even if I forced my way in, I'd never enjoy a bath I earned after an argument, and I didn't want to go around starting fights in the neighborhood in the first place.

Every word the woman had spoken to me was polite, but her lack of respect for me permeated from every part of her. I couldn't understand why she'd take such a stance, nor what made her so disagreeable. It didn't help that she turned to a few people to reassure them that she'd "get rid of me soon."

"Very well, then," I said, and left.

That was when it hit me. The lady had called the bathhouse a place to relax, but the people were lively. And among the eyes that gazed upon me were others like that same manager; eyes that held in them disdain. It wasn't all of them—and to be fair, the vast majority of gazes were sympathetic—but there was a feeling in the air that I did not belong.

The trip home was one I walked in a daze, and so I felt no emotions of any real weight. Achim was surprised to see me back so soon. He'd made sure that I left with one of our guards, and that another was set to come meet me once I was done. It was just like him to assign and insist on protection even though I told him it was unnecessary.

Whateley seemed to sense it when he saw me, and he immediately prepared a pot of tea. Only then could I take a breath.

"I'm sorry," I uttered. "I suppose I'm still in shock."

"Don't be," replied Whateley. "I gather that my fears came to pass, and for that *I* should apologize. I should have warned you."

"There's nothing for you to apologize for, Whateley."

Achim still hadn't caught on, so I explained to him what had happened. Naturally, he responded with indignant fury. But I couldn't really take anything in. I was shocked and sad, and mixed with that was a hint of frustration. Achim helped give voice to my heart, and I think that perhaps he even went overboard just to make me feel better. What I had just gone through was a textbook case of discrimination. Though for me it was something rare and unusual, Achim was far more familiar with it, and so in his outrage was his empathy.

This was not my first dance with discrimination, however. When I had been expelled from the Kirstens in Falkrum, people had talked about me behind my back. However, this was the first time I'd been denied entry to a place purely due to my nation of birth. I'd never expected it at a bathhouse, of all places, but now that people there saw me as something less than the rest of them, what was I even supposed to do?

I might have been reborn in another world, but I'd never experienced anything like this before. Nonetheless, the whole debacle did bring clarity to certain past events. Back when I had encountered those imperial soldiers in my attempts to save Sven, I had thought of their leader Lang as a rare case. Upon further thought, however, I now understood that he more likely existed among a subset of the population who felt exactly the way he did.

"I was naive," I said. "I should have considered things more thoroughly."

Knowing as much did nothing to lessen my shock or soothe my gloom.

"Ordinarily you'd never *have* to think about..."

The words, muttered by Whateley, would linger with me in my memories long after the incident passed. He had come and stayed at the imperial capital many years ago, and he'd likely faced similar experiences to my own. Though no further questions were asked, his words were a balm for my soul.

"And unfortunately, thinking it through won't get you anywhere," said the steward. "Let's get you nice and warm and sure you have a nice, early night. By tomorrow you'll find the sting of it all will have dulled some. Shall I bring you some milk this evening?"

"Oh, I don't suppose you'd make a cup with some honey in it, would you...?"

"As you wish. And perhaps just a hint of brandy to go with it, hm?"

I giggled.

"Yes, please."

I wasn't much of a drinker, but I *did* enjoy just the hint of the scent of alcohol with warm milk. Whateley allowing me a slight sugar hit in the evening was his way of spoiling me a little. And truth be told, both Whateley's and Achim's kindnesses helped bring a smile back to my face. I decided to lift myself from the haze I was in, knowing now that the problem I'd encountered was not something I would solve in a single day; I would have to learn to deal with it over time.

That day, I ended up using the family bath, and I made sure to use the most expensive soaps and salts I'd bought. The men asked that I use something a little weaker of scent, but Rosanne and Louisa loved it.

After that, I took my time enjoying my warm milk before bed.

"Karen, do you have a moment?"

It was Wendel. He held out a small bag that he'd made himself. It smelled faintly of herbs and fruit.

"Is it a sachet?" I asked.

"Put it by your pillow; it'll help you sleep. I thought it might come in useful, what with all the racket we hear from next door in the middle of the night."

"Ah, yes. And so you made this just for me. Thank you so much."

"The materials would have gone to waste, otherwise... And, er...perhaps you might hear out a request as a show of gratitude?" he said, looking down nervously at his tapping feet. "Can I sleep with you tonight?"

The request was most unexpected. Wendel had never asked for

such a thing before, and I froze in shock.

"No! I don't mean it like that!" said Wendel, fearing I had the wrong idea. "I don't mean anything weird! And I know it's childish, but, it's just...sometimes I can't bear to be alone, and usually I would go to Whateley, but..."

This was all news to me.

"He and Ben have been so busy and so exhausted these last few days. Emil and Achim are on the second floor, and I can't go to them while others are still awake... And with all that arguing next door, I... All that rage is frightening, isn't it?"

"I didn't think you meant anything weird," I said. "I was just caught by surprise. I'm fine with it, so don't panic."

