02

Victoria of Many Faces

Syuu

Illustration by
Nanna Fujimi






Mike
Edward
Clark
Bernard
Victoria
Jeffrey
Nonna
Characters


I charged past one of the men, slicing his left knee with my dagger. It was a deep cut, and he let out a terrible scream, but I'd had no other choice. I wondered if Nonna was learning that being larger in size didn't necessarily equate to having superior fighting ability.
"Come out. If you surrender now, we'll have mercy on you. But if you attack, consider yourselves dead."



02

Syuu

Illustration by
Nanna Fujimi

YEN ON
New York

Copyright



Syuu

Translation by Andria McKnight Cover art by Nanna Fujimi

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

TEFUDA GA OME NO VICTORIA Vol. 2
©Syuu 2022
First published in Japan in 2022 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.
English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

English translation © 2025 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen On
150 West 30th Street, 6th Floor
New York, NY 10001

Visit us at yenpress.com
facebook.com/yenpress • twitter.com/yenpress
yenpress.tumblr.com • instagram.com/yenpress

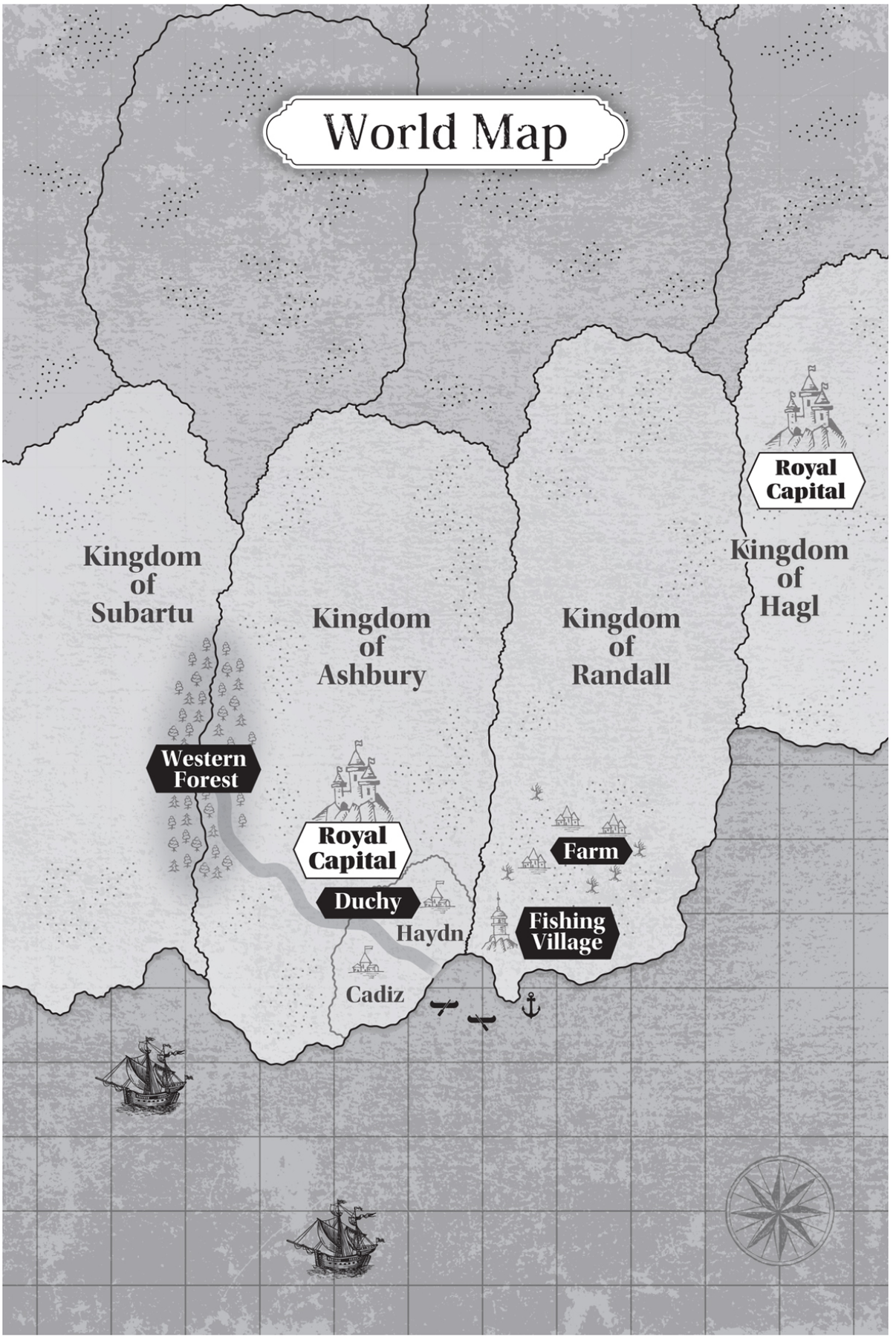
First Yen On Edition: April 2025
Edited by Yen On Editorial: Maya Deutsch, Rachel Mimms
Designed by Yen Press Design: Liliana Checo

Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.
The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Syuu, author. | Fujimi, Nanna, illustrator. | McKnight, Andria, translator.
Title: Victoria of many faces / Syuu ; illustration by Nanna Fujimi ; translation by

Andria McKnight.
Other titles: Tefuda ga oume no Victoria. English
Description: First Yen On edition. | New York : Yen On, 2024–
Identifiers: LCCN 2024028926 | ISBN 9781975390747 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975390761 (v. 2 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9798855408430 (v. 3 ; trade paperback)
Subjects: CYAC: Spies—Fiction. | Disguise—Fiction. | LCGFT: Spy fiction. | Light novels.
Classification: LCC PZ7.1.S996 Vi 2024 | DDC [Fic]—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024028926
ISBNs: 978-1-9753-9076-1 (paperback)
978-1-9753-9077-8 (ebook)


World Map
Royal Capital
Kingdom of Hagl
Kingdom of Subartu
Kingdom of Ashbury
Kingdom of Randall
Western Forest
Royal Capital
Duchy
Haydn
Cadiz
Farm
Fishing Village

CONTENTS

Cover
Insert
Title Page
Copyright

Prologue ✵ In the Kingdom of Shen
Chapter One ✵ Homecoming and Reunions
Chapter Two ✵ The Lost Crown
Interlude ✵ Edward Asher's Hunch
Chapter Three ✵ Innermost Feelings
Chapter Four ✵ To Sybil Forest
Chapter Five ✵ My Pet Sibby
Interlude ✵ Edward's Paternal Instincts
Chapter Six ✵ Mother Superior Eliza and the Used Bookstore
Chapter Seven ✵ A Peerage Ceremony and a Tea Party
Chapter Eight ✵ An Old Contract
Chapter Nine ✵ Beautiful Old Books
Chapter Ten ✵ A Visit with Lady Yolana
Epilogue ✵ A Tea Party at the Asher Estate
Bonus Story ✵ A Boy and His Mother
Bonus Story ✵ Reed's Daily Life
Bonus Story ✵ Blythe Asher's Daily Life

Yen Newsletter

Victoria of Many Faces 02

CONTENTS

Presented by Syuu

Prologue ✸ In the Kingdom of Shen
Chapter One ✸ Homecoming and Reunions
Chapter Two ✸ The Lost Crown
Interlude ✸ Edward Asher's Hunch
Chapter Three ✸ Innermost Feelings
Chapter Four ✸ To Sybil Forest
Chapter Five ✸ My Pet Sibby
Interlude ✸ Edward's Paternal Instincts
Chapter Six ✸ Mother Superior Eliza and the Used Bookstore
Chapter Seven ✸ A Peerage Ceremony and a Tea Party
Chapter Eight ✸ An Old Contract
Chapter Nine ✸ Beautiful Old Books
Chapter Ten ✸ A Visit with Lady Yolana
Epilogue ✸ A Tea Party at the Asher Estate
Bonus Story ✸ A Boy and His Mother
Bonus Story ✸ Reed's Daily Life
Bonus Story ✸ Blythe Asher's Daily Life

Prologue

In the Kingdom of Shen

I looked around the villa in Shen we'd been living in for the past five years. It was filled with things we'd bought here.

I figured we would probably be staying in a hotel or Lord Edward's house for a while once we got back to Ashbury, so the fewer belongings we took back home, the better.

"Nonna, are you finished sorting through your luggage?"

"Yes. I put everything I'm taking home in this bag."

She gestured to a small tote that surely couldn't fit much inside.

"That's all you're taking?"

"Yeah. These are all the things I really care about," she said as she opened it up to show me the contents. There were only three items: a Shenese martial arts training uniform, a beautifully bound book written in Shenese, and a jade lion figurine given to her by Yil, the son of the family we stayed with here. Nonna wasn't the type to get attached to material things.

"You can take more home, you know," I said.

"It's all right. The most important things to me are the ones I can't take with me anyway, like the people who trained with me, the garden, and the beautiful fish that swim in the pond. Oh, but the most important thing is you, Mom. As long as I can be with you, I don't need anything else."

I wrapped my arms around Nonna, overcome by emotion. She'd grown so tall now. She let out a muffled giggle against my shoulder.

She was so adorable that I had to put packing on hold for a bit. We decided to look around the garden of the estate where we'd been residing. We admired the wildflowers planted on the small hill, the delicate red bridge spanning the pond, and the large, colorful fish leisurely swimming through the tranquil waters.

“So what did you think of Shen? How were the past five years for you? Or can you not wait to go back to Ashbury?” I asked.

“I had fun here! The most fun was learning Shenese martial arts. It’s so different from the martial arts you taught me. That was the most interesting thing of all, I think.” She smiled broadly, showing her white teeth. She’d lost most of her baby teeth during the time we’d been here, and her adult teeth had grown in.

“Mom, since this is our last time in this house, I’m going to let you in on my little secret,” she said slyly.

“Oooh, a secret? I’d love to hear it.” *I wonder if she’s talking about the pretty stones she collects and hides away. I already know about that.*

Nonna smiled and led me to a far corner of the backyard, in front of the shed where the gardening tools were kept. Once we were there, she slipped through the space between the shed and the fence.

“Wait, Nonna. What are you hiding back there?” I asked.

“You’ll have to wait and see,” she said.

“…All right. I’m coming with you then.”

She looked like she was holding back a laugh as she continued through the narrow passageway. We were directly behind the shed now. She reached out to move a large metal basin.

“Help me lift this up, Mom.”

I grabbed onto the edge of the basin, and we lifted it up together.

“What?!”

“See? I knew you’d be surprised!”

There was a hole in the ground, and the interior was reinforced with bricks. The space was just barely large enough for an average adult.

“Nonna? You’ve been down there before, right? Where does this hole lead?”

“Right into the backyard of the house across the street!” she said with delight.

“Did Yil show you this? I’m assuming you used this several times to leave the property.”

“That’s right. Yil and I would go to the shops in town and buy snacks or kebabs to eat together.”

So the two of them would sneak out through this hole and buy food. Well, that certainly does sound like fun.

There were many things I wanted to say about this, but I refrained from the worst of them because I didn't want to scold her after she'd gone out of her way to tell me a secret.

I climbed into the hole after Nonna. After we dropped to the bottom, the passageway became horizontal, and we crouched as we walked through it until we emerged into the backyard of the vacant lot across the street. This would certainly be thrilling for children.

"Oh, I know! Do you have any money on you, Mom?"

I always carried cash on me. I took some coins out of my dress and showed them to Nonna. Her face lit up.

She took me to all the food stalls the locals frequented. As we walked down the streets, the sounds of Shenese filling our ears, I thought, *She snuck out and came all this way?!* with exasperation. The next instant, I had another thought. *Argh, I wish I could've come, too!* The two of us sampled a variety of Shenese specialties, and I couldn't help but be surprised at how cheap and delicious everything was. We had glazed meat kebabs, round steamed wheat buns filled with spicy pork and green onions, and soft, silky taffy. Then we had some shrimp that had been grilled on a heavy iron plate until it was fragrant and crispy. *I want Jeff to try all this, too!* I thought, buying some extra food to take back for my husband.

"This is delicious. I've never had shrimp like this before. So this is what you and Yil would sneak out to do, Nonna? I wish I could've gone exploring through the passageway, too. That sounds like a lot more fun than going around making pleasantries with everyone all day," Jeff said. He was always easy on both me and Nonna. He had a smile on his face as he bit into the crunchy grilled shrimp.

The candy and kebabs from the food stalls the locals frequented were varied and delicious. I'd never been to establishments like those before. All the places the people here had suggested to me were luxury shops. And the food there was delicious, of course, but if we ever came back to Shen again, I would like to explore the district Nonna had shown me fully.

"I can't believe we only learned about that place a day before we left the country! I'm so frustrated I could just stomp my feet!" I huffed, making Jeffrey laugh again.

Tomorrow, we would set sail for the kingdom of Ashbury.

Chapter One

Homecoming and Reunions

After five long years away from Ashbury, we were welcomed back on a rainy day.

Even though I'd barely lived in the country for a year, it felt like I was coming home.

My daughter, Nonna, had grown so tall in these past five years. She would probably be taller than me in no time. Her body was slender yet strong from her daily training, and she wore her long, blond hair in a loose braid over her left shoulder.

"Anna, the gangplank will be slick from the rain, so hold on to my arm," Jeff said.

"Thanks, Jeff."

Although Jeffrey was a large man, his movements were graceful and coordinated. He was the type of person who was always looking out for his family. Nonna looked on at us with a wry smile on her face. She was probably thinking, *There goes Dad being overprotective again!*

There weren't many passengers disembarking the Shenese merchant ship here, and we were the last ones among them.

"Did those people come to greet us, Dad?"

As we stepped onto the dock, I saw a familiar man with brown hair and a medium build holding an umbrella looking up at us.

Once the three of us finished our paperwork at the immigration office, we exited to find a sleek black carriage waiting for us. The man with the umbrella from before was standing next to it.

It was Mike, the man who had helped us with the paperwork to go to Shen five years ago. He was an operative from the kingdom of Ashbury.

“Welcome back, Lord Asher. I’ve come to escort you home,” he said.

“Thank you so much for coming all this way for us, Mike,” Jeff replied.

“Not at all, Lord Asher. I’m pleased to see that Anna and Nonna are looking well, too. And Nonna’s grown so much!”

“She really has. Soon she’ll be even taller than her mother.”

“Yes, quite. She’s certainly grown into a lovely young lady.”

Jeffrey and I exchanged glances, stifling laughter. In truth, the thing that had troubled us the most as parents was Nonna’s education on behaving like a young lady. I knew she’d noticed the looks on our faces, but she maintained a cool expression.

“We’ll stay at an inn on the way back to the capital. I was hoping to share information on our journey there,” Mike said.

The luxurious carriage smoothly proceeded down the road as a steady drizzle fell outside.

Raindrops struck the carriage windows, turning into thin streams of water as they traveled down the glass. Beyond the window, I could see the landscape of an Ashburian town, and I felt my expression soften at the nostalgic scenery.

“First of all, let me tell you about the changes that have occurred during your absence,” Mike said.

“All right.”



“Publicly, the story is that Victoria Sellars was killed by robbers. However, I’m sure you’ll reunite with those you were acquainted with in the capital before your departure. So please go by the name Anna Victoria Asher.”

I was surprised that Victoria, a name I’d grown so fond of, would now be my middle name.

“Goodness, are you sure it’s all right to continue using the name Victoria?”

“My boss determined that changing your name now would raise suspicions among the people who knew you as Victoria. When you reunite with your old acquaintances, please go ahead and call yourself Victoria just as you did before. If they ask you anything about your first name, just say, ‘A foreign authority took a liking to me, so I decided to go by my middle name when I fled from them. Please understand I’m not at liberty to share any more details.’”

Hmm, I see. Claiming I wasn’t able to share the details left it up to their imagination, and it was a good excuse.

Honestly, as long as Jeffrey’s family accepted me, I didn’t mind at all.

Nonna gazed out the window as the adults talked. She had been completely absorbed in her martial arts training during our time in Shen. When we’d lived in Ashbury, we’d usually spend all day together, but in Shen, she’d spent most of her time with Yil, our landlord’s son, and their servants.

At first, Nonna had enjoyed exploring the vast estate, but once she’d covered every nook and cranny, she’d begun training with the guards. They had been intrigued to have a little blond girl from another kingdom train with them, and they’d taught her very enthusiastically.

The five years we’d spent in Shen passed by so quickly. By the time we were to return to Ashbury, all three of us had become completely fluent in the Shenese language, and Nonna had become unbelievably adept at martial arts. Yes, *unbelievably*.

“Mom, I can’t wait to teach Master Clark Shenese,” she told me eagerly.

“Yes, I bet he’ll be thrilled. Now, Nonna… I’m sure you already know this, but…”

“I know. I mustn’t knee Master Clark anymore, and I won’t give him any straight punches or roundhouse kicks, either.

Don’t worry.”

Mike paused in the middle of his conversation with Jeffrey for a moment, looking shocked. Jeff let out a sheepish chuckle.

“Anna, what in the world are you talking about?” Mike asked.

“Nonna spent every waking moment in Shen training in martial arts. She’s gotten quite good at it over the past five years, so I was just a bit concerned. That’s all,” I said.

“When you get confident in your martial arts abilities, it’s easy to get reckless, Mike. But don’t worry. Nonna’s already outgrown that phase,” Jeff assured him.

“That’s not what I’m worried about,” Mike muttered. I knew what he was trying to say. He was worried about Nonna’s education as a lady since she would be treated like the daughter of a noble here in Ashbury.

I’d taught her the basics of etiquette, and Jeffrey and I had come to the decision that Nonna would start her formal education as a lady in earnest once we returned home. After all, she could only learn Shenese martial arts in Shen, so we’d thought it best for her to make the most of her training while she was there.

Around the time Nonna turned ten, I’d decided to tell her the truth about my past. *“I’m a former spy from the kingdom of Hagl who defected,”* I’d said. *“I don’t think we have anything to worry about anymore, but we shouldn’t let our guard down. It would be best for you to learn self-defense techniques, just in case.”* I’d consulted with Jeff about it beforehand, and he’d agreed it was for the best as well.

Nonna had been listening to our conversation and turned to Mike with a composed look on her face. “Don’t worry. My martial arts teacher told me I would be expelled if I ever used my techniques on someone weaker than me.”

“Oh, I see.” I could tell that Mike was biting the inside of his cheek to stifle a laugh. *I’m sorry our daughter is so unusual!*

From the outside, Nonna seemed to be the picture-perfect noble’s daughter. Her long blond hair was silky and lustrous, and although her skin was slightly sun-kissed, it was smooth and flawless. Her blue-grey eyes shined with intelligence, and her posture was exceptional.

However, she moved far too briskly, though she could cover that up well enough with some formal training in etiquette.

Probably.

Our carriage continued through the rain. We stayed at hotels on our way back to the capital. After being cooped up in the carriage for so long, Nonna had a ton of energy to burn, so I let her go to the back gardens of the hotels, where the staff would be unlikely to see her, to practice her Shenese martial arts. Jeff and I took the opportunity to do some training there, too.

At first, Mike merely observed, but at some point, he couldn't bear just watching any longer.

"Pardon me, but would you mind if I joined in? Victoria's style and Nonna's Shenese style of martial arts are so different from the Ashburian style. I'm simply intrigued."

"Oh, would you like to get a closer look?" I asked.

"Very much."

We had no reason to say no, so Nonna and I would both spar with Mike to show him each of our respective styles of martial arts. I went first.

Before we began, Mike quietly asked me so Nonna couldn't hear, "What's your weapon of choice, Victoria?"

"Daggers. I rarely got to use them in actual combat, though," I whispered back.

"That makes sense. The more skilled an operative is with a weapon, the less likely they'll have to use it. Please use your dagger with the scabbard still on. I'd love to spar with you once like that. It's not every day I have the opportunity to face off against a top operative of another country." Normally, Mike was quite impassive, but now his eyes sparkled with excitement.

"Let's go." I armed myself with my dagger and rushed at Mike. I decided to attack his dominant arm and leg first. I focused my gaze on his right leg and feinted a kick, but that was just a trap. My plan was to strike the moment he reacted to where I was staring and shifted to guard his leg.

People trained in this line of work tended to react unconsciously, following the gaze of their opponent. Hesitation meant death in the world of operatives, so behaviors like this became second nature.

I had made good use of those instincts during my time with the organization, exploiting the fact that seasoned fighters would react automatically. By the time they would realize they

had been tricked, my dagger would have already cut into their flesh.

It had been a long time since I'd employed that tactic. But just as I expected, Mike moved without thinking, his body instinctively following my gaze.

"There. Now your dominant arm has been rendered useless," I said.

"Huh?" He stared blankly at my dagger, still in its scabbard, which I had pointed toward his right arm. "Wait, what?"

"Ha-ha-ha."

"Mom wins!" Nonna shouted.

"One thing about me is that I'm speedy," I said.

"I'm sorry, Victoria, but could you show me that again?" Mike asked.

"No way! I want to spar with Mike next!" Nonna protested.

"Go ahead. Let's switch," I said.

Mike still wanted to spar with me, but if I showed him that technique two or three times, he'd get the hang of it, so I thought it best not to use it again. I doubted I would ever have to fight him in the future, but I wanted to keep that technique in my pocket, just in case. I switched places with Nonna and got ready to observe her match with Mike.

I'd been wanting an objective display of Nonna's technique for a while now.

Mike was unsure of the extent of Nonna's skills, so he seemed a little hesitant. That was ill-advised—he would most likely lose because of it.

I guessed he weighed around sixty-eight kilograms. Nonna was around forty. Since there was such a difference in weight, it seemed like Nonna's kicks or punches wouldn't have that much of an effect.

But if it were a real fight, she would've already shredded his body to ribbons with her dagger by now.

"I haven't taught Nonna how to use weapons, but if she were to use a small dagger or the like… Let's just say it would be quite something…" I thought back to what her Shenese martial arts instructor had told me. Despite the ominous air of his statement, he'd said it with a gentle smile on his face. I couldn't

help but wonder what legendary feats he'd achieved in his prime.

The match ended in the time I'd spent absorbed in my thoughts. Mike looked stunned.

"Wait. Hang on a minute."

"Does that mean you surrender, Mike?" I asked.

"Yay! I beat Mike!" Nonna cheered.

Mike hung his head in disappointment, struggling for breath. Meanwhile, Nonna had a giddy smile on her face. She hadn't even broken a sweat despite the fact she'd been moving and attacking the whole time.

She could leap high without a running start or run up walls and jump off in an arc to strike from above. Sparring with her was utterly exhausting. By the time fatigue set in, you had already lost.

It always amazed me how a body as tiny as hers could have so much stamina.

"Since I beat you, can I have a reward?" she asked, and Mike gave her some kind of red ball. He smiled as he chatted with her while he took it out of his pocket. They looked like they were having a great time. Even though I trained with Nonna daily, I was constantly amazed at her skill and dedication, especially since she had just bested an active special operative. As her mother, I was very proud of her, but at the same time, I couldn't help but worry if this was really okay.

At any rate, our journey back to the capital was very enjoyable.

Finally, our carriage arrived at the capital. We would be living at an estate in the eastern quarter, which was where the aristocrats resided.

It was a two-story domicile near Lord Edward's estate, an elegant home that looked like it had a lot of history. The grounds were lush with green grass, flower beds, and mature trees.

"Since you will not be given a domicile, Baron Asher, we are granting you this estate and land as compensation. Your older brother, Lord Edward, chose this property so you could

immediately settle in after your return to the capital. We've also hired a small staff for you."

Once the carriage stopped, Nonna didn't even wait to listen to Mike's explanation before she took off running for the house.

The front door opened before Nonna reached it, revealing a middle-aged woman with a warm smile.

"Welcome home, Lord Asher, Lady Asher, and the young lady as well. We've been waiting for you. I am your maid, Bertha."

"It's nice to meet you, Bertha. This is our daughter, Nonna," I said.

There were flowers arranged in the foyer, and the floors were polished to a sparkle.

"Mike, is it all right if we visit our friends to tell them we're back and to apologize for leaving so abruptly?" I asked.

"Yes, of course. In that case, I'll head back to the castle. I just wanted to say that I thoroughly enjoyed our journey here together."

And with that, Mike excused himself.

Nonna came racing down the stairs from exploring the second floor and managed to give Mike a polite good-bye. She then looked up at me excitedly. "Mom, my room is so cute! You have to come see!"

"Oh, is it? I can't wait to take a look."

As Nonna and I eagerly explored the house, the servants carried our bags in from the carriage and neatly unpacked everything, putting it in its proper place for us. Jeff had already gone to his new study to start working.

Well, it's still early in the afternoon.

"Hey, Nonna, we have some time before dinner. How about we go say hello to Lady Yolana? I don't think she'd mind if we dropped by unannounced."

"Yeah, let's go! Do you think Susan still works there?"

"I can't imagine why she wouldn't. Let's not even bother changing and go straight there."

"Yay! I mean, um… That would be lovely, Mother."

"Good girl."

"I'm going to go to the castle to let them know we're home," Jeffrey said.

"All right. We'll see you later then, Jeff."

I was stiff from the long voyage and carriage ride to the capital, so I wished we could have just walked to Lady Yolana's estate, but since we wanted to give her some souvenirs, we decided to take the carriage instead.

We arrived at Lady Yolana's in no time. The main building and the cottage Nonna and I had lived in looked exactly the same as they had when we'd left. A rush of nostalgia and guilt came to me as we stood at the gates. I was already on the verge of tears.

When I'd first arrived in Ashbury five years ago, not knowing a soul, Lady Yolana had agreed to let me rent her cottage at a ridiculously low rate and had treated both Nonna and me like we were family. Despite how close we had been, I had only been able to say good-bye to her via letter when I'd left for Shen. Regardless of the fact that we had been in imminent danger, I'd felt terrible about it, and my heart still ached at the thought.

Hearing the sound of the carriage, Susan emerged from the front door. The moment she saw us, she whipped around and yelled inside, "Lady Yolana! Victoria and Nonna are here!"

Without a word, Nonna raced over to Susan and threw her arms around her with such force that she nearly knocked her over.

Lady Yolana made her way outside by the time I reached the front door. The second she laid eyes on me, she walked over and embraced me tightly.

"We're home. Lady Yolana, I can't begin to tell you how sor—"

"It's fine, it's fine! A man named Mike gave us the gist of what happened. I know there were circumstances beyond your control, so please don't fret about it. All that matters is that you're back home safe now." She looked up at me as she spoke. Lady Yolana's generosity and kindness filled my heart with joy.

"Oh, I'm so relieved. You look well, Victoria. I heard that your ship from Shen was set to arrive soon. And goodness, is this beautiful young lady really your daughter? Nonna, do you remember me?"

"Of course! It's a pleasure to see you again, Lady Yolana." Nonna was still hugging Susan, but then she turned to Lady Yolana and curtsied. Her eyes were slightly red. Susan was one

of the few people Nonna had completely opened up to while we'd lived in Ashbury.

"Now, Susan, don't just stand there crying. Mr. Bernard will be waiting."

"Oh my! Is Mr. Bernard here right now?"

"Yes, he rushed right over. He's champing at the bit to see you."

Mr. Bernard was waiting for us in the parlor.

"Mr. Bernard!"

Nonna and I rushed over to him. He immediately dropped his cane on the floor and hugged us both at the same time, wrapping his arms around us.

"Welcome home. I've missed you so dearly. Victoria, you haven't changed a bit. And Nonna, you've grown into such a beautiful young girl."

After that, our conversations flew at a furious pace.

They both already knew that our new house was in the neighborhood.

"Whoever chose that estate for you, they have wonderful taste. That home is a real treasure!" Lady Yolana gushed.

After Nonna and I had disappeared, Lady Yolana had started visiting Mr. Bernard, worrying he might be depressed by my absence. Before long, the two were going to each other's houses regularly to have tea together.

Save for the fact that Mr. Bernard had to use a cane all the time now, he was looking quite well.

I gave them both incense and an incense burner from Shen. They lit a stick of incense, and we all enjoyed the fragrance together.

After we'd talked quite a bit, Mr. Bernard looked over at me hesitantly. "Victoria… Now that you're a baroness, I suppose I can't ask you to come work as my assistant again, can I?"

I stopped myself before I could say that I would love to. Before, I'd made all my decisions on my own because I'd been prepared to accept the consequences. But things were different now. I had my family to worry about. So from now on, I would only make decisions with Jeffrey since we'd decided to share our lives together.

“I’d love to help you, Mr. Bernard, but I’ll have to check with Jeff first,” I said.

“I see. I know you just got home, so I’m sorry to bother you. But I have some documents I’d love for you to translate,” he said.

“I’m sure Dad will say yes. He never says no to Mom,” Nonna said.

Mr. Bernard laughed. “Is that right? Come to think of it, since Jeff is your father, that means that you two are my relatives now! I can’t tell you how delighted that makes me,” he said with a smile.

“It makes me happy, too, Mr. Bernard. We have to go home for today, but I’ll be sure to make you my roast lamb again sometime. Would you like to have dinner together every now and then, just like we used to?” I asked.

“I’d love that! Ah, I’m already looking forward to it. Your roast lamb is the best around. Thank you so much, Victoria. I can’t wait.”

We had so much fun reuniting with our friends after five years apart. The time just flew by. Nonna and I wanted to stay longer, but we reluctantly said our good-byes and headed back to our new house.

We had dinner together while waiting for Jeffrey to return from the castle. The servants brought out one delicious dish after the other. I could confidently say Lord Edward had hired us an amazing chef.

When Jeff got home later, I told him straightaway about Mr. Bernard and Lady Yolana.

“It sounds like Uncle Bernard’s doing well. I’ll go see him tomorrow on the way home from the castle. I’m pleased to hear Lady Yolana’s doing well, too.”

“Jeff, do you think it would be okay if I worked as Mr. Bernard’s assistant again? He asked if I could,” I said.

“I don’t see why not. He’s your uncle now, too. There shouldn’t be an issue with that. He still lives alone, so it would put my mind at ease if you could check on him frequently.”

I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Told you so. Dad never says no to you, Mom,” Nonna said with a grin as she took a bite of pan-fried beef.

“My brother should be home by now. Shall we take a walk after dinner and go see him?” Jeff suggested.

“That would be nice. I want to thank him for setting us up with this beautiful estate,” I replied.

The three of us went to the Asher estate, but Lord Edward wasn’t home yet.

My mother-in-law, and Lord Edward’s wife—Lady Blythe—were there, so we let them know we were home. I also apologized for not formally meeting them before Jeff and I got married since we needed to go to Shen due to my personal circumstances. Fortunately, both women were very gracious and forgave me immediately.

“Don’t worry about it at all! I know Jeffrey went because he wanted to be with you. That’s all that matters. Please don’t feel bad about it in the slightest,” my mother-in-law said.

“How about we go to Lady Eva’s house for a visit tomorrow?” Jeff suggested.

“You mean I’ll get to see Master Clark, Father? I can’t wait!” Nonna exclaimed.

“Master Clark is eighteen now, isn’t he? I can’t believe he’s an adult. I bet he’s gotten so much bigger since the last time we saw him,” I mused.

Nonna had trouble sleeping that night.

I heard a noise in the middle of the night, so I got out of bed to check on her. I found her in the middle of her room, practicing her Shenese martial arts forms.

“Nonna, I hate to remind you, but under no circumstances—”

“I promise I won’t use my martial arts, and I promise I won’t show them to him, either. Is that acceptable?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll go to sleep after I run through all the forms. Don’t worry, Mom.”

“All right then. Good night.”

I went back to my room and quietly slipped into bed so as not to wake up Jeffrey. As I lay there, I thought about all the people I had seen today.

Not one of them had commented on the fact that Jeff and I didn’t have any other children besides Nonna. I’m sure they

had noticed right away, and I was grateful they hadn't mentioned it out of the kindness of their hearts.

In Shen, the doctor had told me my troubles with conceiving might have been related to how I'd lost so much weight when I had so little to begin with.

But there was no helping it. Back when I'd defected, I had needed to make myself look gaunt so my superiors would buy my death. I would have loved to have a baby, but I still felt fulfilled with the way things were now. I had a loving family and a peaceful life—two things I had desperately wanted but never thought I could have.

I thought Jeff was asleep, but just then, I heard his quiet voice in the darkness. "Is Nonna all right?"

"She can't sleep. I guess she's got too much energy because she's going through her martial arts forms," I said.

"Ha-ha. I figured as much. I'm sure you're tired, though. You should try to get some sleep."

"You're right. Good night, Jeff."

"Good night, Anna."

I snuggled against Jeff and fell asleep in his arms.

Chapter Two

The Lost Crown

The following day, we headed over to the Anderson estate. Lady Eva welcomed us with a beautiful, tearful smile on her face—it was just the reaction I'd expected her to have.

"Victoria, welcome home! And congratulations on your wedding!" she said.

"I'm so sorry for suddenly disappearing on you, Lady Eva."

"It's all right. We're back together now, aren't we? Mike explained the situation to us, so I understand. Ah, but don't worry—he told us to keep quiet about it. Despite appearances, I can keep a secret!"

"Lady Eva…" My heart filled with gratitude and regret.

Jeff gave me a tender look, and Lady Eva turned her attention to him. "Jeff, your trip to Shen was certainly very sudden, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was quite hectic."

"They made you a baron due to your achievements importing that medicine, right? Congratulations," she said.

"Thank you. It might be a while until it's official, though," Jeff replied.

After we said hello to Lady Eva and Master Clark, Nonna gave them an elegant smile. I'm sure no one would ever believe she'd been up all hours practicing martial arts the night before.

Master Clark was completely grown up. He'd shot up in the past five years, and he now stood at over 180 centimeters tall. And he probably still had some growing left in him, too.

"You look like a young man now, Master Clark!" I exclaimed.

"Thank you, Miss Victoria. You know, you were crucial in helping me overcome my dislike of studying foreign languages. Now I love learning languages in my spare time. I'm so grateful

to you. I'm currently working as a civil servant in the department that handles documents in foreign languages," he told me.

Master Clark's voice had deepened since we'd last seen him. He looked slightly surprised when he saw Nonna, but he was incredibly composed compared to her. Nonna was fidgeting restlessly.

I felt a pang of sadness as I wondered where that adorably shy, delicate young boy had gone.

Jeff said he had business to attend to at the castle, so we didn't stay very long at the Andersons' before we excused ourselves. As we were leaving, Master Clark looked like he wanted to say something to Nonna, but she didn't notice.

"Excuse us, Lady Eva and Master Clark," Nonna said, walking off. Jeff and I followed her.

"Jeff, I think Nonna and I are going to walk over to Mr. Bernard's estate now," I said.

"All right. I'll go ahead and take the carriage to the castle then," he said.

"Have a nice day, Dad. I'll see you later."

"See you," he said.

We walked down the bustling streets of the capital.

"Nonna, you should have thanked them first and then started walking. That was a bit rude," I said.

"Well, I couldn't help it, Mom. I was disappointed! Master Clark has changed so much."

"He looks different, sure. But what are you disappointed about?"

"I wanted to tell him all about Shen, but he didn't seem interested. Don't you think so?"

"Hmm, I'm not sure about that."

"Well, whatever. I'll just tell Mr. Bernard about Shen."

I wondered if Master Clark was giddy with excitement to see Nonna again but felt he was too grown up now to express that while also not being mature enough to keep up with Nonna's conversation. Well, they were both young, and it was their business anyway, so it wasn't my place to meddle in their affairs.

We went to Mr. Bernard's house, which to my surprise, was fairly neat. As I looked around, he explained why.

"I hired a maid who comes daily. She cleans, makes breakfast and dinner for me, and then goes home."

"I see. I suppose it would be rude of me to do her job for her then." To be honest, I wanted to pick up a rag and scrub the house from top to bottom, but I didn't want to offend anyone, so I fought back the urge.

While Mr. Bernard and I reminisced, Nonna gazed longingly at an old tome sitting on top of the shelf. Noticing this, Mr. Bernard said, "You can go ahead and read it if you'd like," prompting a smile from Nonna as she picked it up.

It was a dark blue, leatherbound book with gold leaf embossing. It was titled *The Lost Crown*.

The Lost Crown was a famous adventure story that had been translated and published in several other countries in addition to Ashbury.

In the story, the protagonist journeys around the world on orders of his king, who asks him to search for a crown that had been stolen long, long ago.

After much trouble, the protagonist finally finds the crown, only to be attacked by the people guarding it. He is left with no choice but to give up on retrieving the crown and must flee for his life, suffering many injuries in the process. Although he fails in his quest, he ends up being nursed back to health by a kind woman, and he dies a happy man.

"That's the book that made me fall in love with reading, Nonna," Mr. Bernard said.

"Wasn't *The Lost Crown* written by an Ashburian?" I asked.

"That's right. It was penned about a century ago. Most books written back then were either religious or academic in nature. Novels for pleasure were exceedingly rare. But that's not the only thing that makes it unusual."

"Mr. Bernard, I want to try to figure out the other thing, so please don't tell me." I peered over Nonna's shoulder as she sat on the sofa, reading the book next to me.

We read it together for a while. I took in the sweet scent of her shampoo and her lip balm, which was made from honey.

The book was handwritten, lettered beautifully on parchment paper. Delicate illustrations featuring plants and small birds adorned the upper left corner of each two-page spread. The ink was still vibrant after all this time, and it beautifully enhanced the pages of the book.

After we read intently for a while, Nonna looked up from the book.

"The way this author writes is so difficult to understand. Is this how people talked back then, Mr. Bernard?"

"I would agree that the language is quite antiquated. But that's how people spoke. What do you think, Victoria?"

"I do think the language is old-fashioned, but the story itself is just like I remember it," I said.

"Is that all?"

"There are spelling mistakes. I only read a little, but while the long, difficult words are spelled correctly, there are several errors in short, simple words that even a child wouldn't get wrong," I answered.

A satisfied look came to Mr. Bernard's face, and he handed me another book with the same title. This one was also written on parchment but was newer than the version Nonna was reading. I took it from him and opened it up.

"The newer version has fewer illustrations, most replaced with portraits. And the misspelled words have been corrected," I remarked.

"That's right. The one I just gave you was copied later on," he said.

"Much later on?"

He nodded slowly. "That's right. The one with the spelling mistakes was handwritten by the author himself. Yet you can tell from his prose that he was a very intelligent person. Don't you find it odd that he would misspell such simple words? I'm convinced it has to mean something. Ever since I got the book, I've been mulling over those spelling mistakes. But it seems I wasn't blessed with the talent to solve mysteries. Of course, this might be nothing but my imagination," he said.

A meaning behind those spelling mistakes? Does he mean it's a code?

"In other words, you think the author misspelled the words on purpose when he wrote the book?"

“That’s right. I think Elmer Archibald, the author, was using those spelling mistakes as a means to communicate something to his readers.”

Mr. Bernard told us he’d loved reading Archibald’s books as a child, and he’d asked his parents to buy him every book he wrote.

I was also familiar with the author since *The Lost Crown* was famous in my homeland of Hagl, too.

“I’ve always wanted to visit the setting of *The Lost Crown*. But I got so lost in my research of this kingdom that I became an old man in the blink of an eye. I don’t think I’m capable of going anymore, which is a shame… Ah, the dreams of childhood,” Mr. Bernard mused.

“Do you know where the story takes place?” I asked.

“As far as I can tell, it’s set in a vast forest between Ashbury and the kingdom of Subartu. Somewhere around Sybil Forest, I believe.”

That’s the forest where Jeff fought in the war during the time he was in the First Order of the knights.

“Oh, that forest? There’s a local tribe around those parts that thinks the land is sacred, isn’t there?”

“That’s right. I’m surprised you knew that,” Mr. Bernard replied.

“Jeff told me. It’s a place with a lot of painful memories for him.”

“Right… That’s where Jeff and the others went off to war.”

To be honest, when I’d found the fourth spelling mistake, I’d thought to myself, *What if it’s code?* But I’d just laughed it off, thinking it was a habit of mine from my former line of work.

But…if the code was written a century ago, I’m sure it’s easier to break than those from the modern day, I found myself thinking. However, as I read a little more, I couldn’t figure out what the key to breaking the code was.

Back during my operative days, there was a time when I’d been obsessed with breaking codes, both as a hobby and as something to pay the bills.

I’d loved detailed work ever since I was a child, and Lancome, my former boss who had raised me as a spy, recruited me

because of the intricate drawings I would make on the ground. I loved knitting, drawing complex pictures, and finding patterns in sentences. I also liked polishing my martial arts skills, but the thing I loved most was focusing on tasks where I could get lost in the details.

From that experience, I could come up with two theories about the book, assuming it was indeed a code. The first possibility was that it was intended for a specific person. If only one person knew the key to decrypting the code, then it would be incredibly difficult for other people to decipher because the rules could be endlessly complex.

The second possibility was that it was *not* intended for someone specific. In that case, it couldn't be *too* difficult. Otherwise, no one would ever arrive at the answer. The code would have to be relatively simple.

If these pages really did hold a code of some kind, then which of these possibilities was true?

"I've already given up on figuring out the book. Would you like to take on the challenge, Victoria?" Mr. Bernard asked.

"It sounds fun, but isn't this book incredibly valuable if it was handwritten by the author himself?"

"I think the book would be happier to have you read it than to sit unused in an old man's house. Take it home with you and enjoy it. Think of it as my wedding present to you," he said.

And so we ended up taking home the one-hundred-year-old adventure novel *The Lost Crown*.



"Can I read the book, Mom?" Nonna asked.

"Sure. But just remember this book is incredibly old and valuable, so it's probably a good idea to wear gloves when you handle it."

"What? That's a total pain!"

"Oh, don't be like that. Wouldn't you feel sorry for Mr. Bernard if you got his favorite book dirty?"

"Fiiine."

Despite her earlier complaints about the author's use of language being strange and difficult to read, Nonna began to read *The Lost Crown* enthusiastically.

In the meantime, I went to inform the staff about our family's general habits, such as when we ate and went to sleep. By the time I got back to the living room, I found Nonna asleep on the chaise, clutching the book in her hand.

She'd unbraided her long, blond hair, and it hung in a silky curtain off the side of the chaise. It looked like a river of gold. Her eyelashes and eyebrows were blond, too. Her lips were as red as cherries, and her cheeks were like peaches, covered in soft fuzz. My adorable Nonna.

I put a blanket over her while Bertha made a fire in the fireplace. I gently slipped the book out of Nonna's hand and sat down in the chair next to her. The book smelled like leather and parchment. The handwritten letters were flowing and beautiful, and the elegant binding spoke to its careful craftsmanship. Seeing it up close, I understood why people would want to collect antique books.

As I read through it, I started to write down everything I noticed about the sentences with the misspelled words—the page numbers and line numbers they fell on, the position of the words in the sentences, and how the words were misspelled. I was trying to examine the code from multiple angles.

But no matter how hard I tried, I just couldn't figure out the trick.

By the time I was starting to think perhaps they really were just spelling mistakes, Jeff had come home.

"Welcome back," I called.

"Thanks. I submitted my report about the trading company we formed in Shen. I'm free now until my peerage ceremony, so I can relax for a while," he said.