Wendel, too, had seen and survived Conrad's downfall firsthand. Like me, he was still sometimes plagued by nightmares. Now I knew that until now, he'd always gone to Whateley for support. All the fighting next door must have worn the boy down. I knew just how he felt, and I wasn't about to make fun of his blushing; I'm sure it was embarrassing enough for him already.

"Come on in, then," I said. "I was just about to turn off the lamp anyway, so you're just in time."

And it wasn't untrue to say that I'd had quite the disappointing day myself. Once he hopped inside, I realized that it was true what they said about children having higher body temperatures; the bed was toasty far quicker than usual.

"Oh, how happy it makes a mother when her son leans on her for support!"

"You don't feel that way at all, I bet."

"I'm speaking completely from the heart. We're family, after all. The fact that you've been going to everyone *but* me breaks my heart."

I have to imagine that everyone has stayed quiet on the issue in the name of Wendel's pride...

Wendel's murmured "Hrmm..." of a reply seemed only to support the idea that this was all rather embarrassing for him. I couldn't help wondering then if one day a rebellious period would hit him like it hit so many other teens. I hadn't given birth to him myself, but all the

same I thought I might still cry if he one day called me an old hag during such a period.

"Good night, Wendel," I said. "Don't hesitate to wake me should you need anything."

"Okay. Good night."

We were both exhausted. Neither of us woke to the fighting next door that night, and instead we slept the whole night through. The following day brought with it an unexpected visitor.

"Hello there," said a woman who introduced herself as living a couple of houses down and across the street. "I'm sorry to interrupt you like this when you're still in the process of getting settled. I won't keep you long, I promise."

I happened to be closest to the door and so greeted her myself. I got the sense that she knew me from somewhere.

"Not at all," I replied. "Can I help you with something?"

"I'm sure you barely have time for anything outside of your unpacking, so I thought you might enjoy this."

The woman presented me with a big, heavy plate covered in a towel.

"Oh?" I replied, taken aback by it.

"My next-door neighbor and I love to cook. It's a hobby we share, but I made far too much today, and I can tell by the food you have delivered that you've a lot of people under your roof. I thought you might be getting tired of eating the same fare every day."

"We'd be delighted," I replied, "but are you most certain?"

"Of course! Nothing could please me more. That particular pie is a favorite among my kids, so I'm sure you'll enjoy it."

"Wh-Why thank you," I stammered. "I'm so sorry we can't offer you any hospitality; the house is a right mess at present."

"Don't let it bother you; I came unannounced, after all. More importantly, you've children living with you, yes? I have a feeling they're about the same age as my own, so if you're amenable to the idea, what say we give them a chance to get acquainted sometime?"

"Oh, thank you! We'd love that!"

"No need to thank me. We're neighbors; it's only right that we do what we can to get along."

She flashed a bright, easy smile, told me she didn't want to hold me up any longer, and then left. When I removed the towel from the plate after I returned to the others, I was shocked. The woman had claimed that she'd cooked too much, but she'd given us a *whole* pie. It was filled with minced meat, and I knew that when you baked something of this size, your oven couldn't handle any extra.

"This is *not* left over, no matter how you look at it," I muttered. "I wonder why she went to the trouble, then...?"

That said, the woman was right to be proud of her recipe; the pie was delicious. She'd given it a slight spicy kick to match the pastry, and the boys were munching through the thing at such a pace I had to slow them down.

"She could guess how hectic it is here and so she left before we could do anything, but we'll have to show her our appreciation in the coming days," remarked Whateley.

"And we'll have to return the plate too," added Wendel. "I'll come along when you do."

He seemed curious to meet our neighbor's children. I hoped it would be a chance to make some new friends. At the same time, I wondered about the whole thing; was it just my imagination? We were meeting for the first time, but I couldn't shake the feeling we'd seen each other before.

"Oh," I uttered.

That was when it hit me. I'd seen her at the bathhouse the previous day. It had only been for an instant, but even then, I knew it had been her. And if it was, then her unexplainable behavior was not so unexplainable after all. It was possible that I was wrong, but then why else would she have approached me with a gentle smile so as not to intimidate or frighten me?

The answer seemed evident.

I felt strangely bashful, but it was buried under the feelings of gratitude I felt for the gentle kindness we'd been shown.

"I see," I muttered, picking up some pie with my fork.

I knew now that kindness, too, existed here in Arrendle, and the future appeared a little brighter. I hoped that Wendel and the children across the road would get along well, and I thought of how

happy that would make me as I ate a little more pie. It tasted so much better than before.

It was the flavor of good tidings.

Afterword

Volume two is in the books!

Thank you to my readers for your support. To 46-san for always responding to my detailed requests at lightning speed. To Otsuka, my editor, for waiting patiently even when the draft was a little late. To Hayakawa Publishing for all their hard work putting the book together and promoting it.

I couldn't be more grateful to all of you for getting the book out into the world.

To be honest, though, when volume one was set to be released (and even when it *was* released) I couldn't help suspecting I was caught up in a scam of some sort (I'm really sorry). I tried to mentally prepare myself for the whole thing crumbling to pieces in failure. But I think finally I might have earned myself a pat on the back. I am excited by all the letters I receive and cherish every one of them.