"We didn't ever really get to have a break the entire five years we lived there, huh?"

"That's right. However, I was on cloud nine the whole time because I got to live with you." He grinned and pulled me into a soft hug. I inhaled the wonderful fragrance of his woodsy cologne.

I was used to it now, of course, but when Jeff and I had first gotten married, he would hug and kiss me so much that I would feel a bit flustered each time. That only made him smile at me even more.

I recalled being mystified by this and commented on it once in Shen. *"I never would've thought you were such an affectionate person,"* I'd said.

"I want to express my feelings as much as I can when I have the chance."

I wondered if that was because his first fiancée had died young or because his parents had never been affectionate to each other in front of him.

Either way, hearing Jeff's answer had made me think of his past, and my heart had ached with sadness.

We couldn't go back in time and do things over, but I decided to love him with my whole heart and verbalize that as often as I could. I wanted to give him all the love he'd never had as a child. That was what went through my mind as I hugged him back.

"By the way, my brother's coming over tonight since he wasn't there when we tried to visit him yesterday. It seems he wants to see how we're settling into the estate he picked out for us," Jeff said.

"All right."

I knew Mike had already told Lord Edward that I had come from a foreign country under complicated circumstances.

As an earl and the head of their household, as well as Jeff's loving older brother, Lord Edward could have easily pushed me away. But I'd never heard a word about him opposing our marriage. And for that, I was deeply grateful to him.

Lord Edward showed up after dinnertime.

"Hello, Victoria. I'm glad to see you're doing well. How do you like the new house?"

"It's very comfortable, Lord Edward. Thank you so much for finding it for us. We really appreciate it."

"Do you like it, too, Nonna?" he asked.

"Yes! I love how there are so many little rooms tucked away everywhere!" she said.

"I thought you'd say so. Perfect for hide-and-seek, isn't it?"

“Hide-and-seek? I’m twelve years old now! Plus, I don’t have anyone to play with me,” she said with a frown.

“Is that right?”

“Yes. Master Clark’s gone and become a grown-up on me.”

“Ah-ha-ha!” Lord Edward burst out laughing. “Now don’t tell anyone, but…,” he prefaced and began to tell us about Master Clark. Apparently, Master Clark had been very depressed after we’d left for Shen, and he’d spent a very long time feeling lonely.

“Is that true?” Nonna asked.

“It is.”

Nonna didn’t look displeased by this bit of information. I glanced at her, and then Lord Edward said, “Hmm? Isn’t that one of Uncle’s books?”

“Yes, that’s right. He gave it to us as a wedding present.”

“Is that so? You know, Uncle might be cranky about me telling you this, but that book’s worth so much you could buy a fine house for its price. Make sure you take good care of it.”

“What?”

“Huh?!”

Nonna and I both expressed our surprise in unison. Jeffrey rubbed his temples and closed his eyes.

I realized Mr. Bernard had given away such an expensive book so easily because he now thought of me and Nonna as his relatives. And since I didn’t have any living relatives of my own besides my new family of Jeff and Nonna, the thought behind the gift meant a great deal more to me than how much it was worth.

Lord Edward watched us react with an amused expression on his face.



“I wouldn’t worry about it. If Uncle wanted to give it to you, then you should just keep it and get the most out of it,” he said.

“Yes, Lord Edward, but…I’m almost scared to touch a book that expensive,” I said.

“Phew, I’m glad I wore gloves when I read it!” Nonna exclaimed.

Lord Edward laughed again and said, “Believe me, you don’t have to worry about it. Just enjoy reading it.”

Soon afterward, he left our estate in high spirits.

That night, while Jeff and I were in bed, I told him about what Mr. Bernard had said about the book.

“Hmm, I see. And so he entrusted the task to you.”

“I wouldn’t say that, but I got the sense that those spelling mistakes weren’t part of a code. They appeared at regular intervals, which made them seem deliberate, and…”

“Yes? Go on.”

We had been lying on our backs and staring up at the ceiling while we chatted, but now Jeff turned to me. His silver hair gleamed from the light of the lamp on his nightstand behind him.

“Mr. Bernard said he wanted to go visit the forest where *The Lost Crown* takes place. But that would be awfully difficult for him now.”

“Yes, his legs have gotten quite weak. Don’t tell me you want to go there in my uncle’s stead.”

“No. There are a lot of things I have to do here at the house. I’d love to go there someday, though.”

Jeff didn’t respond to me.

To be honest, I *really* wanted to go.

But that forest was tied to a lot of painful memories for Jeff, and I couldn’t bear the thought of taking him there. Yet I was also reluctant to leave him behind while taking Nonna along with me.

These thoughts spun in my head as I drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, I found Nonna already in the living room reading *The Lost Crown*.

“Morning, Nonna. That book’s really good, isn’t it?”

“Morning, Mom. The language is annoying, but it *is* interesting.”

“I want to read it, too. Put a bookmark in it when you’re reading to keep your place, will you?”

“Sure.”

That night, I waited until Nonna went to bed and grabbed *The Lost Crown*. I had a paper and pen ready to mark the location of the misspelled words and the intervals at which they occurred to see if I could spot any patterns.

I tried applying some old cipher keys I knew to the text, but none of them worked.

“Hmm… What are you trying to say, Mr. Archibald? Aren’t you trying to tell someone something?” I murmured to myself as I kept comparing it to old ciphers. I spent three days doing this, exhausting my knowledge of decryption on the task, but none of my methods worked.

At first, Nonna had watched me with interest, but she grew bored after a while and wandered away, most likely off to her bedroom to practice her Shenese martial arts forms.

I left the book open and sipped some tea, sitting back a bit to avoid getting the text dirty.

Each set of pages had beautiful illustrations in the upper left-hand corner. The first was a peach blossom and small birds—there were five birds perched on the branches of the peach tree, with three of them looking below. The next was a stream and some little fish. There were many fish in the stream, and they were all facing upstream, but two of them were respectively looking at the left and right shores.

Suddenly, an idea popped into my head, and I read the pages again. Then I tested my theory several more times. On the fourth try, a sentence that made sense popped out.

My heart began to pound.

“I *knew* there was a code in this book! And it’s an extremely simple one, too. Why didn’t I pick up on it earlier?!” My voice rang out in the empty room.

The key to the code didn’t have anything to do with the misspelled words. Those were a trap to lead the reader in a certain direction. The key was the illustrations in the upper left-hand corner of the pages. It was so basic I had overlooked it.

The illustrations are beautiful, but they’re a little cluttered, I’d thought as I stared at them, and eventually, I’d realized that

there was a strange regularity about them.

Various illustrations of birds, fish, and fruit from trees were drawn on the pages. And in each of the illustrations, several birds, fish, or fruit were facing a slightly different direction each time. So I noted how many of them were in a different position, skipped that number of sentences on the page, and lifted the first word from the next sentence. I continued on in that fashion, and then a sentence began to emerge. It was an even simpler code than any I'd been taught at the academy.

The moment I realized I was onto something, my heart began to race. The sensation I'd experienced back in school of finally cracking a code after a long struggle to understand it came rushing back to me.

Lost…crown…found…I…betrayed…injured…kingdom…
Ashbury…kind…princess…nursed…me…recovered…left…
crown's…information…for…people…Ashbury.

Arranging the words into sentences that made sense left me with the following passage:

I found the lost crown, but I was betrayed and injured. A kindhearted princess belonging to the kingdom of Ashbury nursed me back to health. So I decided to leave the information about the crown for the people of Ashbury.

Ah, this was so fun!

I wondered what kind of treasure the crown was. I wondered if it was indeed hidden away in that deep forest that later became a battlefield. I was overcome by the urge to go right there and confirm it, but the moment that thought came to mind, I chastised myself.

"You know you can't go there. You're Jeffrey's wife and Nonna's mother, and now you're a baroness. Your days as an operative are long behind you."

I belonged here with Jeffrey and Nonna, in this place we'd made for ourselves in society. I couldn't let my husband down or make him worry about me. And I didn't want to lose him, either.

I closed *The Lost Crown* and tucked the paper I'd used to solve the code beneath the book on the desk.

For some reason, I felt the urge to go visit The Black Thrush today.



Something had been bothering me ever since I'd returned to Ashbury: I could no longer wander off by myself to The Black Thrush at night like I used to. Part of me yearned to sit in a booth by myself in the back corner and relish in my victory of cracking the code.

I had a happy, stable family now, and I'd reunited with the old friends I had here as well. There was nothing in my life to complain about.

But as soon as the sun went down, I would think, *I want to go to The Black Thrush.*

When I went there, I wasn't a wife or a mother—I was just Victoria. And I could knock back a glass or three of whiskey. I imagined myself stretching out my normally cramped wings and unwinding from the very first sip I took.

But that's too selfish of me.

I stood by the window in my bedroom and watched as the sky turned from maroon to indigo to pitch black.

I imagined how other people would perceive it. "The baroness leaves her family late at night to go to a pub where she drinks a bunch of strong alcohol."

Impossible! What an uncouth baroness, I thought to myself. I shook my head, trying to forget about The Black Thrush.

But what Mr. Bernard said to me the other day was still echoing in my ears. *"I don't think I'm capable of going anymore, which is a shame… Ah, the dreams of childhood."*

He had been filled with thoughts of adventure and had dreamed of going off on a journey to that place. But time went on, and his life slipped by. The sands in my own hourglass continued to fall as I stood there brooding over not going to The Black Thrush. How much sand was even left?

"Mom."

"Huh? Oh, Nonna! How long have you been standing there?"

“Not long. I saw you looking up at the sky and shaking your head, so I got worried. Is there something bothering you?” she asked.

“No, nothing at all.”

Nonna walked over to the table and peered at the results of my code-breaking. “Wait, you cracked the code?! So the misspelled words were a code after all? No wonder you were a top spy!”

“Shhh! Don’t say that so loud!”

“You’ll tell Mr. Bernard about it, won’t you?”

“I’m planning on it. He spent many long years wanting to crack that code.”

“I want to come with you! Can I? Can I, Mom? Please!”

“Y-yes, of course. But listen to me, Nonna. Codes can be used to hide things you don’t want people to know, so sometimes it’s better to—”

“Yaaay! I’m so excited! I’ve been so bored ever since we left Shen.”

The next day, Mr. Bernard was thrilled to hear the news.

“Why, Victoria! It’s only been a few days! Is it true that you cracked the code?”

“It was just good luck that I happened to notice it. Plus, I’ve only done the very start of the message. I was thinking about reading the book more closely to figure out where the author found the crown,” I said.

“Would you let me help you?” Mr. Bernard asked, his eyes sparkling with excitement.

“Of course! Let’s solve it together. But the truth is…it ended up being so simple. Don’t you think it’s unusual that it went a hundred years without anyone solving it?”

“No, I have an explanation for that,” he said.

He told me that when the book was first written, it had been hand-copied by a professional and was very expensive. The copy in Mr. Bernard’s collection had most likely been bought by a wealthy person somewhere and kept locked away for a long time.

Around thirty years after that, *The Lost Crown* was released in paper form and went on to become a bestseller. Another seventy years had passed since then.

By now, the handwritten edition had skyrocketed in value. Even though it changed owners, it had always been carefully kept and stored away by its wealthy collectors.

Mr. Bernard told me that he'd bought the tome twenty years ago and had been working at the misspelled words ever since then, never showing it to anyone else.

"I see. So this edition of the book only had a few owners, and none of them realized there was a code or were capable of breaking it," I said.

"That's right. And books are made to be read, so this book was probably sad just sitting there in some stuffy cabinet for so many years."

After that, Mr. Bernard and I set about to continue decrypting *The Lost Crown*. Nonna was in charge of the notation.

We decided to limit ourselves to doing ten pages a day so we could enjoy it more. When we weren't decoding, I assisted Mr. Bernard with his research as usual.

Mr. Bernard told me he was beside himself with excitement over breaking the code, and he eagerly awaited our arrival each day.

The time the three of us shared each day decrypting the book was truly enjoyable.

After we spent a week on the task, we discovered Mr. Bernard's initial guess had been correct: The story took place in the western region of Ashbury, Sybil Forest. That was the same place where Jeff had fought in the war.

The code only conveyed the starting point of the path to the crown, and the rest would be unknown until one actually went to the site in person.

"Now for the real question: What do you think the lost crown is, Victoria?"

"I think it's a metaphor for something very valuable, but I can't imagine what it is," I said.

"Huh? Wait. The lost crown *isn't* a crown, Mr. Bernard?" Nonna asked.

"Well, think about it, Nonna. Why would someone steal a crown and hide it in the forest instead of selling it to a collector or melting it down for the gold?"

"Hmm, I guess you've got a point."

“Mr. Bernard, I’m really curious about the princess who nursed the adventurer. I wonder who she was.”

Suddenly, Mr. Bernard froze and began to mutter something to himself. “Wait… Wait just a minute. A hundred years ago… A princess… Could it be?!” He rose to his feet and went over to a bookshelf, then returned with a cardboard box with the words *Fifth Princess Carolina* written on the side. He took a bundle of thick papers out of the box.

“The princess in the story may be the fifth princess, Carolina. The official Ashburian royal family tree had her in its records until she was fifteen, but she disappeared from them the year after that. Yet I couldn’t find any mention of her death anywhere.”

Famous historians certainly are knowledgeable about many things…

“Victoria, I’m thoroughly satisfied with how much we’ve learned. It’s like a dream knowing that Princess Carolina could be tied to *The Lost Crown*. Ahhh, this is so intriguing!” Mr. Bernard had a dreamy look on his face. He was thrilled to learn that this missing princess could somehow be involved with the book.

Nonna and I left Mr. Bernard’s that evening pleasantly tired from our day’s work. We took a leisurely stroll home, and Jeffrey came out to greet us.

“Welcome back. You were at Uncle Bernard’s, right?”

“Yes. Remember that old book he gave us for our wedding present? There was a code hidden in it after all.”

“Hidden? So you cracked the code, then?”

“I did. It was actually pretty easy, though,” I said.

“Easy, huh?” He gave me a wry chuckle, and I detected a hint of worry in his expression.

“It was amazing, Dad! Mr. Bernard and Mom just kept deciphering the code, and my heart was racing the entire time I was writing down the hidden message!” Nonna exclaimed.

“Well? Did you figure out the location of the crown? And are you going to go hunt it down yourself?” Jeff asked.

“I never said that. I have my work to do here at home as a baroness, and I have no desire to go. Don’t worry,” I said.

I thought the conversation was over.

But when I lay down to sleep that night, Jeffrey brought it up again. The lamp was off, and he spoke to me quietly in the darkness of our bedroom.

“Deep down, you really want to go to the place mentioned in the book, don’t you? You’re dying to search for the crown.”

“I’m not. I left the organization when I left Hagl, remember? We’ve been gone from this kingdom for five years, and before that, Nonna and I were bouncing from place to place, so our life was very unstable. I put her through a lot of heartache and loneliness. I have no intention of going out and acting like I’m a spy again.”

“Are you sure? Did you really become Hagl’s top operative because you only did the job begrudgingly?” he asked.

I couldn’t answer.

I didn’t hate the work I’d done as a spy then, and I didn’t hate it now, either. I’d left because I’d lost my family and could no longer trust my boss. Consequently, I no longer had a reason to dedicate my life to the organization. And meeting Nonna and Jeffrey kept me from returning.

I’d made the best decision I could at the time, which led me to my life today.

As I pondered how to answer Jeffrey, he said something that surprised me.

“Why don’t the three of us go to that place from the book?”

“But why? Don’t you have your duties as a baron to worry about?”

“Not for a while. The next ship from Shen doesn’t come for another year. And we already brought over a lot of medicine from Shen with us on this trip. I have plenty of time to go on a family vacation.”

“But Jeff… The place mentioned in the book is deep in Sybil Forest. It holds so many painful memories for you.”

I felt him turn around, and I heard his voice close to my ear.

“What do you think makes a good marriage, Anna?”

“Hmm? Well, I suppose being close with your spouse and getting along well, right?”

“You were separated from your family when you were eight. And I was born to parents who didn’t show even an ounce of

affection to each other. We didn't have the chance to see what a good marriage looked like. So, for a long time, I mulled over what kind of marriage I wanted with you when you and I got married."

He rolled over onto his back again.

"To be honest…I didn't think much about that," I said. "All I could think about was raising Nonna right. After I reunited with you, I was so happy to get to live with you and stop being on the run. Just that has made me plenty happy."

"I want you to smile, Anna. That's all."

"That's all you want?"

"You lived your whole life without relying on others. You're like a wild bird who flies around on her own. I don't want to clip your wings. I want you to smile and be able to fly freely to wherever you want."

"But Jeff…"

"And I don't want your fears about what is or isn't proper of a wife or a baroness to hold you back. I fell in love with you because you're strong, smart, and kind. But most of all, I fell in love with you because you're free. Let's go. Let's go wherever you want, Anna."

I was so moved by his words that hot tears welled up in my eyes. I wrapped my arms around his neck and pressed my forehead against his chin.

"I'm honored that I get to live the rest of my life with a man like you," I said, my voice trembling.

I wondered how many times I'd thought how blessed I was to meet him. And that was why I had to act very carefully—so I wouldn't lose him.

"I want to think about it for a bit first to figure out whether I really want to go look for the lost crown or not," I said.

"Of course. But if you want to go, I think we should. And please don't forget that it's okay for you to live your life freely."

"Thank you, darling. I'll take you up on that because there *is* somewhere I know I'd like to go."

"Is it that pub you used to go to before we left for Shen?"

Oh, he knew about that?

Interlude

✡

Edward Asher's Hunch

Bernard the historian was in high spirits.

After Victoria and Nonna went home, he quickly rushed to the parlor, where the portrait of his late wife Helen hung. He sat down on the sofa facing the portrait and began speaking to it.

"Helen, remember how you were angry with me when I bought that expensive old book without consulting you first? You didn't speak to me for ten days! But guess what? My wish is finally going to come true."

The woman in the portrait smiled back at Bernard as he spoke.

"I think I was just a go-between for Victoria and that book. Their paths were destined to cross. I can't even remember the last time I felt this excited. The Fates certainly do have interesting plans for us, don't they? I want to see this through, Helen. I know that means I'll keep you waiting, but I'd like to stay here for a bit longer."

Just then, there was a knock at his door.

"It's open. Come on in."

"Oh, Uncle. Don't be so careless!"

"Ah, Edward! It's unusual for you to come by so late. What's the matter?"

"Did you really give Victoria *The Lost Crown*?"

"Yes, I did, as a wedding present. She is that book's rightful owner."

"Huh? What does that mean?"

"I puzzled over the mystery of it for twenty years, and Victoria solved it in mere days. The only explanation I have for that is the book was waiting here twenty years for Victoria to come."

Edward's blue eyes twinkled. "She solved the mystery?"

“Do you remember how I’ve been saying for the longest time that I thought there was some kind of code written in *The Lost Crown*?”

“Yes, I remember. You showed it to me, but nothing in particular stood out to me about it.”

“Well, Victoria cracked the code. And today, we finished unraveling the mystery of it together. It was thrilling. We had the best time.”

“And what did the code say?”

“Here it is. Nonna wrote it down for us.”

Bernard handed Edward a piece of paper with Nonna’s pretty handwriting on it. A look of surprise came to Edward’s face after he read it.

“Was this message really hidden in that adventure novel, Uncle?”

“It was indeed.”

“So then Elmer Archibald really did find some kind of lost crown? But he didn’t take it home with him—or *couldn’t*. And Princess Carolina might have been involved?”

“Well, that last part about the princess is just a theory of mine.”

“So what did Victoria say? Is she going there to find it?”

“Of course not. She’s nearly a baroness now, and she has Nonna to think about. Surely she wouldn’t do anything reckless. I’m just satisfied that my long-standing mystery has finally been solved.”

“I see. Well, sorry to bother you. I’ll be going home now.”

“Hmm? But why did you come in the first place?”

“Just to check on you. That’s all. Good night, Uncle.”

But instead of going home after leaving Bernard Fitcher’s estate, Edward hurried to the castle.

He went straight to Document Management on the third floor of the north wing. It was one of the offices of the intelligence organization known as the Third Order of the knights.

Edward entered the department. The men inside all turned to him with surprised looks on their faces.

“Huh? I thought you went home already, Director?”

“Yes, but there was something on my mind. I wanted to come check if the hunch I have is correct.”

Tension filled the room. Edward Asher's hunches were rarely off the mark.

The men kept giving sidelong glances at him while they prepared their documents. Edward went over to the back shelf where old documents were kept and began taking out and opening folder after folder.

Finally, he found the right bundle of documents and headed to his desk, which was on the floor above in the Department of Institutional Maintenance. He flipped through the file and read it carefully. Just then, Mike came over.

"What's going on, Director?"

"Hello there, Mike. It seems a lady we know might have solved something."

Mike was in charge of managing all the information concerning Victoria for the time being. Of course, she was a free citizen now, but both he and Edward were secretly working behind the scenes to protect her from Hagl. They were the only two people in Ashbury who knew that Jeffrey's wife had been a top Hagl spy. Even the other members of the royal family and the prime minister weren't in on the secret.

Edward was well aware that if they *did* find out, he would get a talking-to about mixing his personal affairs with business, so he made sure to act very carefully.

"So? What did she do this time?" Mike asked.

"Mike, have you heard the story about the princess who went missing a century ago?"

"Hmm… Well, I know she went missing. That's about it."

"I think I might know where she went, so…," Edward trailed off. "No, I should stop. It would be too greedy of me."

"C'mon, Director! You can't just tell me that and stop halfway!"

Edward stared at Mike.

"What is it, sir?"