This volume begins with the fall of Conrad. I still remember the many cries of anguish and sorrow from readers back when I was actively writing that part of the story. The downfall of the kingdom arc saw the end of many individuals' stories, but the imperial capital arc hints at the beginning of many others. Marie also made her return, and we see that her whole worldview has shifted drastically in a relatively short period of time.

The royal family has also been through a lot, and for those who are curious, you can read more of that in a side story online; it's a chance to peek into the heart of the queen and glimpse her sons for who they were. To quote a snippet of the margrave's letter to the king: "Were it possible, I wish we could talk things through."

When I think back to the time of writing, things were different. Originally, I had planned for Wendel's and Whateley's fates to end with Conrad, and for Karen to return to the Kirsten family. But then

who would Karen have had at her side? The margrave had educated her in a great many ways, but there was still so much left for her to learn. I realized that she needed a teacher, someone to guide her learning in this other world, and so Wendel and Whateley survived. The Conrad name, too, which I came up with in a few seconds, continues to this day. I quite like the name, so it's not an issue, but I admit I should think these things through more thoroughly.

And so the curtain finally rises on Karen's story proper. She meets with her friend Ern, a fellow reincarnated individual, who has decided to make use of past world knowledge here in her new one. Her innate talents also come into stark relief, and I hope you'll look forward to reading the ways in which the two girls change, both in terms of how they live and their personalities.

The mysterious mage Six, who makes his way into the official cast of characters in this volume, plays a much larger role in the next volume, so there's that too.

Speaking of next volumes, volume three has an official release date: June. When you find this volume on the shelves, I'll be deep into work on the volume three draft. Hopefully somewhere around the last chapter.

I want new readers and old readers alike to get something new with each volume, so expect some additions here and there.

Until we meet again,

February 2022

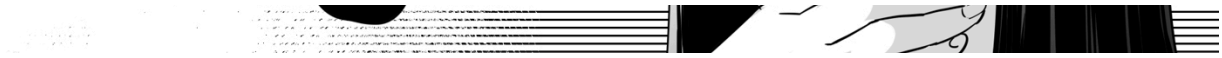
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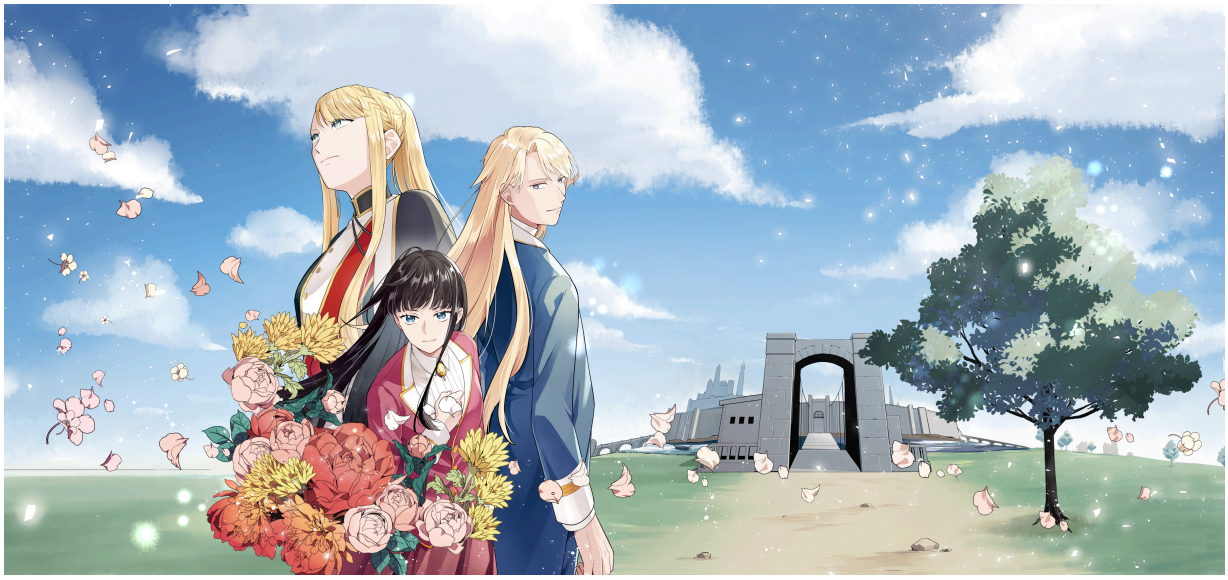
CONGRATS on the release of volume 2!

Things start to get rolling in volume 2, and I utterly adore this scene. It's when Moritz—whose 5,000 gold coin scene had me raising an eyebrow—put himself on my list of favorite characters. You think he's just a poker-faced prude, and then he goes and completely blows your expectations out of the water.

Volume 2 is where we learn what will become of Conrad, see Ern's return, and watch Karen's world expand as she meets more people, including Whateley's former superior. I hope you enjoy it!









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The Trials and Tribulations of My Next Life as a Noblewoman: Volume 2 Part 2
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First published in Japan in 2022 by Hayakawa Publishing Corporation The book is published by arrangement with Hayakawa Publishing Corporation English translation © 2025 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: July 2025