"Jeffrey wouldn't like it if it were you."

"Wouldn't like what? I'm not following you, Director."

"This is just a hunch, you see. But I have this feeling that Victoria's going to go looking for the lost crown. Her skills will lead her to it. She was once Hagl's top covert operative, so I can't imagine she'd give up on it now. And knowing her talents, I can't help but think she'll actually find it."

“The lost crown? You mean the treasure from that novel? And give up on what exactly?”

“You can go back to your desk now,” Edward said.

“Er, yes, sir. All right.” Mike walked back to his desk, scratching his head.

Edward stared at the documents related to the fifth princess’s disappearance and fell into thought.

There were many people who could protect themselves from an assailant.

There were a fair number of people who were skilled at decrypting codes.

There were only a few people who could afford such an expensive book, but they did exist.

It was practically unheard of for one individual to satisfy all three criteria. That was how rare of a person Victoria was. And on top of all this, she had both the luck and the charm to have received an antique copy of *The Lost Crown* as a wedding gift.

Edward’s younger brother had married a woman with charm and talents no ordinary man could match.

“It must be rough for Jeffrey…” Edward couldn’t help but sympathize with his brother, who was very serious and straitlaced. Surely he would be so desperate not to lose his charming wife that he would worry endlessly about her.

His intuition was telling him, *She’s going to look for the crown. Send someone with her who can see, hear, and record the process.*

She might solve one or even two mysteries that had lingered unsolved in Ashbury’s history for quite some time now. He couldn’t let this opportunity pass. He tried to think of someone she wouldn’t be opposed to going with her, who could also be helpful in documenting the journey.

“Jeffrey wouldn’t want Mike going with her. And Victoria knows Miles’s identity, so it would be difficult for her to act.”

Edward pondered this for a while but couldn’t come up with an answer, so he decided to go home and think about it some more.

“I’m home, Mother.”

“Welcome back, Edward. Were you busy at work today?”

“Yes, I was fairly busy.”

“I wonder if Jeff is tied up by his work with the knights. I just hope he gets married soon.”

“Mother, Jeff already got married.”

“Oh, did he? I must’ve forgotten again!”

“Jeffrey’s wife is a wonderful woman, so don’t worry.”

“I see… That’s nice. He’s had such a terrible time, you know. Such a pitiful upbringing because I wasn’t able to protect you both.”

His mother began to shed tears, so Edward gently patted her back to comfort her.

Sometimes, his mother’s condition would cause her mind to regress in time. Right now, she seemed to be stuck in the period when Jeffrey had still been a young bachelor.

His father had been too emotionally volatile to provide his family with a stable home life. He had broken their mother’s heart and had stolen Edward and Jeffrey’s happy childhoods away.

But he was their father, and without him, neither brother would have been brought into this world. There was nothing to be done about that fact.

Edward left his mother’s room and went to his bedroom. His wife, Blythe, took his jacket from him.

“Mother’s not doing well today,” he said.

“I know. She has days like this, though. She’s only human.”

“Yes… Thank you for everything you do. I’m beyond grateful I married you.”

“Goodness, don’t you think that’s going a little overboard?”

It wasn’t going overboard at all. He was endlessly thankful for his wife, who’d grown up in a loving, happy home and thought such things were natural, while he had grown up in a living hell. Blythe wanted their family experience to be just as loving and happy as her childhood was, and since Edward had never experienced that before, it felt like heaven to him.

And as he relaxed with his ideal family, a certain someone’s face abruptly popped into his mind.

“I know! Clark can do it! He’s a civil servant now, and he’d be the perfect recordkeeper!”

With that settled, there came a knock at the door. It was a servant delivering a letter to him from Jeffrey.

During our five years in Shen, we never got to take a vacation together, so we'll be going on a family vacation soon. I'll return before my peerage is conferred.

Once he read the letter from his younger brother, a smile crossed Edward's face. *It appears my hunch was correct.*

Chapter Three

Innermost Feelings

We decided to follow the clues from the code in *The Lost Crown* and search for the treasure.

After we spent several days preparing, we would be leaving tomorrow.

"We're going on a trip, we're going on a trip!" Nonna chanted as she finished packing. She was in high spirits.

I watched her with a smile, but Bertha was very worried. "My lady, you only just got home. Aren't you still tired from your journey?"

"Bertha, we never got to take a vacation together while we were in Shen. This will be our first family trip together since we got married."

"Oh goodness! Is that right? Not a single break in five years? Well, don't you worry, my lady. We'll take care of everything back here at home."

"Thanks. Our work there was very interesting, even though we didn't get to take any time off. So we were partly to blame for never going on a trip. Oh, that reminds me!"

I handed her a box filled with handmade hand lotion, ointment for burns, medicine for upset stomachs, and cold medicine. Altogether, it was quite a lot.

"When I was in Shen, I learned how to make medicine. There's a packet in there detailing how to use all of these. Please let the staff know they're more than welcome to use anything in that box as needed."

"Oh my! How very useful! Thank you so much."

After that conversation, I saw Master Clark coming through our gate.

"Jeff, Master Clark is here."

Jeffrey looked out the window while Nonna raced outside. She said something to Master Clark and then came back inside.

“Good morning, Uncle Jeff.”

“You don’t have work today, Clark?”

“I actually came here because of work. Uncle Edward told me you were going on a trip, and he said he wanted me to accompany you as part of an assignment with the Document Management department. I’ve already gotten permission, and last night, he asked me to record the details of the journey,” Clark said.

“My brother said that? Oh, he must have heard about it from Uncle Bernard. I suppose that makes sense, given we might discover some things of historical note,” Jeff said.

“Yes, that’s what I was told. Um, are you already packed?”

“Yes, we’re leaving early tomorrow morning,” Jeff said.

“Early tomorrow morning? Uncle, do you mind if I come with you to document the journey?”

“There’s one thing I want you to promise me if you come along with us, Clark.”

Jeffrey’s face grew so serious that Master Clark was taken aback.

“You can write down anything we discover. However, please don’t report on personal details involving our family. This trip is our way of rewarding ourselves after five years of hard work in Shen.”

“I promise not to report on any conversations you have or record any details about your personal lives.”

“Good. Then you can come with us.”

And with that, Master Clark rushed home.

“Jeff, I thought that Lord Edward worked for the Department of Institutional Maintenance?”

“He does. But the prime minister told my brother he could be in charge of all three departments if he liked because they were busy. I believe that’s the Department of Institutional Maintenance, Document Management, and the Department of Repairs. So he’s the head of all three.”

“That explains why he’s always so busy.”

Nonna must’ve been quite happy that Master Clark was accompanying us because she had planted her feet shoulder-width apart on the floor and was going through her martial arts forms. She quickly punched one fist into the air, then pulled it

back. Bertha was in the room and looked quite baffled at the display.

"*Ahem*. *Ahem*!" I cleared my throat to get Nonna's attention. She looked up with surprise and glanced back and forth between me and Bertha.

"Bertha, Nonna learned that watching the guards in Shen train. She can be such a tomboy sometimes!" I said.

"Oh, I see. Well, she certainly looks good at it!" Bertha smiled and excused herself from the room.

I waited until she was gone and turned toward Nonna.

"I know. I'm sorry. I won't do it in front of anyone but family from now on," she said before I could get a word in.

"Nonna, I'm not angry. It's just I want you to remember that you shouldn't show people the cards you hold so easily. You should only reveal your hand to others when you're going to use it."

"Yes, Mom."

"With that being said, I must admit I've sometimes been absentminded and done the same thing. Let's both be more careful from now on."

The two of us shared a laugh over the incident.

That night after dinner, I asked Jeff for a favor.

"Do you think it would be all right if I went to visit someone else who helped me out during my time in Ashbury and let them know I'm back? I want to give them some medicine I made, too. I'll be back in about an hour. I'm going to that pub I used to frequent. And do you mind if I go by myself?"

"Not at all. But since it's nighttime, please take the carriage."

"Thanks, Jeff. I'll come back as soon as I can."

"No need. Take your time and relax."

I pressed my forehead against Jeff's chest as I hugged him as a sign of my gratitude.

I opened the door to The Black Thrush and looked inside. Zaharo glanced up at me and instantly froze. He sat down the glass he was drying and rushed over to me with big strides. It felt like time had stopped for a moment—he hadn't changed a bit in five years.

“You’re alive! Where have you been all this time? I was worried when you stopped showing up all of a sudden,” he said.

“I’m sorry. It’s complicated, but I’ve been working in another country for the past five years.”

“Another country? Oh, please have a seat. Will you sit at the bar?”

“Sure.”

There were only two other customers in the place—a couple sitting back in the corner who looked quite cozy, chatting with their faces close to each other.

Zaharo poured me a glass of my favorite liquor, which I’d often drunk here five years ago.

“Well? What happened? Hector wasn’t involved, was he?”

“No, it was nothing like that. It was personal circumstances. I was studying how to make medicine in the kingdom of Shen. I brought you this.”

I handed him the medicine, and he took off the lid and sniffed it. “It smells like medicinal herbs.”

“It’s an ointment for cracked, rough hands. Since you wash so many dishes, I know your hands get dry,” I said.

“Shen is so far away. You took your daughter with you, too?”

“Yes. I got married, so I went with her and my husband.”

“Married?”

“Yes.”

Zaharo took out another glass, poured some alcohol in it, and lifted it up. “Let me make a toast to you, then.”

“Thanks.”

“Damn, you got hitched? That dashes my hopes of scooping you up, then. What a shame…”

“Those words don’t match the look on your face, Zaharo,” I said.

“That obvious?” He grinned at me as we clinked our glasses together and sipped our drinks.

The strong liquor burned my throat as it went down and filled my belly with warmth. I felt my body relax as if those folded wings of mine were finally starting to stretch out. Being able to sit here and have a drink was heaven.

“So where are you living now?”

“The eastern quarter.”

“You got married and moved to the eastern quarter? Are you a noble now?”

“Yes. As I said, a lot happened. Nonna was there the whole time.”

“I’d say a bit *too much* happened!” Zaharo said with a wry chuckle.

“Maybe you’re right.”

There was a lot I wanted to talk to him about, but I had to get up early the next day. I had one more drink and then got up to leave.

“The drinks are on me. It’s a wedding present,” Zaharo had said, refusing to accept my payment.

I was about to get into the carriage, which was parked near the pub, but turned around when I felt someone watching me. Zaharo was standing there, staring at the carriage.

“Good night, Zaharo.”

“Mm-hmm. Good night.” He smiled at me.

I waved and shut the door of the carriage behind me. After the carriage pulled away, I turned and saw that Zaharo was still standing in the same spot, staring after it.

Even though I had met him after I left the organization, for some reason, I couldn’t shake the feeling he had worked with me in it. I felt a sense of camaraderie with him. That was because we both had pasts we couldn’t tell other people about.

When the carriage pulled into the grounds of our estate, I saw the warm, cozy glow of the lights on in each room. The house seemed to be saying, *“Welcome home!”* to me. When I used to come back from the pub, I would hop over the wall of Lady Yolana’s estate to return to my little cottage. *Oh, how things have changed.*

Jeffrey opened the front door, where he was waiting for me.

“Welcome home, Anna.”

“Thanks, Jeff.”

“Were you able to see your friend?”

“I did. I told him I got married.”

“I see.”

I went inside and used the restroom, then sat in front of my dressing table to let down my hair. Nonna came into my bedroom.

“Nonna, we should get to sleep soon. We have to leave early tomorrow when it’s still dark outside.”

“I wanted to tell you something first, Mom. Dad was very worried. He asked me, ‘Do you know who Mom went to go see tonight?’ But I told him, ‘Oh, don’t worry. It’s just an older guy who loves sweets.’”

“Oh, really? Thanks.”

She had a proud look on her face, as if to say, “I was really helpful, wasn’t I?” I watched as she left the room, then continued taking down my hair. Evidently, Jeffrey really had been worried about me going out by myself. *Well, that makes sense*, I thought.

But “an older guy who loves sweets”? That probably only made him worry more!

It was quite late by the time I was ready for bed. I thought Jeff was already asleep in another room since he was turning in early, but he surprised me when he came into the bedroom.

“What is it, Jeff?”

“Nothing. I just wanted to sleep with you.”

“Oh. Well, come on into bed, then.”

He moved gracefully like a big cat through the darkness as he slipped into bed beside me. I decided to clear up what he’d heard from Nonna, just in case.

“Tonight, I went to that pub I told you about. I had two drinks, told the proprietor I got married, and then came straight home.”

“All right. It’s fine, though. You don’t have any obligation to report back to me, Anna.”

“Yes, but I want you to know. I don’t want you to worry. We’re going to be living with each other forever now, so I want you to know who I’m with and what I’m doing when you’re not with me. It will make me feel more at ease. Oh, but don’t take this to mean that I want you to report back to me in the same way,” I added hastily.

“I know.” He pulled me into the crook of his arm. I loved when we snuggled like this, but I always worried that his arm would go numb with me lying on it. “I would never dream of hiding anything from you, nor would I want to.”

“Really?”

“Yes. But I have to admit…I was a little jealous today.”

“I thought so. I won’t go there anymore.”

He grabbed my shoulder with his left hand to pull me even closer. “No, you can go wherever you want, whenever you want. I don’t want you to miss out on anything. Sometimes, I get frightened that I’ll turn out just like that arrogant father of mine.”

“Jeff…”

“I never want to be controlling of my family like he was with his.”

Jeffrey’s wounds from the past were still raw and oozing, formed by the fear and hatred he had experienced as a helpless child. They were painful memories that would play out time and time again in his mind, just like the emotional wounds I had incurred during my time as a spy.

“I wish we could overwrite all those painful memories with happy ones,” I said.

“I do, too.”

“When I go to that pub alone, I can truly feel like myself. All I have to do is sit there and have a few drinks, and that’s enough.”

“Yeah.”

“And when I do that, it almost feels like wings stretch out from my back and unfold. But I want you to know I have absolutely no intention of flapping my wings and flying off somewhere far away. I’ll always come home, back to your side.”

“Ha-ha…”

“Why are you laughing? I’m being serious here.”

“Ah, I’m sorry. It’s just, most of the time, that’s something a man would say. ‘I’ll always come back home to you’ is the playboy’s favorite excuse.”

“I didn’t mean—”

“I know. It’s just funny because when I asked you to marry me, you were the one who said, ‘I’m going to protect you and Nonna.’”

“Oh! I suppose I did say that, didn’t I?”

The two of us laughed and drifted off to sleep in a pleasant mood. Right before I fell asleep, I thought of my conversation with Lady Yolana a few days ago.



Right after we'd decided to go on the trip, I'd dropped by Lady Yolana's estate to ask for some advice. Nonna was with me, and the moment we got there, she and Susan went off into another room together to talk about bobbin lace and knitting.

"Why, what's the matter, Victoria? Is something bothering you?"

"Goodness, is it that obvious?"

"You're the kind of person who can't tell a lie, so I always notice right away."

I felt a pang in my chest.

I'd lived my entire life telling lies. In fact, I'd lied to Lady Yolana plenty of times.

"So? What is it?" she asked.

"Lady Yolana, there's this pub I liked to go to alone at night from time to time. I didn't stay long, and I only spent about an hour there before returning home."

"Hmm. Yes, what about it?"

"Well, I feel guilty about it. Jeffrey says I can go, and I think he probably truly means that, but even if that's what he thinks, what if deep down in his heart he really *doesn't* want me to go? That's what I've been worried about. Did you ever go through anything like that back when your husband was alive?"

Lady Yolana gazed into her teacup as she listened to me, then giggled softly and looked up at me.

"In your case, you aren't lying to your husband. But I did lie and go out. You don't live to be my age and never tell a lie now and again, so I'll tell you about it. I went out during the day and took my maid with me, but I lied to my husband and mother-in-law all the time about why we went. Now, I didn't *want* to lie, of course."

"Oh my," I said, surprised to hear that.

"In my case, my husband's mother was very serious and stubborn. She didn't mean any harm, but she was very much the type to think only *her* values were correct. And since she

thought what she believed was the only right way, she expected me to adhere to her beliefs as well."

"Uh-huh."

"And that was quite difficult, you know."

Lady Yolana had a nostalgic look on her face as she recalled the past. "The problem was cards if you can believe it. My mother-in-law despised every sort of card game there was. She firmly believed that cards were something men played and that women had no business getting involved in them. That must have been the way she was raised, I suppose. However, my family loved playing cards together, so when I heard her opinion on the matter, I was just shocked."

"Was it because some card games can be used for gambling?"

"That was part of it, I'm sure. But aren't card games more fun when you bet something? My friends and I would play cards and bet with cookies. It was completely harmless, and the evidence was gone once we ate our treats, but my mother-in-law just couldn't get over it. She kept on telling me I was forbidden from playing cards."

If she wouldn't even allow betting with cookies, then perhaps she had an issue with gambling itself instead of what they gambled with.

"Not to toot my own horn, but I was a good wife, a good daughter-in-law, and a good mother. I performed my duties as a noblewoman as perfectly as I could, and I ran the house smoothly. Besides the issue with cards, I got along fine with my mother-in-law. I took good care of my children. But back then, I felt guilty about spending time on myself. Hearing your story made me remember that."

"You felt guilty?"

"When I was young, I was always *determined* not to do anything people would judge me for. I was so busy worrying about it that days and years flew by before I knew it. Because the moment you start worrying about what others think of you, suddenly you have an endless chain of things to do. For example, I'd be so busy preparing to celebrate my mother's birthday and get lost in the hubbub of it that the next thing I knew, it was time to prepare for my mother-in-law's birthday. By the time I realized what I was doing, I felt frightened. I

thought, ‘What if I grow old and die just like this?’ What a boring life I would have led.”

“Lady Yolana…”

Lady Yolana had always struck me as such a solid, strong-willed person that it was shocking to hear she had gone through a time in her life with such worries.

“After that, I started to prioritize my own feelings over the opinions of others. And I went to play cards with my friends once a month. I lied to my mother-in-law and told her I was just going to a regular tea party, but we were really playing cards. On those days, I could just be myself—not a wife, not a daughter-in-law, not a mother. I could just be a *person*, you know? Now I feel like that every day, of course.”

“You started to value your own feelings…,” I repeated.

“I tried so hard to make everyone else around me happy that I always felt exhausted and gloomy. I was consumed with thoughts of all the things I *thought* I should be doing that I drove myself into a corner. No matter how you look at it, surely that’s wrong, don’t you agree? No one ever asked me to spend my life pleasing them, yet there I was doing it to myself.”

“And then it would be like everyone else was happy at the expense of your personal sacrifices.”

“Precisely. My family never asked me to do it, but I was torturing myself over it.” Lady Yolana held out a plate of cookies, urging me to take one.

“I remember this one time I had a terrible headache that just wouldn’t go away. I’m not sure if it was due to overwork or stress. But it occurred to me that if I kept working myself to the bone for my family to the point of getting sick, without ever making time for myself, then I would start to resent them one day. ‘I’ve sacrificed so much for you that I’m going to die early because of it!’ You know, that sort of thing. And that’s when I decided I wasn’t going to feel guilty about having a good time anymore, even if I had to lie about it.”

I quietly waited for her to continue.

“I thought I was doing all those things because I wanted to, but at some point, I found myself thinking, ‘I’m working so hard

for these people. And yet…' That resentment started creeping in without me realizing it."

"That's frightening."

"Everyone has their own opinions on how a married woman should live. And the most important thing to me was for my family to be happy. So what's wrong if a few white lies helped me get there? I think that's what it means to be an adult, you know? Because telling those lies didn't just let me avoid upsetting my mother-in-law—it also let me release my stress and have fun while I chatted with my friends and played cards."

"That's right," I agreed.

Lady Yolana touched her snow-white hair and gave me a smile. "You should go wherever you please, Victoria. Because if it will help you be happy, then that means your family will be happy. And I think that's the right thing to do."

"I understand."

She was right. The most important thing to me was that Nonna and Jeffrey were happy. Because as long as they were, I could get through most anything. So it was good for me to spread my wings and relax every now and then at the pub.

Then I would go back home, and we could all be happy together.

I thanked Lady Yolana and left with Nonna. Then we headed straight for Mr. Bernard's house.

"What is it, Victoria?"

"Mr. Bernard, our family has decided to set out for Sybil Forest to investigate the secret message we found in the novel."

"My word! Young people certainly do move fast, don't they? So Jeffrey's going with you, then?"

"Dad *and* I are going, Mr. Bernard!"

"Oh, you're going, too, Nonna?"

"That's right. Actually, I wasn't sure about it, but Jeffrey was the one who encouraged me to go for it," I explained.

"I see, I see! Well, I can't wait to hear all about it. But please don't do anything reckless now, you hear? You know, I'd be pleased just to hear a description of Sybil Forest. That would be enough for me!"

"Anyway, I just wanted to come over and let you know we were leaving," I said.

“All right. You enjoy yourselves now.”

“I promise to bring you back a souvenir we find there, Mr. Bernard!” Nonna promised.

“Oh, I’m looking forward to seeing what you’ll bring back for me!”

I remembered something very important on the way back home in the carriage. “Oh, Nonna… I nearly forgot, but…”

“I know. I’ll only give Mr. Bernard a souvenir of something we find on our trip. Everyone else can have store-bought souvenirs, right?”

Oh, so she already knew.

We both smiled at each other, and the restless sense that I was forgetting something disappeared from my heart.

Chapter Four

To Sybil Forest

On the day of our departure, Master Clark arrived before sunup, and we all got into the carriage together.

I thought it was going a bit overboard to take a carriage with four horses, but Jeffrey knew the area, and he was the one who decided on it. “If something happens to the carriage due to the terrain, then we each have a horse to ride,” he had reasoned. Our stableman Reed was the driver. Jeffrey sat across from me in the carriage and grinned.

“You’re in an awfully good mood,” I said.

“I’m going on a trip with my wonderful wife. How could I not be happy?”

At times like these, I thought there was no way I could go back to my former life. When I had been a spy, I’d never loved anyone else, but I’d also never really thought about romance.

But now that I knew the joy of loving and being loved, I couldn’t go back to that way of life anymore. In fact, being exposed to the joys of having a family made me frightened of losing it. I couldn’t even imagine not having something so precious in my life again.

We traveled for about two hours before taking a break by a stream to give the horses time to rest. We laid out some blankets on the shore to sit for a while. I took the opportunity to explain our goals for the trip to Master Clark since he didn’t have much information about it.

“So basically, you were able to solve the hidden code in the novel in a matter of days, Miss Victoria?”

“I wouldn’t even call it a code, Master Clark. It was a trick so simple even a child could do it.”

“Yes, but…”

“Victoria’s loved adventure novels ever since she was a child, and she read about so many codes that she learned to decipher them herself,” Jeff said.

“That’s incredible. But I’d expect nothing less from Miss Victoria.”

Since Master Clark was accompanying us on this trip, Jeff was calling me Victoria instead of Anna.

Five years ago, I had been Master Clark’s foreign language tutor. Back then, he had called me Miss Victoria. It seemed he liked calling me that because he still continued to do so. Now eighteen, Master Clark was quite the handsome young man, and his emerald-green eyes shined with intelligence.

“So where are we headed exactly, Miss Victoria?” he asked.

“According to Elmer Archibald’s code, there are several markers deep in Sybil Forest that lead to the lost crown. I’m sure it would be tough to search the middle of the forest, but we should be able to find it if we follow the landmarks written in the code. And if we don’t find anything, then we can just chalk it all up to a fun journey and be on our way!” I said.

“Mom, does that mean we’ll be sleeping in the forest at night?”

“That’s right. Does that scare you, Nonna?”

“No way! I’m excited!”

The path to the lost crown can only be traveled by the brave.
The first marker is a white monument within the forest.

The code mentioned the approximate distance to the first marker, some kind of white stone monument in a forest, which we believed was Sybil Forest specifically. It seemed like the other landmarks would become clear once we arrived at the first one.

Since the roads out here weren’t very well-maintained, Reed slowed down the carriage. But we could only travel while the sun was up. I guessed it would take the carriage about a week or so to reach Sybil Forest.

Three days into our journey, Nonna suddenly said, “Mom, I’m about to explode. If I stay in this carriage one more minute, *kaboom*! I’ll simply blow up!” I got where she was coming from. The lack of exercise was also making me restless.

So we decided to stop and train as a family for a while.

Master Clark had some knowledge of my and Nonna's abilities from when he'd been a child, but Nonna's skills had progressed very quickly and dramatically in Shen, so I was a bit hesitant for her to show them to him.

"Clark, Nonna and Victoria learned Shenese martial arts while we were abroad. They're quite good at it." Jeff just came right out and told Master Clark, then glanced over at me. *Oh, I see.* I supposed he decided it was better to just tell him the truth instead of trying to hide it.

Hmm, shall I spar with Nonna? I shot a questioning look at Jeffrey, who nodded back at me with a smile.

So from that day on, our family was allowed to train in front of Master Clark and Reed.

"Jeff, is this the reason why you asked him not to write anything about our family's personal life?"

"Yes. I figured Nonna wouldn't be able to sit still for long."

That's my Jeffrey.

But thanks to his keen insight, the three of us were able to get in some good exercise once a day.

Nonna's speed while she trained was astonishing. She was so light that she moved around like a nimble fairy. If she kept sharpening her skills as she matured, she would be such a force that even most men wouldn't be able to stand a chance against her.

Reed initially looked startled, but Jeffrey explained, "My wife and daughter learned martial arts while we were in Shen." I wasn't sure how much of that he believed, but he didn't say another word about it.

I broke a tree branch off about the length of a dagger to spar with my lithe fairy Nonna. She sharply shouted *Hah!* and *Yah!* as she delivered a flurry of kicks and punches with incredible speed. Her golden braid swung around wildly as she came at me with everything she had.

I adopted a defensive since I didn't want her to get hurt. I managed to block the hits, but I didn't have much time for anything else. Her skills had improved that much.

"It feels frustrating to be the only one sitting and watching." Master Clark seemed stunned the first day, but the next day, he began to practice swordsmanship with Jeffrey. Well, Jeffrey

wasn't so much sparring with Master Clark as he was coaching him because he wasn't even breaking a sweat. The sounds of their wooden swords clunking against each other came much slower than when I trained with him.

"I want to train with a wooden sword, too!" Even though Nonna had just finished her martial arts practice with me, she eagerly began to train with Jeffrey right after he was done coaching Master Clark. Her skill with a wooden sword was also impressive.

For a moment, I found myself wondering, *Just how strong will Nonna become?* However, I quickly pushed the thought out of my mind. Trying to hold my daughter back would just make her explode. *Kaboom!*

A week after we left home, we finally reached Sybil Forest.

I wonder if it's painful for Jeffrey to come back to the place that holds memories of the war for him, I thought, casting a sidelong glance at him. He kept staring straight ahead and took my hand.

"Could we stop here for a moment?" he asked.

"Of course."

Jeff had Reed stop the carriage, then quietly got out. He bowed toward the grass, his silver hair falling over his face as he silently began to pray. He took a silver flask from his bag and poured some alcohol out onto the ground, then spoke aloud.

"For the brave men who lost their lives here."

And that was how I learned we had reached the battlefield.

There was nothing out here—just a field of grass in front of the forest.

Here in this deserted place, much blood had been spilled, and as a result of the tragedy here, Jeffrey's fiancée had ended her life. I closed my eyes and prayed for the brave men who had fought here and for Jeffrey's fiancée. *May you all rest in peace.* The other three followed suit.

"Thank you, Victoria. I'm fine. My memories of the war have scarred over now. They don't hurt anymore," Jeff said.

"I'm glad to hear that."

The old wounds on my heart still hurt. I couldn't help but pray that Jeffrey was telling the truth about him no longer experiencing the pain.

We got back into the carriage and drove to the town of Sybil.

The industry there revolved around wood, including reforestation, logging, and lumber processing. It was virtually a self-sufficient town thanks to its forestry and agriculture.

We rented rooms at an inn that primarily catered to logging merchants and inquired at the front desk about a white stone monument in the forest.

“A white stone monument? I can’t say I’ve ever heard of that,” the staff member replied.

“We heard it’s about thirty kilometers from here, deep within the forest.”

“If it’s deeper than the reforested area, it might be helpful to ask at the Sybil Forestry Association.”

“Oh, I see. Thank you.”

The Sybil Forestry Association was located in the center of town. We headed inside the building and saw that it was bustling with burly men. The head of the association greeted us.

“Hmm, a white stone monument thirty kilometers into the forest? Never heard of such a thing. But it’ll be tough going beyond the reforestation zone. You can’t use a carriage, so you’ll have to go on horseback.”

We thanked him and left the building. We bought some meat and vegetables, then got back in the carriage. The road to the reforestation zone was quite well-maintained, so we were able to travel there via carriage. Towering conifers lined the path, casting deep shadows over the area. The carriage crept through the dim, eerily silent forest, where even the cries of birds were absent.

The problem was what lay ahead. The trees grew thicker and denser, and the road narrowed, leading us to a section of the woods where only patches of sunlight filtered through. It looked like we couldn’t go any farther with the carriage.

“Looks like the carriage won’t cut it anymore. Let’s switch to horseback.”

“Jeff, are we just going to leave the carriage here? Won’t it get stolen?” I asked.

“We can leave a note. If it gets stolen, we can deal with it when the time comes, but it’s a serious crime to steal the carriage of a noble. I think we should be fine. Everyone in this town seems to know one another, so it would be hard to get away with,” he reassured me.

“I love how optimistic you are, darling.”

“Here we go again. Master Clark, my parents are crazy about each other,” Nonna said.

“Isn’t that a good thing?” he asked.

“I guess so.”

Jeffrey and I laughed as we listened to their conversation.

I had a good sense of distance thanks to my training as a spy, so I decided to rely on that. We loaded our bags onto the horses, and the five of us traveled in a straight line. I was at the head of the party, followed by Nonna and Reed on one horse. Then came Master Clark on his horse, with Jeffrey at the rear.

I immediately felt the slope as we entered the dense grove. We were at the foot of a mountain, climbing up.

The peak of Mount Sybil lay shrouded in clouds, deep in the forest. As the dense conifers gave way to a greater variety of trees, we began to hear the sound of birds echoing in the forest. *There are a lot of birds who live in the forest depths*, I thought.

During our time in the carriage, Nonna and Master Clark had rekindled their old friendship. They were riding close to each other and chatting on the way.

“Oh! I see something white!”

“Wait, Nonna!”

Nonna urged Reed to make the horse go faster while Master Clark hastily followed after her. Jeffrey and I rode faster, too.

The white monument was larger than expected. It didn’t seem like someone had carried in a stone and placed it here, but rather, they had carved letters into a large white rock that had already been here to begin with. We all dismounted and went over to look at it.

Ten kilometers north.

“Mom, was this the only marker in the code?”

“It was. But doesn’t that make it feel even more like an adventure?”

“It must’ve flown all the way here,” Jeff remarked.

“What do you mean, it flew here?” Nonna asked.

“A long time ago, that mountain must have erupted, sending that boulder flying all the way down here.” Jeffrey pointed, and Nonna followed his gaze.

We could see the green of Mount Sybil in the distance. It was a beautiful mountain with a wide base.

Master Clark took out a small notebook and began scribbling something in it.



We got back on our horses and continued up the gentle slope, making our way through the forest packed with both broad-leaved trees and conifers.

There was no longer a man-made path to follow, just trails made by animals.

The temperature suddenly plummeted as the sun began to set, and we came out into a clearing in the forest. We found a small house made of stone there.

“Is this the next landmark, Miss Victoria?” Master Clark asked.

“I think so. We’ve traveled about ten kilometers north of that stone by now,” I replied.

“Perfect. Victoria, let’s stay here tonight,” Jeff suggested.

“Mom, there’s a well! It’s overflowing with water!” Nonna exclaimed.

“Goodness, you’re right! It must be an artesian well. The terrain here seems to be rich with groundwater.”

We dismounted and went inside the house, leaving the horses to graze on the nearby grass. One of them began to gulp up the gushing, cold water from the well.

It wasn’t clear how long ago this house had been used, but it wasn’t as run-down inside as I’d expected. The place was filled with dust, of course, but it was better than sleeping outside.

The slate roof was sturdy, but there were signs of some leaks due to rainwater here and there.

“I bet it was hard to live so deep in the forest. I wonder why anyone built a house out here,” I mused.

“Victoria, do you think this house belonged to the writer and the princess?”

“We got here from following the clues in the code, so I think so. We don’t have enough evidence to be sure that the princess

in the story was really royalty, though, so I can't be certain. At any rate, let's make dinner. There's no rush."

"All right. I'll help."

There was a wood-burning stove inside the house, but after consulting with Jeffrey, we decided to cook on an open fire outside instead. Since Nonna and Master Clark had no experience with such things, we thought it would be fun for them to enjoy a meal by campfire.

Jeffrey was skilled at starting fires. He got some dead cedar branches and pine cones together, and before long, they were crackling away.

Meanwhile, I used my sword to cut down a nearby tree branch and sliced it into thin strips to serve as skewers for our meat. I seasoned the meat with salt and stuck the skewers into the ground around the campfire. Using a big leaf from a tree as a cutting board, I cut thin slices of bread. Then I boiled water in a pot we'd brought and added chopped vegetables, salt, herbs, and thin slices of sausage to it. Finally, I placed the pot near the fire.

"That smells amazing, Mom!" Nonna exclaimed.

"I've never eaten food like this before, Miss Victoria! I'm really excited," Master Clark said.

They both seemed thrilled, which brought a smile to my and Jeffrey's faces.

The sausage soup was bubbling away on the fire, and I could hear the meat from the skewers sizzling away as the fat dripped down.

"It should be about ready. I'll go ahead and dish out the soup," I said.

"Dad, can I eat the skewers yet?" Nonna asked.

"Yes, go right ahead."

Nonna and Master Clark bit into the skewers. Their faces immediately broke into smiles as they said, "Mmm, delicious!" in unison.

We were about halfway through our food when I looked over at Jeffrey. He was looking at me, too. He turned toward the others and spoke in a low voice.

"Nonna, Clark, Reed, I want you to keep eating and listen to me. There's a group of suspicious men lurking nearby. Four or five of them. They're heavy, and I think they're quite muscular. I'm fairly certain they're armed."

Master Clark and Reed's faces tightened. Nonna kept her gaze on the fire and nodded slightly as she chewed her meat.

"Victoria and I will take them on. I want you three to seek shelter inside the house. Block the door from the inside with anything you can move. Nonna, you're in charge of taking care of Clark and Reed," Jeff said.

"I understand."

"Wait. I can fight, too!"

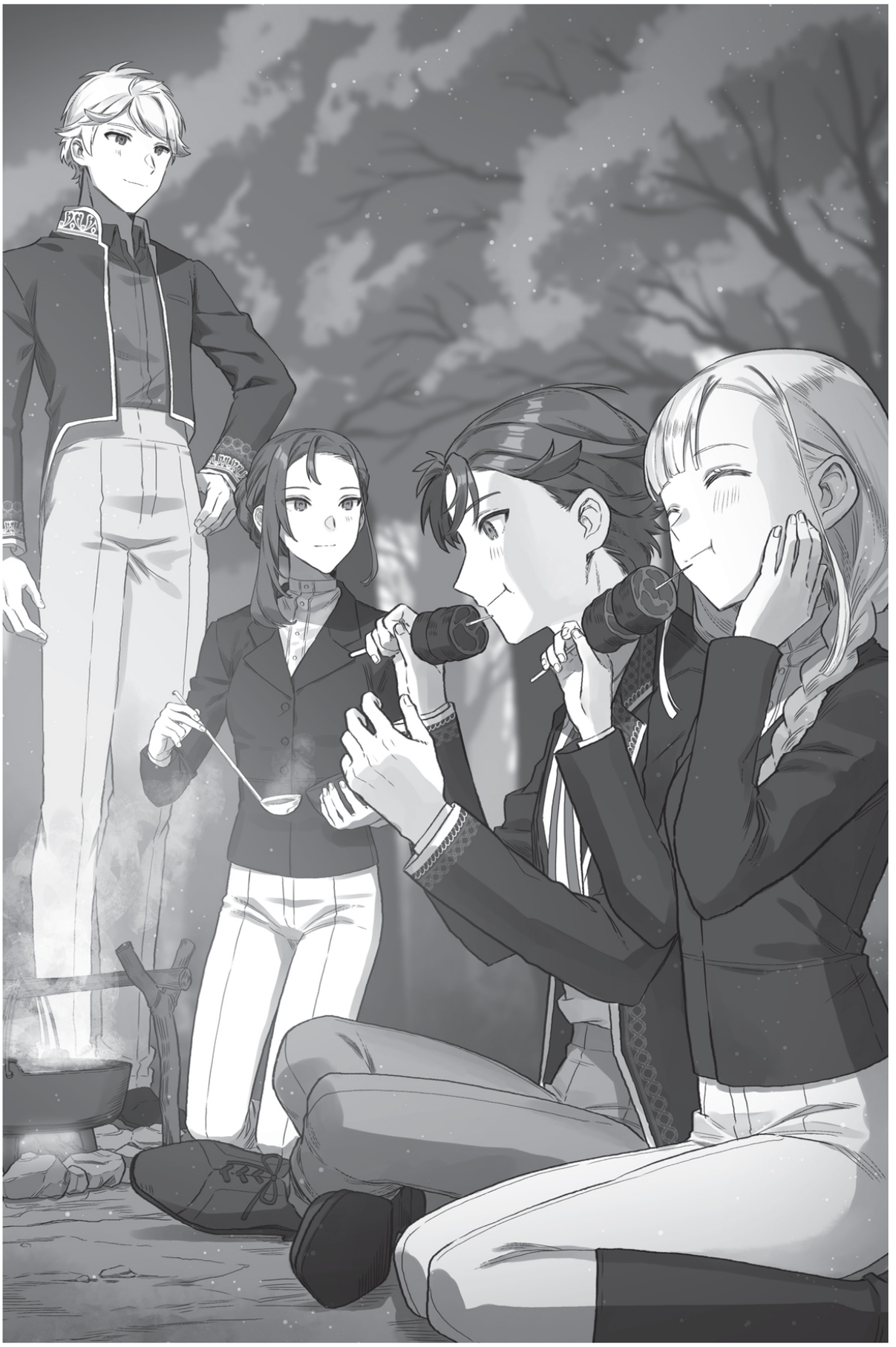
"No, Clark. You don't have combat experience. The worst thing that could happen right now is them taking you hostage. Got it?"

"…Yes, Uncle."

"I'm going to count to three, and then we'll all move at the same time. One, two, three, go!"

Master Clark, Nonna, and Reed all shot to their feet and ran inside the house. Nonna was still holding a half-eaten meat skewer.

Jeffrey and I reached for our weapons and split up to the left and right, our backs to the campfire.



“Come out. If you surrender now, we’ll have mercy on you. But if you attack, consider yourselves dead,” Jeff called out loudly.

I guessed they were bandits. We wanted to use this house as the base of our operations, so it would be a pain if we had to kill them. It would be troublesome to leave corpses lying around, and I didn’t want to go through the annoyance of the security forces asking what happened. I hoped they would surrender.

However, they had no intention of listening to us. Two burly men charged at Jeffrey and me, wielding machetes.

Jeffrey deftly dodged one and thrust his scabbard into the man’s right side, just below the ribs where the liver was located. Meanwhile, another man with a machete lunged at me, but I quickly sidestepped and drove my fist into his solar plexus, then kicked him in his ribcage from behind. I heard the sickening *crack* of his ribs breaking.

Nevertheless, the men staggered back to their feet. Their thick muscles must’ve absorbed most of the blows.

But they were slowing down, making them no match for Jeffrey and me. It was time to finish this. I charged past one of the men, slicing his left knee with my dagger. It was a deep cut, and he let out a terrible scream. But I’d had no other choice.

Jeffrey caught his opponent in a headlock from behind and rendered him unconscious.

I wondered if Nonna was learning that being larger in size didn’t necessarily equate to having superior fighting ability. Judging by their clothing, it didn’t seem like these men were bandits or thieves.

I scanned the dark forest, certain there’d been at least two more of them. Just then, two more burly young men emerged, raising their arms high while holding machetes.

“I’m sorry! Please forgive us!”

“We were only following orders from our superiors. We had no choice.”

“Before you give us excuses, throw your machetes on the ground and get down on your knees. Put both hands on the back of your head and lace your fingers together.” Jeff’s voice was deep and threatening.

The men obeyed, tossing their machetes onto the ground and getting onto their knees. Jeff stood over them with his sword drawn while I tied them up. Using as little rope as possible while still making sure the knots wouldn't come loose was one of my specialties.

"We were trying to let our children enjoy a fun camping experience, so why did you attack us? Money?" Jeff asked.

"Camping? Tony told us to protect the fields. That's all we were doing."

"Stop blabbing, Mack!" The man who'd attacked me shouted as he lay on his side, tied up. I punched him in the gut to get him to shut up. They had attacked us with the intent to kill, so they would be getting no mercy from me. I turned my attention to one of the men who'd surrendered.

"I saw you at the Forestry Association. I remember those pants."

He was wearing pants with a large patch over his bottom, made from a cute floral fabric. There was no mistaking them. The man who lay on the ground averted his gaze awkwardly.

"What should we do, Victoria? They attacked us with machetes. If we tell the security forces we had to kill them in self-defense, I don't think they'd question us about it," Jeff said.

"You're right. And since you're the captain of the Second Order of the knights, they'd believe you. It would be such a pain to carry them all the way back to town."

Jeff and I played off each other perfectly to intimidate the men.

"Please forgive us! We just wanted to protect the field of red poppies!"

"Stop. Don't kill us. I'm the only person my mother has to rely on!"

The two younger men grew frightened and pleaded for their lives.

"How selfish of you. If we'd been weak, you wouldn't have hesitated to kill *us* and bury us right here," Jeff said.

"I agree. Wait, I know! Maybe we should use their machetes to cut off their legs one by one so that they can't run away. If I tie some cloth around their knees tightly, it'll stop the blood loss.

That way, they won't die even if I chop their legs off," I said menacingly.

"Nooooo!"

"Somebody heeeelp!"

That ought to have sufficiently terrified them.

"I'm going to have this man show me to the poppy fields they're talking about," Jeffrey said. He forced one of the young men onto his feet and started walking.

I turned toward the house and called, "You can come out now!"

Master Clark and Reed's faces were pale with anxiety. Meanwhile, Nonna was practically bursting with excitement. She was holding onto the now empty meat skewer. *I can't believe this girl was eating while her parents were fighting…*

"Mom and Dad were so great! I was watching from the window!" she said.

"Thanks. Nonna, you have meat juice around your mouth," I said.

"Oh. Thanks." Nonna dragged the back of her hand across her mouth, which only spread the juice more.

I definitely need to teach her more about etiquette, I thought to myself.

Jeffrey came back about an hour later.

"I'm back. There's a huge field with red poppies out there. He didn't want us to see the fields because they assumed we were officials who'd come here to investigate it," he said.

"Even though we have Nonna with us?" I asked.

"People who are doing something wrong tend to be suspicious of everyone," Jeffrey added.

The red poppy was a bright red, square-shaped flower that could be used to produce a potent alcoholic drink. When its roots were chopped up and soaked in alcohol, the plant's components dissolved, allowing for a quick and intense intoxication. Some people claimed it was economical since even a small amount could induce drunkenness and provide a pleasant buzz. However, the flower was also dangerously potent. An overdose could lead to respiratory failure and even death, which was why its cultivation was strictly prohibited.

“I’ll contact the security force tomorrow,” Jeffrey said.

The four men listened with resentful expressions on their faces. They would most likely face severe punishment for attacking us, especially since they were not only illegally growing the red poppies but had also ambushed us without provocation. Had Jeffrey and I been weaker, they would have killed and buried us, and the children wouldn’t have escaped unharmed, either. The men had to pay for what they’d done.

That night, we left the men tied up outside. Master Clark took watch with Jeffrey, saying, “I won’t be able to sleep tonight anyway.”

Jeffrey rode out at dawn to contact the town security force in Sybil.

While Jeffrey was gone, Nonna and I searched every nook and cranny of the house to see if there were any clues to the next landmark, but we didn’t find anything. I stood in the doorway and looked around the house from there to see if I missed anything.

The most unusual thing about the house was the slope of the ceiling. At first glance, it seemed aligned with the slope of the roof, but upon closer inspection, it was just slightly off. Normally, houses of this type would have exposed beams and rafters. So why would anyone go to the trouble of installing ceiling boards?

“I wonder if the ceiling was put up to help retain the heat from the wood stove during the winter? Or maybe it’s for storage. But there’s no entrance or exit…,” I mused.

“Mom, if you want to investigate the attic, I’d be able to fit up there!” Nonna said.

“Hmm? Well, I might take you up on that.”

I chose a ceiling board that had been damaged by the rain and poked it from below with a carriage axle to break it. I kept the axle on my person for emergencies, and I was pleased it had come in handy.

I moved a table beneath the broken ceiling board and put a chair on top, then helped Nonna up onto the chair. She grabbed onto a spot that wasn’t rotten and carefully pulled herself up, disappearing into the attic in a flash. I wasn’t surprised, considering her agility. I certainly wouldn’t have been able to

shimmy up there so easily. And even if I could, the weak ceiling boards probably would have collapsed under my weight.

A short time later, Nonna yelled, “Mom, I found a jar wrapped in a tattered piece of cloth!”

I got up on the table and called back to her. “Can you pass it down first?”

“Sure.”

Nonna lay on her stomach and carefully handed me the jar, which was indeed wrapped in the fabric she had described.

The jar was made of bronze and was about thirty centimeters tall. It was quite heavy. The lid was sealed with melted wax.

I used my dagger to pry the wax off and opened it. To my surprise, it was stuffed full of rolled-up bundles of parchment.

The bundles of parchment were actually in good condition because they’d been stored in the tightly sealed jar. I took them out and stacked them in order of the page numbers written on them. Bundled together, they were as thick as a book.

Finally, there were two pieces of parchment remaining—these two had no page numbers written on them.

The first read, *Go north until you hit a waterfall. Look to the wind. Be brave.* The other one had a sentence written on it I couldn’t decipher, so I folded it up and put it in my pocket. Master Clark and Nonna were intently reading through the stack of parchments, sitting close enough together that their heads touched.

Nonna was so absorbed in reading that she kept bringing her face closer to the parchment, and Master Clark pulled away with an awkward look on his face. After a few rounds of that, Master Clark was reading with his head leaned all the way back.

I’m sorry my daughter is so oblivious, Master Clark, I silently apologized.

“Miss Victoria, this might be a huge discovery! I think it may be an unpublished work by Elmer Archibald! I’m so happy I came with you and got to witness such a historic discovery! I’ve got goosebumps!”

“If you’re cold, I can lend you my jacket,” Nonna said.

Master Clark looked terribly excited. He glanced over at Nonna but didn’t correct her childish misunderstanding. *Thank*

you, Master Clark. You really have grown up, haven't you?

Before long, I heard several voices outside the house.

I hurried out the door and saw Jeffrey leading about a dozen or so security force guards over.

"Victoria, I'm going to show these officers to the poppy fields," he said.

"Be careful."

I explained the previous night's ambush to the guards who stayed behind. I made sure to have a frightened expression on my face. "We wanted to take our children camping, and we were so scared when we were attacked. We were so afraid we couldn't even sleep last night! If my husband hadn't fought them off, they would've killed all of us!"

By evening, the guards had burned the poppy fields. Thick, black smoke rose up from the forest into the cloudless blue sky. That was for the best. Now no one would have to die over those fields.

The guards put our assailants onto horses and took them away. *What an ordeal.*

During dinner that night, Jeffrey and Nonna finished their plates and said, "It's delicious! Food tastes so much better when you're starving!" However, Master Clark seemed to be deep in thought about something—he looked a bit down and didn't seem to have an appetite. I glanced over at Jeffrey, who nodded silently and seemed to understand what I was thinking.

"I'm his uncle, so I'll ask him."

"Maybe I should since he still thinks of me as his teacher? It might be easier for him to talk to me."

Jeffrey and I discussed who should ask Master Clark about it, and we concluded I should do it discreetly.

After dinner, we sat down on an old tree stump together. "Is there something bothering you, Master Clark?" I asked.

"I feel absolutely pathetic, Miss Victoria. When we were attacked by those ruffians, I was utterly useless. I had to be protected by a girl six years younger than me. I'm positively worthless!"

Oh, so that's it. I'm sorry. Everything had happened so suddenly that all I had been able to think about was the others'

safety, so I'd quickly called out for Nonna to protect Master Clark. But that had been inconsiderate of me.

"Master Clark, everyone has their strengths and weaknesses. You're a very fine young man, and you're very good at studying, aren't you? Not everyone can do that."

"Who cares if I'm good at studying if I'm a weak man?"

"You think that men must be strong and women must be reserved. But you think that way because that's how everyone else thinks. Torturing yourself based on other people's opinions when it's *your* life is a waste of time, Master Clark."

"But isn't that normal?"

"If that's what you think is normal, then Nonna and I must be quite abnormal! Ha-ha-ha."

His face brightened a bit, and I wondered if he was thinking, "That's true."

"Nonna and I can *pretend* to be ladies. But in reality, we're a far cry from being reserved and demure. But Jeffrey loves us as we are, and Nonna and I are happy. And if you're happy, then who cares about what other people's idea of *normal* is?"

"Do you think that's the mindset I should have?"

"Absolutely! Life is short, and it goes by in a flash. Looking back on it, the five years our family spent in Shen went by unbelievably quickly. If you spend all your time worrying about what other people think, you'll become an old man before you know it," I said.

"Miss Victoria…"

"What is it?"

"I just think you're the best teacher ever!"

"Well, thank you. And please be patient with Nonna. She can be a bit wild at times, but she's a good girl, and she's so cute."

"Yes, she's very cute." The moment those words left his mouth, a look came over his face that said, "I shouldn't have said that!" and it reminded me once again of that delicate little boy I had once known five years ago.

"Well, now that we've had a whole day wasted because of those ruffians, shall we set out tomorrow?" Jeffrey suggested.

"Yes. Our new clue said, 'Go north until you reach a waterfall. Look to the wind. Be brave,' so let's try to find that waterfall," I said.

"This is so fun, Mom!"

“It really is, Nonna.”

While Jeffrey, Nonna, and I chatted, Master Clark was scribbling away in his notebook. He took his job as the recorder very seriously, and now he looked like a responsible adult.

The next day, I resealed the bronze jar and dug a hole in the ground outside to bury it instead of putting it back in the attack. Since the ceiling board was broken, it would look too conspicuous if someone else came into the house.

After I buried the jar, I put some fallen leaves over it to hide its location.

“All right. I think it’s sufficiently hidden,” I said to myself.

“C’mon, Mom! Let’s hurry up and leave!”

“Coming!”

I was planning on reading the thick stack of parchments later when I had some more time, so for now, I tucked them away into my things.



“Mom, are we going to climb that mountain?”

“That’s right.”

“I’ve never climbed a mountain before, Miss Victoria.”

Nonna pointed at Mount Sybil, which had most likely erupted in the distant past. But now it was a lush mountain with a gentle, rolling slope near its base. I wondered how far we would have to travel before we ran into the waterfall. Well, wherever Mr. Archibald had gone, surely we could go, too. Hopefully.

So we rode our horses north in search of the waterfall. Nonna still rode double with Reed.

The slope was gradually growing steeper, and rocks ranging in size from about a foot in diameter to the size of a dining table were at our feet.

I wagered not many people came here, as from time to time, the rabbits, foxes, and deer would get startled and stare at us like we were a strange sight.

“Victoria, let’s have lunch in a little while,” Jeffrey suggested.

“Good idea.”

We stopped to rest the horses and eat lunch.

Jeff sliced the meat we'd skewered and roasted in advance the day before. I mixed some flour and water and fried up some simple, thin flatbreads with olive oil. Meanwhile, Nonna chopped the carrots and onions we'd pickled in sweet vinegar two days before. The rule in our house was simple—anyone able to pitch in had to. Reed was busy tending to the horses.

"It's quite convenient to have horses on a journey like this, isn't it, Miss Victoria?"

"That's right. If we traveled on foot, we wouldn't have been able to carry all these ingredients and supplies."

"All right! It's ready. Let's dig in," Jeff said.

We all ate with our hands, slipping the grilled meat from the skewers onto the piping hot flatbread and adding the pickled vegetables.

Master Clark boiled some water and made everyone tea.

"You're good at making tea, Master Clark," I said.

"Thank you. My mother always said men should learn how to make a good cup of tea, but now that I've seen Uncle Jeff in action, I think perhaps it's best to learn how to do all sorts of things, too."

"Mom always says it's more fun to know how to do something than not," Nonna agreed.

"That's right," I added.

Eventually, the slope grew too steep for us to go any farther on horseback, so we chose to continue on foot. Reed said he would take the horses back to the stone house and wait there.

I told him to come back to this spot in two days, promising we would return whether we'd been successful or not.

Nonna walked behind me in high spirits the whole time. She hummed and hopped over branches and rocks as we climbed up the slope. Master Clark also appeared to be in good spirits as he walked behind her. Jeffrey was paying close attention to our surroundings as he climbed with large strides.

This is fun. I'm so glad we did this, I thought, almost feeling the urge to hum to myself.

After we walked for a few hours, Nonna was the first person to notice the sound.

"I hear water!"

Everyone strained their ears to listen. I could definitely hear the sound of flowing water in the distance. But I couldn't see the waterfall anywhere—perhaps because the sound was bouncing off the dense trees. No slope nearby looked like it might lead to a waterfall, either.

Still, we all quickened our pace. We didn't have much time until the sun set, so we decided just to keep heading due north instead of searching for the waterfall and continued climbing up the mountain. As we made our way through the forest, our view eventually opened up, and we came before the waterfall.

The waterfall wasn't very tall or large, but it had ample water flow. The pool beneath it looked quite deep, and the water pouring from it carved a fast-moving stream along the mountainside.

The river veered west, far off the path we'd taken up here.

"So that's why we couldn't use the river as a guide," I said. "If we followed it, it would have taken us on a wide detour around the mountain."

"We got here via the shortest route thanks to Mr. Archibald's instructions," Jeff replied.

"Let's search for the next clue, Mom," Nonna said.

"Oh, right…," Master Clark spoke up and took out a piece of parchment from his backpack. "All it says here is, 'Look to the wind. Be brave.'"

He looked up at the waterfall, and the rest of us followed suit. The water gushed down to the pool, overflowing into the river. I wondered if the "be brave" bit was related to this waterfall somehow.

Suddenly, I remembered something very important I'd learned long ago.

"Nonna, there's something I want you to promise me: Don't ever go near the pools beneath waterfalls."

"What? Why not? I thought if I was brave and jumped into it, we'd find something," she said.

"Hang on a second."

I went back into the woods and looked for a fallen branch. I found one and chopped it in half with my sword. It was about the length of my arm. I returned and then threw it into the waterfall pool. It was immediately sucked into the water and

disappeared. The branch did eventually rise back to the surface, but it spun around wildly until it was pulled back under once again.

Nonna and Master Clark looked surprised to see how the branch kept floating and then getting pulled back under the current. After a while, it broke into pieces and floated down the stream.

“It’s common for whirlpools to form beneath waterfalls. And if you get caught up in the current, even a very strong swimmer will end up being pulled under over and over again and could drown in an instant. So don’t ever jump into a waterfall pool.”

“I understand.”

Nonna’s face tensed up, so I knew that she understood just how dangerous the water around a waterfall could be.

Though I had learned this phenomenon during my spy training, to be honest, this was my first time seeing it in real life. Since I had undergone intense training, I could swim better than most people, but even I would be in trouble with that swirling current. It would be wise to respect the violent power of nature and stay away.

Nonna and Master Clark began to search the surrounding area, saying, “I hope there’s another rock with instructions written on it!” Jeffrey went off to look for food. I took the parchment with the mysterious sentence from my pocket and began to examine it.

There were no illustrations on this parchment, so I had only the sentence to rely on. However, no matter how many times I read it, I couldn’t make any sense of it or identify the key to a code, either.

“What are you doing, Miss Victoria?” Master Clark asked.

“This was the only parchment that had something written on it that didn’t make any sense. I don’t think it has anything to do with a clue, though. I think the next landmark pointing to the lost crown must be somewhere else.”

We never ended up finding the clue that day, so we decided to make camp and cook dinner.

We were all tired from climbing the mountain, so the night was spent mainly in silence. We spread out a thin blanket on

the ground to protect us from the dew, then put our sleeping bags on top of that.

Nonna and Master Clark got in their sleeping bags and nodded off, but I got up because I wanted to try something.

We had a good campfire going. Jeff and I were taking turns feeding it, which was part of it, but I noticed that one side of the fire was burning and flickering up more wildly. I picked up a branch and walked over to the waterfall.

This afternoon, I'd thought, *Hmm, there's a spot where the wind is blowing colder.* I took my makeshift torch and walked around with it until I got to a spot where the smoke was totally blown away.

It was normal for it to be breezy around waterfalls, but this place seemed to be different.

"Did you figure something out, Anna?" Jeff asked.

"Oh, you startled me! I didn't know you were still awake!"

"I wish I were young enough that I could fall right to sleep out here," he said with a chuckle.

"There's a spot over where a cold wind is blowing. This afternoon, it blew in the opposite direction, though."

Jeff looked at the torch I was holding. He walked over to the cliff on the side of the waterfall and took out his sword. "Move back a bit, would you?" With that, he began to cut the thick ivy that clung to the wall. At first, we could only hear the whooshing of his sword, but then we heard the *clang* of the blade striking something hard.

I leaned the torch closer and saw a stone wall, one that was clearly man-made. There was a small gap around the size of two apples in between the stones on the upper right-hand corner. A cold wind was blowing in from the gap, picking up speed now that there was no longer any ivy to block it.

"The stone part of the wall is about the size of a door, don't you think?" I said.

"The fact that it was completely overgrown with ivy means that it's been a very long time since it was built."

"Once the sun comes up tomorrow, let's remove the stones and take a look."

"Good idea. It's late now, though, so we should get to bed."

"All right, darling."

Back at the campfire, I lay beside Jeffrey, and we talked quietly as he added some dead branches to the fire.

“When I saw that branch in the pool of the waterfall today…,” I said.

“Yes?”

“I realized once again just how many things I learned back at the academy.”

“Hmm.”

“Sometimes, we had to break the law during our missions. Now I understand what our instructors were trying to teach us.”

“What do you mean?”

“‘Don’t die. Live on no matter what.’ I think that’s what they were trying to impart to us. They taught us all these things hoping it would save our lives one day.”

Jeffrey didn’t respond. He just gently caressed my cheek.



The next morning, we told Nonna and Clark what we’d discovered the night before, and they immediately ran off to take a look. Nonna hurried back excitedly, still chewing her food.

“Nonna, we’re still eating breakfast.”

“Buh we finly fawr it!”

“Oh, Nonna. Your manners are atrocious.”

“Miss Victoria, I believe she’s saying, ‘But we finally found it.’”

“I know that, Master Clark.”

Master Clark was certainly kind to Nonna, despite her behavior.

After breakfast, the four of us set to work moving the stones. We started from the top, and as we made progress, we began to reveal a deep cleft in the side of the cliff.

Once we’d removed about half of the stones, we made a shocking discovery: a human skeleton. All the bones were there, and it was covered in tattered clothing. Even more shockingly,

there turned out to be not one skeleton but two. One lay against the wall, and the other lay inside the cave.

Jeffrey told the children to wait outside as he and I went inside to check out the skeletons. Both of them had large wounds across their chests—we could tell because there were marks on the ribs that looked like cuts from a sword.

“They must’ve been hit by a huge sword,” Jeff said.

“It certainly looks that way since the blade went so deep as the ribs. Their lungs and heart were probably injured,” I said.

“Mom, can we come in yet?” Nonna asked impatiently.

“As long as it won’t frighten you,” I said.

Nonna came closer and looked at the skeletons. She seemed completely unfazed. Master Clark glanced back and forth between the skeletons and his notebook, upon which he was scribbling away.

“Mom, do you think this is what the ‘be brave’ part was referring to?” Nonna asked.

“I’m not sure. Look at that.” I pointed back into the cave.

There were three more skeletons, barely visible in the dim light. That made five of them altogether. The wind was still blowing inside, but I didn’t see any light on the other side of this passageway.

“The clothing on all five bodies doesn’t match that of the people who once considered this area sacred. If anything, their outfits are more in line with the traditions of Ashbury, Randall, or Hagl.”

“Let’s go in as far as we can,” Master Clark suggested.

“It’s pretty narrow in here. I doubt anyone else will come, so let’s just leave our things outside,” Jeff said.

We had to hunch over to fit inside the passageway. Even when we turned sideways, the walls scraped against us, the rough stone rubbing against our bodies. There were many tight spaces like that.

And the ceiling was low, too, forcing us to hunch down even lower to pass through some sections. On top of that, the ground was steadily sloping upward the entire way.

Jeffrey struggled the most out of everyone due to his size. But despite the difficulty, he kept encouraging us, making sure we were doing all right.

My legs and back began to scream in protest, and my calves felt like they were going to explode. But thankfully, we finally found the exit. It was wide enough for us to pass through easily.

We made our way outside, and all four of us collapsed onto the ground, sprawling on our backs and looking up at the sky. The effort of moving that awkwardly for an extended period of time had made us exhausted, and we gasped for air.

"Mom, are you all right?"

"Yes. How are you and Master Clark holding up?"

"I'm fine!" Nonna announced.

"I'm okay, too," he said.

The passageway had led us to a very odd landscape. Cliffs rose steeply around us, curving on both sides like a giant arc. There was a large, circular area in the center that resembled a massive soup bowl or washbasin. The cliffs were nearly vertical, and the passageway we traveled through seemed to have cut straight through one of those walls.

"I'm glad the passageway took us here."

"It got so narrow that my clothes are dirty."

In fact, all of our clothes were dirty.

"Jeff, what is this place?" I asked.

"Looks like we're inside a crater."

"Do people know about this in Ashbury? I've never heard of it," I said.

"I'd heard that there might be a crater here, but I've never heard of anyone actually entering it. I suppose no one was brave enough to scale those cliffs—they're nearly straight up, after all. And even those men who were growing the illegal poppies didn't seem to go any deeper in the mountains than that, probably out of fear of being attacked by the local tribes."

"Do you think they're still protecting this area as a sacred site?" I asked.

"Those men seemed to think so."

"Mom, do you really think the crown is here?" Nonna asked.

"I'm not sure. But there must've been a reason why someone hid the entrance to that passageway," I said.

Master Clark was furiously scribbling away in his notebook.

Jeffrey was rubbing my back and thighs to help loosen up my muscles. Even though he was probably hurting the most out of us all, his first instinct was to protect and care for us. I loved that about him. It was incredibly reassuring to have a man like him by my side.

Until I'd married Jeffrey at twenty-eight, I'd firmly believed that putting your life in someone else's hands and having them protect you was foolish.

But I never doubted him—not even a little. The strength he gave me was beyond words.

As Jeffrey rubbed my back, Nonna gently touched my arm. "Mom."

"What is it?"

"I feel like I trained so much in Shen for days like today. If the people who guard this place attack us, I'll protect you, Mom."

"Thank you, Nonna. But it's a parent's job to protect their children, not the other way around."

"Still, I'll try to keep you safe," she said.

"I'll do my best, too, Miss Victoria," Master Clark added.

"Thank you, everyone. Let's work hard together. And let's see if we can find anything here."

We headed to the center of the crater. There were all sorts of shrubs, about two to three meters high, growing there. We could also hear birds singing.

As we walked around, we made sure to look at the surrounding scenery and the ground beneath us, too. We found a trickling spring. Nonna looked amazed as she peered at it.

"There are even springs at the top of mountains?"

"The rain that falls into the crater is probably stored in the soil and trees, and then it turns into the spring water."

Jeffrey scooped up a small amount and tasted it. "It's not bad. It's actually quite delicious. Don't drink too much of it at once because it might make you sick later," he said.

Everyone drank a handful of the water.

"Oh wow. It really is delicious, Jeff."

"It tastes so sweet, Mom!"

"That's just your imagination, Nonna," I said.

"It is not! Master Clark thinks so, too!"

The spring water helped give us back some energy.

Now, was the crown here?

“Let’s all put our heads together. I think this has to be the place where the ‘crown’ is located, whatever it actually might be.”

“But there’s nothing here but trees and grass and rocks, Mom.”

My hunch was that the “crown” was just an analogy for something—but what?

After we determined there were no large carnivores around, we went off in our own directions to explore. Our voices echoed since there were cliffs on all sides. If anything were to happen, we could rush right over to the person in trouble in no time.

Before long, Nonna had run off quite far, and Master Clark was walking after her.

Jeffrey and I went down the gentle slope heading toward the center of the crater.

It was overgrown with shrubs, and there were rocks and stones of all sizes scattered about. Most of them were white in color.

I saw Nonna hopping on and off large rocks in the distance as she headed farther off. Where in the world did she get all that energy?

“I just wish there was something to eat around here, Master Clark!”

“Me too, Nonna.”

I could hear them chatting loudly to one another. There was no trace of the awkwardness that had been present the day they’d reunited. They were back to being old pals just like they’d been when they studied foreign languages together. As I watched the children, I saw Nonna rubbing something before putting it in her pocket.

“What’s that? Did you find something interesting?” I shouted over to her.

“It’s nothing. Don’t worry.”

“All right. Just make sure not to go too far away from us!”

“I won’t!”

None of us found anything of note, and we decided we should probably start making our way back. Jeffrey called the children over and explained our plan.

“We’re going to turn back in a little bit. After we eat lunch at our campsite, we can come back here to search more if you want. The passageway is too narrow to carry our things through, so we’ll have to make the campsite our base. Tonight, we’ll sleep on the outside of the crater. And we can sleep inside the cave if it rains, although it’ll have to be alongside the skeletons.”

“Okay, Dad.”

“All right, Uncle Jeff.”

Nonna and Master Clark went off again, and they began using sticks to dig into the ground and move rocks.

I told Jeffrey about something I’d been thinking about for a while now. I hadn’t told him because it was something unpleasant.

“Hey, Jeffrey… Remember how I told you that there was a story written on that parchment I found in the bronze jar? In addition to the piece of parchment that told us to head north for the waterfall, there was another piece of parchment that had a strange sentence written on it. Take a look at it. I think the code is much more difficult than what was in *The Lost Crown*.”

I handed him the piece of parchment with the incomprehensible sentence. Jeffrey stared at it for a while and said, “I can’t understand it, either,” then gave it back to me. “But what about it, Anna?”

“I want to solve it before I give it to Master Clark.”

“Go ahead. No one’s going to complain about it. You cracked the original code, and you and Nonna were the ones who found the jar. You have no obligation to hand it over to Clark. You could even give it to Uncle Bernard as a souvenir. I’m sure he’d be thrilled. Do whatever you want with it. That’s your right.”

“But don’t you think it’s unpleasant to have a wife who loves to crack codes?”

“Why would it be?”

Jeffrey looked back from the children to me. He had an incredibly tender expression on his face, filled with love. Even though we’d lived with each other for five years, I would still be struck by how handsome he was. He was the type of man who only grew handsomer with age.

“You should do what you want. I’ve been thinking I’d love to see the look on your face when you crack a code. And I’m sure the serious expression you’ll get while you work on will be

beautiful. You're my wife, and I think you're attractive no matter what. I'll always be crazy about you."

"Ha-ha-ha. Nonna would be so exasperated if she heard you say that."

"Let her be. Even when the two of us are lying side by side in our graves together, I'm sure she'll say to someone, 'My parents were so in love it was annoying.'"

I imagined the two of us lying alongside each other in our graves. That sounded very comforting. If I could still be with Jeff at the end of my life, I wouldn't be afraid of getting old and dying.

"I might as well tell you something now," he said.

"What is it?"

"I'm always desperate to show you how much I love you. I always want to be near you, and I don't want anyone ever to take you away from me. And I always pray that you'll love me even more than you did the day before. Heh. Sheesh, this is embarrassing to say out loud." He hid his face behind one hand.

I felt my face and ears grow hot.

My entire life had led up to meeting this man—I'd thought this ever since we'd gotten married, but I'd never told him. I kept those sweet words a secret.



We struggled to get through the passageway again and came back out to the waterfall, only to find that our belongings had been ransacked and scattered everywhere.

Whoever had rummaged through our things must have been hungry because all of our food was gone.

"No way! What happened, Mom?!"

"They got us."

"But who, Miss Victoria?"

"I can't believe this! They even took the candy I was saving!"

"You brought candy, Nonna?"

"Yes, it was honey candy Bertha gave me! She told me to eat it on the journey. I was only eating one piece a day for a treat!

Argh, I'll never forgive whoever did this!"

Nonna was so angry she began kicking the empty air over and over, even though I'd told her numerous times not to do that.

"Jeff, it's a miracle anyone could get up here. What should we do? Go after them?"

"If it were just you and me, I'd do that. But we can't leave the children here."

"I'll go! I wanna get my honey candy back, Mom and Dad!"

Reed wouldn't be back here until tomorrow. We didn't have any food, so we would have to go back to the stone house, but the journey back would be rough without any food or horses. I wanted to get at least half of our food back.

And we might be able to catch up to the thief in time if we left now.

The problem was Master Clark. He couldn't protect himself. He could be in danger, depending on how many people we might face.

He must've read the concern on my face because he looked at me and spoke up.

"Uncle Jeff, Miss Victoria, I may not be skilled with a sword, but I can speak Subartuan. Since we're near the border of Subartu, it's quite possible that the people who ransacked our belongings were Subartuans. And if so, I can act as an interpreter to ensure we won't come to blows. I promise I'll be useful to you. Please take me along."

"You can speak Subartuan?" Jeff asked.

"Yes, Uncle. After Miss Victoria and Nonna left, I decided I was going to surprise Miss Victoria when she returned by learning a bunch of different languages. I can speak all the tongues of the countries bordering Ashbury."

What a sweet boy.

I want to honor his sentiments and bring him along with us. As I began to think about it, Jeffrey immediately gave his permission.

"Oh, I see. In that case, you should come with us. Perhaps they were in some kind of situation where they had no choice but to steal our food. It'll be very helpful if you can speak Subartuan for us. Don't worry. Victoria and I will protect you."

“Thank you so much!”

Nonna could protect herself, so our main priority was making sure Master Clark was out of harm’s way. I’d done plenty of missions in the past guarding targets, so keeping someone who was so obedient safe would be a piece of cake.

I went ahead and took the lead, with Nonna and Master Clark in the middle and Jeffrey bringing up the rear. We carefully followed the trampled path in the grass as we went after our thief.

After over thirty minutes of walking, we found the thief’s house—if you could call it that.

The dilapidated shack was draped with vines strung between the surrounding trees and topped with a roof of overlapping branches and leaves. It looked more like a makeshift campsite than a proper home. Though a bit of bare ground was visible around it, the nearby vegetation crept close, nearly swallowing the place whole.

It seemed as if our culprit had devoured our food, judging by the paper wrappers that were strewn everywhere. *If they leave it like that, the scent will attract animals.*

“I’ll go in,” I said quietly.

“No, I’ll go,” Jeff said.

“They might be scared of you. It doesn’t seem like they’ve had an easy life from the looks of things. They probably don’t have much strength either, so I should go,” I said.

“All right, then. I’ll leave it to you. We’ll stay here and keep watch, but I’ll be ready to jump in and help if anything happens,” Jeff replied.

“Okay.”

I put my hand on my dagger so I could draw it at a moment’s notice and approached the shack. I couldn’t hear any sounds from inside. But as I got closer and peeked into the interior, I was hit with a terrible odor. A girl of about fifteen or sixteen was sleeping there.

Food was scattered around her, leading me to suspect had stuffed herself with our stolen supplies and then fallen asleep.

I turned back to the others and gave them a reassuring nod. Once everyone was gathered behind me, I spoke.

“Get up.”

The moment my voice rang out, the girl bolted upright. She tried to escape in a panic when she saw us, but Jeffrey moved fast, grabbing her arm and pulling her into his grasp. She struggled and tried to bite his arm, causing him quite a bit of trouble.

The smell only grew worse as she thrashed about. *What* is *that stench?* It reeked like animal droppings.

Jeffrey held her firmly as she flailed about, but when Master Clark began speaking to her in a foreign language, she immediately froze. Her expression became desperate as she began pleading with him in the same language.

Since I didn't understand Subartuan, I left it up to Master Clark and waited for their conversation to end. After what felt like a very long exchange, he turned to us with a sad look on his face and explained.

"She says due to the policies of the Subartuan government, her employer tried to force her into marrying him. She ran away because she was terrified of the man. Apparently, they're forcing marriages in Subartu to absorb the indigenous people into the nation. She lost her parents, so she has no one to help her and ended up going on the run and sheltering here."

"How long has she been living like this?" Jeff asked.

"She said it's been three weeks. And as for the odor, she told me she mixed bear droppings with water and rubbed it on her body to keep wild animals away from her."

"Ah, that explains it."

The kingdoms of Subartu and Ashbury didn't have much interaction. I had no idea such cruel practices were taking place there, and judging by the bitter expressions on Jeffrey and Master Clark's faces, neither did they.

"Jeffrey, I have a favor to ask you."

"What a coincidence. I was just about to ask you the same. Let's take this girl under our protection," he said.

"Ah, what a relief. I was thinking the same thing."

"Mom, Dad, we're taking her home with us, aren't we? Can we?" Nonna asked.

"Yes, protecting a human being is far more important than searching for a crown."

Master Clark translated for the girl again. Although she seemed frightened, she agreed to come with us. Not that she really had any other viable choice. She told us her name was Auri, and she was sixteen years old.

"First, let's do something about that smell," I said.

"Yes, let's head back to the waterfall and get her cleaned up. The odor's already rubbed off on me," Jeff agreed.

We collected what remained of the stolen food and decided to head back to the campsite with our things.

Auri seemed to trust Master Clark, so she relaxed whenever he was nearby. They walked side by side with me in the front and Jeffrey flanking them, and Nonna followed behind.

I asked the two men to keep watch at the waterfall while Nonna and I scrubbed Auri clean. Even though it was early summer, the water was still freezing. Auri's lips turned blue, but we needed her to bear with it because she *reeked*.

Jeffrey built a roaring fire while we bathed Auri. Once we were done, she was shivering uncontrollably, and he brought her over to the fire to warm up.

I used the food we'd gotten back to make soup, and Auri gobbled it up.

Now that she'd been scrubbed from head to toe, it was easier to see what she looked like. She had long, light-brown hair and reddish-brown eyes. She was a rather pretty girl.

"I'm glad my spare clothes fit you. Reed's supposed to come tomorrow, but let's head down the mountain without waiting. We can always come back here later once things settle down."

"Yes, there's no telling if anyone from Subartu will come looking for her," Jeff agreed.

We piled more stones into the crevice that led to the passageway, stuffing in grass and branches for good measure to make it look less conspicuous. Anyone paying very close attention would probably spot it right away, but it was better than just leaving it wide open.

There were five unidentified human skeletons in that place, after all. Even though they were just bones now, they still deserved a better fate than being scattered by wild animals.

We took a break on the way back to the stone house, and Master Clark turned to me with a worried look on his face.

“Miss Victoria, do you think it’ll be a problem if we bring someone from Subartu to Ashbury with us without permission? I’m worried you’ll be blamed for this,” he said.

“Master Clark, Jeffrey and I only took in a lost girl we found in the forest. We don’t even know what country she’s from. She doesn’t even speak our language, after all. Didn’t you have a hard time understanding her thick accent yourself?” I said with a deliberate expression and tone of voice that made it clear that was what our story would be.

“Ah…,” he said and then let out a soft chuckle as he looked down. “Right, of course. I completely forgot about that.”

Chapter Five

My Pet Sibby

Reed had stayed behind with the horses, so he was surprised to see us back a day earlier, but he was even more surprised when he saw we had an unfamiliar girl tagging along with us. But he seemed to understand once we explained the situation.

"Your Ladyship, I've heard stories from merchants who say the people of the western forest live freely and refuse to follow the rules of any kingdom. The kingdom of Subartu forces them into submission by marrying them off to their own citizens. However, the forest folk receive no education and live in severe poverty. There's also a rumor that those who marry them have an ulterior motive for doing it," he said.

"What kind of rumor?"

"Apparently, once the marriage is finalized, they treat the forest folk like unpaid servants."

"That's horrible! That sounds like slavery!"

"Yes, exactly. That's what the traveling merchants said. Even if they try to escape back to the forest, the people from Subartu end up dragging them back again. I thought it was a farfetched tale when I first heard about it, but I suppose it's true after all," Reed said.

I looked over to Auri, who was already asleep. She must be exhausted.

Auri didn't want to get into a sleeping bag. It probably made her feel trapped. But after I laid it out on the ground and covered her with my coat, she seemed to relax finally.

"Please keep an eye on her to make sure she doesn't try to get away in the middle of the night," I instructed Reed.

I fetched water from the well and started a fire to brew some tea for everyone.

Nonna sat on a tree stump, holding a wooden cup with both hands as she sipped her tea. As I watched her, I remembered what had been on my mind earlier.

"Nonna, did you pick up more rocks? Your pants pockets look like they could rip at any moment."

"I did! I found a really pretty one."

Nonna had always loved rocks.

I knew she'd wanted a pet, maybe a dog or a cat, but before Jeff and I got married, we had always been moving from place to place. It wasn't a lifestyle that was compatible with owning a pet. Even back in Shen, we'd lived in a small cottage on the main estate, so we couldn't keep animals there, either.

But Nonna had taken to collecting interesting or beautiful rocks ever since our days on the move. She would name them after the places she found them and would talk to them as if they were alive.

One time, she held a rock and said, *"This is my pet,"* with a solemn expression on her face. I had needed to hide behind the house and cry in silence because I'd felt so guilty and sad for her.

"Take the stones out of your pockets, please. Your pants will rip or be stretched out of shape if you don't."

"All right," she said, then pulled the rock out of her pocket. She smiled proudly as I blinked in surprise. "Isn't it beautiful? I think it's the second prettiest rock I've ever found. I named it Sibby since I found it at Mount Sybil."

"Can I see that?"

"Sure, but you can't have it because it's my pet!"

The rock was rough and white, about the size of my palm. It looked just like the others I'd seen scattered around the volcano's crater. The reason Nonna had chosen this one in particular was obvious—golden flecks shimmered in a mottled pattern across its surface. I'd seen gold ore on display in museums before but never anything with *this* much gold in it.

She must've noticed how startled I looked because she began to explain proudly, "There were bigger ones, but they were too heavy, so I chose this one. Pets should be small enough to fit in your pocket, after all."

"Nonna, could I borrow this for a bit?"

“Huh? But Sibby’s mine.”

“I’ll only borrow it. I promise I’ll give it back.”

“Just a little while, okay? Make sure you give Sibby back!”

I took the rock over to where Jeffrey was resting and handed it to him without a word. He did a double take, took it from me, and held it close to inspect it.

“Hmm? Huh? Wait, Anna… Is this…?”

“It’s gold ore, isn’t it? I’m almost positive this is ‘the lost crown.’ At first, I thought it might be fool’s gold, but I’m pretty sure this is the real thing.”

“This is…going to lead to a huge commotion. That volcano is within our borders, but if the kingdom of Subartu finds out…”

“Depending on the size of the vein and how much gold is there, we could end up at war again,” I finished his sentence.

“This is Nonna’s pet, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll keep it for now. If someone sees her carrying this around, it could lead to trouble.”

“I had the same thought.”

“I can’t believe there was so much gold ore just lying out in the open. It’ll probably be easy to mine if they use the open-pit mining method.”

“This really is a huge discovery.”

Jeffrey fell into silent thought before he spoke up again.

“Why do you think Mr. Archibald wrote about gold ore in the code?”

“I have no idea. If gold was so easy to find, why did he live deep in the forest under such harsh conditions?”

I pulled the piece of parchment that had the cryptic passages on it from my pocket.

“Maybe if I decode this, we’ll understand it better. I’ll get to work on it tonight. I think we should also tell Master Clark about the gold, don’t you think?”

“The volcano belongs to Ashbury, so yes. We can’t keep it from Clark since he’s a government official,” Jeff agreed.

“Right.”

That night, we all slept in the stone house.

I volunteered to keep watch outside first. I began working on decoding the parchment by the light of the fire, trying to unravel its secrets.

I tried all the ciphers I knew, but none led to a solution.

A long time ago, there was an operative in the Haglian spy organization who was a genius at both making and breaking codes. The methods they'd used had been refined and adapted over time into the present.

I was good at decrypting, but I couldn't come up with ciphers myself. The genius behind the code had designated a method that used a combination of numbers as the key, allowing for the secure exchange of complex messages as long as you knew how. Perhaps this was a similar cipher.

As I pondered whether there might be any keys that would help break the code, Jeffrey stepped outside.

"It's my turn, Anna. You should get some sleep."

"Oh, right. Thank you."

I decided to take a break from code-breaking and went inside the house to rest.

The next day, the four of us decided to return to the crater to check out the gold ore. Reed and Auri stayed behind to watch the house.

We squeezed through the same narrow crevice into the passageway with some difficulty and made our way back to the crater. The place was calm and filled with the sound of birds chirping just like the day before. The vegetation was thick, and white stones lay scattered across the quiet landscape.

"This is where I found Sibby," Nonna said, leading us farther into the crater.

And sure enough, we found several pieces of gold ore where Nonna said she'd discovered her rock. At first glance, they looked like nothing more than plain white stones, but when we cleaned off the dirt and mud, patches of gold embedded within the rock caught the sunlight and gleamed brightly.

"Amazing… I wonder how much gold is hidden here," Master Clark said excitedly.

"Let's just hope this doesn't lead to any trouble," Jeff murmured with a concerned expression.

"Dad, can I take some back as souvenirs for Mr. Bernard and Susan?" Nonna asked, totally oblivious to the gravity of the situation.

“Um, you shouldn’t give this to Susan. That could make things…complicated.”

“Aww, really? That’s a shame. But Mr. Bernard is okay, right?”

“Yes, I think Uncle Bernard will just admire it in secret. It should be fine,” Jeff said.

“Yay!”

Master Clark cleaned off a small stone when he suddenly turned to me. “Aren’t you taking any with you, Miss Victoria?”

“No, I’ll pass. I can just admire Sibby if I ever feel like seeing it again.”

“Yeah! I’ll lend you Sibby anytime every now and then,” Nonna said.

“Thanks, Nonna.”

We left the crater and joined back up with Reed and Auri, who’d been waiting for us. After we returned to the stone house, we decided to head back to the capital the next day. That night, after everyone went to sleep, I sat by the campfire and worked alone on breaking the code.

But I couldn’t make any progress, no matter how hard I tried. I was totally exhausted as dawn approached.

“I should really get some sleep…”

Once morning came, it was almost time to set off for the capital.

But then a thought popped into my head. *This probably won’t work, but maybe I should try using Princess Carolina’s name as the key to crack this code.*

I converted her name into numbers using the method the Haglian agent devised and sifted through the text, jumping back and forth to pick out the letters.

And then…

Meaning began to rise from what seemed like a jumble of nonsense words at first, and sentences took shape.

I immediately grabbed my pen and paper and jotted down the words as they revealed themselves. Jeffrey had woken up a little while ago and noticed what I was doing. He looked like he wanted to ask something but held back.

I was too absorbed to explain as I continued scribbling down the message as the words popped out.

And then the buried truth emerged.

I couldn’t believe that the secret message was written in Ashburian but encrypted with a Haglian cipher. And no one, not even the historian Mr. Bernard, could’ve imagined what the message entailed.

I wrote down word after word as I followed the code.

Mr. Elmer Archibald, the adventure novelist, had hidden a great deal of coded information within his parchment. The message I wrote down was as follows:



I, Elmer Archibald, was a spy who posed as a merchant in Ashbury.

During my frequent trips to the royal castle, I became a favorite of fifth princess, Carolina.

One day, she made a request to me.

She said, “I am to marry a prince from Randall. But three of his previous wives have already died, and I am to be his fourth bride. Rumor has it that he beat them all to death. I’m terrified of suffering the same fate. If you help me escape this castle, I’ll give you all the jewels I possess.”

I’d been attracted to the princess for some time. I struggled with my decision but ultimately agreed to her request.

We fled the castle together and blended into a pioneer settlement in Sybil Forest. I opened up a barber shop that doubled as a general store there.

Despite the harsh conditions of life, the princess never complained. On our days off, we would go into the woods, enjoying the thrill of exploring the unknown. At her request, I built a small stone house deep in the forest.

One day, we discovered a passageway. We squeezed through it, and it led us to the crater of the volcanic mountain, where we found gold ore.

We took some ore back with us and displayed it in our bedroom. We didn’t want to draw unwanted attention, so we decided to work hard without relying on the gold.

Then one day, the members of my organization found me.

They forced their way into our home and spotted the gold ore in our room. They told me they would spare my life if I told them the location of the gold.

I led five of them to the crater, and they tried to kill me on the way back. But I managed to fight back, although I ended up gravely wounded. My wife nursed me back to health.

In my old age, I wrote a novel based on my experiences.

My wife lived out the rest of her days peacefully and passed away to rest in the garden of the gods.

However, she left me with one last wish. "I did nothing of value for my kingdom. At the very least, I want you to tell the Ashburian royal family about the gold by way of an apology."

But it was the Ashburian royal family who had been willing to marry her off to a husband who would beat her to death. I couldn't bring myself to reveal the truth to them. Instead, I used a Haglian cipher to encode the secret in a novel I had written in the Ashburian language. I sealed the manuscript in a jar, along with an unpublished novel of mine.

Whoever deciphers the code and reaches the "crown" may claim the gold.

Our child knows nothing of my true identity, or my wife's, nor the existence of the gold. I only wish for them to live a peaceful life.

The novel's title is The Lost Crown*. This encrypted message serves as Elmer Archibald's last will and testament.*



"You…were a spy?" I found myself speaking out loud to the book.

If Elmer Archibald had really been a spy a hundred years ago, it was possible he had been sent there to prevent an alliance between Ashbury and Randall. And if that was the case, then he was almost certainly an operative from Hagl.

The author of *The Lost Crown* was not only my predecessor as a Haglian spy but also a deserter, just like me.

"Phew…"

I let out a long sigh.

Jeffrey gave me a restless look, so I handed him the sheet of paper upon which I'd deciphered the code. He read it carefully, and when he looked up, he seemed shocked.

"So Mr. Archibald was a spy for Hagl?!"

"That's what it sounds like. I was surprised, too."

"And he smuggled the fifth princess out of the castle and then they got married?"

"That's what it says."

"Astounding. It's hard to believe something like that really happened! It's almost like a story straight out of an adventure novel."

"But isn't that exactly what it is?" I asked.

He stared at me intently.

"What?" I asked.

"You really are amazing."

"Ha-ha. Thanks. It's been a while since I've felt this excited, you know. It's been so fun."

"Is it really possible to hide so many coded messages on a piece of parchment like this?"

"That's the brilliance of this cipher. Once you reach the end of the text, you follow the numerical instructions and work your way backward. But it's not a method you can use unless you know several languages."

Mr. Archibald had kept everything a secret in order to protect his child.

There were many parallels between Elmer Archibald the spy and me, but there was one definitive difference between the two of us.

I had told Nonna about my past as a spy and had made sure she learned how to defend herself. I wasn't sure which was safer—keeping someone ignorant or teaching them how to protect themselves with full knowledge of the risks.

Honestly, I didn't know which was the right decision. But I was the kind of person who believed in being prepared for anything.

And I wanted Nonna to be protected as we raised her.

And I wanted to share my life with Jeffrey.

Those were my only two wishes. Gold held no value for me. My desires weren't something money could buy.

The next day, I unearthed the jar we'd buried and put the bundle of parchment inside my bag. We mounted our horses and rode back to the carriage to return to the capital. Our vacation turned out to be shorter than I'd expected.

"We're leaving already?" Nonna asked.

"Yes. Thanks to your love of rocks, we found what we needed."

"Aw, I was hoping we could camp out in the forest a little longer. Mom, when will you give me Sibby back?"

"Once we get home."

"I can't wait to give Mr. Bernard his souvenir!"

Master Clark listened to our conversation with a smile on his face.

It was a subtle, grown-up expression. The fact that he knew how to smile like that really made me feel the weight of the five years we'd spent apart.

We brought Auri along with us and made our way back to the carriage. It was still in the forest, just as we'd left it, safe and untouched.

Even inside the carriage, Auri clung to Master Clark like a frightened baby deer.

Nonna tried her best to join in their conversation, using gestures and attempting to speak to her, but Auri didn't respond to her at all.

Eventually, Nonna gave up, looking quite down. I reached out to comfort her.

"I'm sure Auri will open up to you once she calms down."

"I hope so."

It was unusual for Nonna to look so depressed, and it made my heart ache.

Jeffrey and I had a thorough discussion before we boarded the carriage. We agreed not to reveal the portion of the encrypted documents that contained Mr. Archibald's will and testament to Master Clark. Actually, Jeffrey had insisted on it.

"Carolina, the fifth princess, chose to live her life with Elmer, and they found happiness together in the end. Announcing that she married a foreign spy won't please anyone now. Her

descendants aren't part of the royal family, and her parents and siblings have all passed away," he said.

"We found out the truth of this kingdom, which had been a mystery until now. We're keeping it a secret to hide my ability to decode the cipher. I feel guilty, though. I wish there were a way to tell Mr. Bernard what really happened."

Jeffrey slowly shook his head. "If the will is made public, you'll have to explain how you cracked the code. There's no way around that. And if that happens, then these past five years of hiding under a different name will all have been for nothing."

"You're right. You're absolutely right," I agreed.

So that was why we decided to keep Mr. Archibald's will a secret from Master Clark.

Once again, I asked him to omit as much as possible about us in his reports. The fact that Jeffrey had anticipated this before we all set out made his foresight truly impressive.

Master Clark promised to report only the following.

"I was on a trip when I coincidentally found a signpost. I followed the directions and discovered a house deep in the forest, where I found a jar filled with parchment paper. The parchment paper had clues on it which led me to a crack in the cliffs, which opened up into a passageway. I followed the passageway to a volcanic crater, where I found gold ore."

"That should do it," Jeffrey said.

"We were completely omitted from the story!" I said with amusement.

"I couldn't be happier, Uncle Jeff. Thank you for letting me join you on this journey. It was one of the most thrilling experiences of my life!"

"I had fun, too," Jeff replied.

"So did I, Master Clark."

Everyone seemed satisfied, and that was enough for me. We spent the same number of days getting here as we did on the way back to our estate in the capital.

Master Clark went to hurry home, but Auri clung onto him, not wanting to let go. But Jeffrey and I had already made up our minds to bring her back home with us.

“There’s a chance we might face consequences from the kingdom for taking a foreign citizen back without permission. And if that happens, it should be my family who takes the fall, not yours, Clark. If anything happens before I officially receive my peerage, my punishment will probably be the cancellation of my title as baron, and we’ll have to move,” Jeffrey said with a smile.

He never cared much about the title, though. Not as long as he had me and Nonna.

“I have to hurry and submit an official report to Uncle Edward,” Master Clark said with a determined look on his face before leaving.

Since Auri hadn’t opened up to anyone but Master Clark, I knew I had to start learning Subartuan as soon as possible.

<You’ll be living here with us. Understand?>
<Yes.>
<No one will catch you or hurt you again.>
<Yes.>

Auri gave short responses when I spoke to her using the phrases Master Clark had taught me.

I could only imagine the kind of treatment she’d endured from her previous master. My heart ached to think about the emotional scars this sixteen-year-old girl carried with her. Even Bertha frowned deeply when I told her what little we knew about Auri’s situation.

“What a pity. How should I attend to Auri, Your Ladyship?”

“Please treat her as our guest until we can discuss things with her directly. Do you think you could obtain some clothes that might suit her? And teach her how to use the amenities in our house. If you’re ever unsure about anything, no matter how small, please be sure to come ask me.”

“Of course. Also, I have a report for you, Your Ladyship. It’s about the medicine you gave me.”

“Oh? What is it?”

“The ointment for chapped hands and the painkillers were remarkably effective.”

“Aren’t they, though? I’m so glad they worked.”

“Well, I accidentally boasted about the medicines to the greengrocer, and they asked if I could share some. I wouldn’t feel right about just giving it away for free, so could you set a price?”

“Sure. I’ll decide on a price and give some to you tomorrow.”

“Pardon me for speaking about the medicine out of turn.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. I want it to help as many people as possible.”

I left Auri in Bertha’s care, and the three of us set off to visit Mr. Bernard’s estate. As I walked side by side with Nonna, my thoughts drifted to last night’s conversation.

Jeffrey was very cautious about Mr. Archibald’s will. “Uncle Bernard is a scholar. If he learns the truth, he’ll want to present it to the academic community. Not for fame, but because he believes it’s his duty as a scholar to uncover hidden truths in history and share them with the world. However, if word gets out that the will was originally in code, people will want to know how it was broken and how did it. That wouldn’t be good.”

“You’re right.”

“I feel bad for my uncle because he spent years chasing the truth, but I can’t risk anyone tracking you down,” Jeff said.

“I know.”

I completely understood. If we told Mr. Bernard about the will and it became public knowledge, someone might trace it back to me. And if they started digging into my background and discovered I was living under a false identity, we would be in big trouble.

Although the story was that I was originally a commoner who was adopted into a baron’s family, if anyone investigated my supposed hometown, they would discover that Anna the commoner never existed. There *was* no such person, after all.

As I fretted about what to do, Nonna squeezed my hand tightly. She must be worried. I squeezed hers in return, telling her in my own way that it would be fine.

After a short walk, we arrived at Mr. Bernard’s estate.

“What’s this? You’ve returned already? I thought you wouldn’t be back for at least two months! Was finding the crown too

difficult with the information you had?" Mr. Bernard asked as he welcomed us inside.

I couldn't blame him for asking, considering we'd returned in less than a month. Before I could explain, though, Nonna quickly pulled a rock from her bag and handed it to him.

"Here's the souvenir I promised to get you! I found it in Sybil!"

"Oh, is this a stone? I'll likely never be able to visit Sybil, so this is delight…," Mr. Bernard trailed off. He squinted, putting his reading glasses on and taking them off again, bringing the stone closer and examining it from all angles.

The stone Nonna had brought as a souvenir was about ten centimeters long and six centimeters wide, with streaks of gold running through its mottled surface, just like Sibby.

"Isn't it beautiful, Mr. Bernard?"

"Yes, quite, Nonna. Thank you. Where exactly did she find this, Victoria?" he asked.

"In Sybil. I'll explain everything. Jeff can fill in any gaps I miss. Also, Mr. Bernard, the things I'm about to tell you may become classified by the government, so I wanted to make sure to report back to you before that happened."

Mr. Bernard's usual serious expression shifted into a dark smile.

"Heh-heh-heh… Victoria, if you discovered a historical secret so valuable that the government would want to hide it, no historian in their right mind would pass up the chance to hear it. Please go on. Actually, wait. Give me a moment to gather a pen, paper, and some ink. There, I'm all set. Go ahead, Victoria."

I began to recount our journey, starting with our visit to the Sibyl Forestry Association.

Mr. Bernard didn't ask a single question. Instead, he furiously jotted down notes, listened attentively without interrupting, nodded, and occasionally showed a look of surprise or admiration.

When Jeffrey pulled the bundle of parchment from his bag, which was the unpublished work by Elmer Archibald, Mr. Bernard immediately snatched it off the table.

But then he realized this wasn't the time to read, so he reluctantly shook his head and set it back down, picking up his pen again.

I told him about the volcanic crater, the five skeletons, the discovery of the gold ore, and how we'd rescued Auri. My story ended up being quite long, but I told him the whole thing, only leaving out the part about the will.

Mr. Bernard was visibly excited when I finished. Nonna and I prepared some tea while we waited for him to calm down. Jeffrey sat there quietly, observing his uncle. We began to drink our tea, but Mr. Bernard was far too worked up to even touch his.

"Jeffrey, I take it you'll be reporting this to the government?"



“Clark went with us at my brother’s request to record the events of our journey. He’ll be the one submitting the official report, not me,” Jeff said.

“Clark went along?”

“Yes, my brother framed it as a request from the Document Management department.”

“I see… But, Victoria, there’s still something that isn’t adding up,” Mr. Bernard said.

“What’s that?”

“Well, it seems to me that a few parts of your story are… incomplete. I can’t quite put my finger on it, though. Perhaps I’ll have my thoughts more organized the next time we meet.”

The maid was arriving, so we decided it was time to leave. Mr. Bernard still seemed restless. Clearly, he couldn’t wait to read the unpublished works of Mr. Archibald.

“Jeff, we’ll be home in no time if we take the carriage. But I feel like taking a little detour,” I said.

“All right. That’s fine. Where would you like to go?”

“How about a bakery with that delicious apple pie?” I suggested.

“Okay, let’s go,” he said.

“Yay! I love the apple pie from that place!” Nonna cheered.

We sent the carriage back and walked to a little bakery in the southern quarter I used to visit often back when I lived in the cottage on Lady Yolana’s estate. The shop was just as lively today as it was back then, bustling with customers.

We took a seat in a corner of the dining room, each of us ordering our favorite treats. Nonna went with her usual, an apple pie. Jeff chose a cheesecake parfait, and I picked a blueberry and raspberry tart.

“This is so good. I thought I knew all the popular spots from my time in the Second Order, but I must’ve missed this one,” Jeff said.

“Really? I thought for sure the captain of the knights would know all the best places to eat!” I teased.

“We only found it because of Mom’s older guy friend who has a sweet tooth. Right, Mom?” Nonna asked.

“That’s right,” I said.

I thought I saw Jeffrey's expression tighten ever so slightly for a split second.

"Um, Jeff? That man owns the pub. I just happened to bump into him at the market one day…," I said.

"Are you worried because you love Mom so much, Dad?" Nonna asked innocently.

"I'm not worried at all, Nonna."

"It's okay, Dad. Mom only gets that dreamy look on her face when she's with you. She has a totally different expression on her face when she's with that man or Mr. Bernard or Lady Yolana. She gets a special way when she's with you!"

Nice save, Nonna!

A happy look spread across Jeffrey's face. *What an adorable man.*

"Wow, this looks amazing!"

The moment the apple pie arrived, Nonna enthusiastically dug in. The berry tart I ordered was sweet and tangy, with rich whipped cream on top. It was happiness on a plate.

"Jeff, I know we haven't told Master Clark what was in the will, but do you think the kingdom will eventually catch on to me?"

"It would've been a whole lot easier if Clark hadn't come along," Jeff admitted.

"Why did Master Clark end up coming with us anyway?" I asked.

"Probably because Uncle Bernard told my brother that we were going after the lost crown."

"I suppose, but has Lord Edward always been a history buff?" I asked.

"I'm not sure," Jeffrey said. He paused, deep in thought. "No, I've never heard anything like that before. It's probably because he's in charge of the Document Management department, right?"

"I'm sure that must be it. Plus, we were able to help Auri because Master Clark was with us. So everything worked out in the end," I said with a smile. But truthfully, I felt uneasy deep down.

The key to the first cipher I'd explained already to Mr. Bernard was simple and straightforward. Anyone who had dabbled in decryption would recognize it as a classic code,

provided they didn't fall for the misspelled words—you didn't have to be a spy to figure it out.

But how many commoner women were into code-breaking?

It'll be fine. It'll be fine.

I kept that mantra up in my head, but whenever I'd tried to convince myself of this in the past, things hadn't been fine after all. And that was precisely why I couldn't shake my anxiety.



We stopped by a bookstore on the way home to pick up an Ashburian-Subartuan dictionary.

It was an expensive dictionary—so expensive, in fact, that I almost put it back on the shelf once I saw the price tag. But as I hesitated, Jeffrey casually took it from my hand, headed up to the counter, and bought it for me.

"I know that was a lot of money. Thanks, Jeff."

"You worked hard in Shen and contributed a great deal to our kingdom. You at least deserve this dictionary as a reward. Don't worry about it."

When we got home, Auri and Bertha were cleaning up the garden together.

Auri had on a dark grey skirt, a white blouse, and black shoes. Her hair was tied back, accentuating her pretty face even more. She looked beautiful.

"We're back, Bertha and Auri. We brought some cakes for everyone, so please help yourselves."

"Oh my, you brought back sweets for us servants, too? Thank you so much, Your Ladyship! You know, Auri has been a very diligent worker."

"Did she offer to help with the cleaning? Were you able to understand her?"

"She volunteered, yes. And since cleaning doesn't require much talking, we're managing just fine."

"I see. Well, you're probably closer in age to Auri's mother than I am, so maybe that's why she's warming up to you faster."

Auri must've realized we were talking about her. She gave me a faint smile but kept sweeping. Even that tiny smile felt like

progress.

Nonna shuffled her feet anxiously as she watched Auri. She probably wanted to be friends with her.

Nonna had grown up isolated until she was six years old. She'd had no friends and had spent her days in silence alone at home. Once she'd started living with me, Master Clark became her only playmate. Even in Shen, our landlord's oldest son had been her sole companion. It wasn't often she met another girl, so that was probably why she was so eager to get along with Auri.

As we headed to the living room, I spoke to her.

"You used to be just like that when you were six, Nonna. You were shy around people, like a cute little kitten. You were so adorable I couldn't help but love you."

"Hmm, really? I know I was quiet, but I had a lot on my mind back then. I just didn't know how to express it."

"I know. You told me all about what you were thinking about later on."

"I really wanted you to know how I felt."

"I'm sure Auri feels the same way. She probably has so much on her mind, but since she doesn't know Ashburian, we need to be patient with her. But if we can't wait…"

"Yes?"

"Then we'll just have to learn Subartuan, won't we?"

"That's right, Mom!"

As the two of us walked along laughing and chatting, I felt someone staring at us. I turned around, but I only saw Auri and Bertha.

Which one of them was watching me?

I went to my bedroom alone without an answer to that question. I knelt down and checked the baby powder I left on the floor. There were no footprints.

Since all the servants in this house had been personally selected by Lord Edward, it was unlikely that anyone suspicious had slipped in. Still, I decided to keep an eye on things for a while—for both Nonna's sake and mine. I'd told too many lies for work to trust strangers without some kind of proof that they were safe.

I found Nonna in the living room, muttering to herself as she studied the Subartuan dictionary.

As I watched her, I thought back to that strange gaze I'd felt earlier. It had felt ominous and definitely not like anything good.

A long time ago, during my academy days, an instructor had taught us the necessity of sensing when someone else's eyes were on you.

He turned his back to the class and then called on me. "Chloe, move without making a sound, then glare at me like you want to kill me."

I quietly crept to another position and returned to my seat before glaring at him. *I'll punch the back of your head!* I thought.

"You stayed in the same spot," he said, correctly guessing where I was.

Several of my classmates tried the exercise after me, sneaking to a new position before glaring at the instructor's back. And every time, he pinpointed their location exactly without turning around. "You're behind me to the right," "You're directly behind me," or "You're slightly to the left."

After that lesson, our class became obsessed with the exercise, which we called "The Glaring Game."

Among my peers, I was particularly talented at guessing when someone was glaring at me and where they were. If I had to describe the sensation of someone staring at you, I would say that it felt like a subtle pressure. Some students never got the hang of it, so I thought maybe it was just something you were either born with or not.

As I reminisced, I looked at the dictionary and memorized a few words myself.

"Mom! Listen to my Subartuan!"

"Oh, you've picked it up already? Let's hear it."

"Okay. <I'm Nonna. What's your name?> I hope the pronunciation is all right…"

Nonna stumbled through the sounds, checking the phonetic symbols as she went. She was probably close. I'd educated her thoroughly in languages. Besides her native Ashburian, she could hold conversations without issue in Randallish, Haglian,

and Shenese. And she'd probably master Subartuan soon, too. That wasn't a bad set of skills for a young noblewoman.

"Nonna, go call Auri. Say, <Come with me.>"

"Wow, Mom! You already memorized that? <Come with me. Come with me.> Got it. I'll go get her!"

Nonna rushed off in a not so ladylike manner and returned moments later with Auri in tow. Auri looked bewildered as Nonna plopped her onto the sofa and set a pen and paper in front of her, preparing to talk.

"Wait, Nonna. You need to ask if Auri can read and write first."

"Oh, right! Good point."

We asked Auri a series of questions with the help of the dictionary. It took a bit of time, but we carefully asked her questions, one by one.

The key to this process was patience. When someone had been through a traumatic experience, even the slightest trigger could get them to shut down emotionally. And once that door was closed, it wasn't easy to get them to open up again.

I carefully pronounced each word, making sure Auri understood before she answered. Nonna wrote down her responses. We needed to keep a record for Jeffrey and Bertha.

We took breaks, enjoying tea and cake between questions, and we pieced together Auri's story little by little.

She could read and write simple words. She told us that before she escaped, she'd worked on a farm. The owner was forty-five and had tried to force her into marriage. He'd barely paid her, but since she'd had no one to turn to and no allies among the forest folk, her only option had been to run.

Forty-five? That man was probably older than her father.

I imagined how I would punish a man like that.

The kingdom of Subartu was supposed to be a civilized nation, but apparently, they were turning a blind eye to what amounted to slavery. Or perhaps this human trafficking was being concealed, and the government and royal family had no idea.

I wrote down <*What do you want to do now? We want to help you.*>

Auri read what I wrote, and her response was brief. <*I want to see Clark.*>

That was all she wanted.

Nonna looked surprised and stared at Auri. “Huh?”

“Nonna, Auri’s been through something very scary. She probably trusts Master Clark deeply because he was the first person to speak to her in Subartuan after what happened. I’ll write to the Andersons and ask him to come over.”

“Okay.”



That night, Master Clark hurried over to our house.

The moment Auri laid eyes on him, she ran over to him and threw her arms around him, speaking quickly in Subartuan. He looked bewildered and held his hands out to the side in a silent plea for help as he looked at Jeffrey and me.

I took a step forward. “Auri, it’s not polite to cling to people like that,” I said as I gently tried to pull her away.

But Auri smacked my arm hard and glared at me sharply. I felt a clear sense of hostility in her gaze.

So it was your *gaze I felt.*

“Let go of Master Clark. It’s rude.” I said in a slightly firm voice. Even if she couldn’t understand the language, she should understand my tone.

But she clung to him, sobbing and pleading desperately as she spoke in a rush. As he listened, his brows drew together until a look of disgust slowly crept across his handsome face.

Before long, he grasped her shoulders firmly with both hands and forced her off him. She looked stunned as he said something in Subartuan to her in a harsh tone, then walked over to Jeffrey.

“Uncle Jeff, you mustn’t trust Auri. Letting her stay here isn’t a good idea. I think it’s best you move her somewhere else,” he said quietly.

“What’s going on? What did she say to you?”

“I’d rather not say. It’s not something anyone should have to hear. But please trust me when I say that she’s dangerous. I’m sorry, but I’ll be going now.” And with that, Master Clark gave me and Nonna a polite nod, then turned and left. Nonna stared after him, completely shocked. I wrapped an arm around her shoulders and tried to nudge her back inside.

But she brushed my hand away and went over to Auri. Everyone was rejecting my touch tonight.

“What’s wrong, Auri? Are you okay?” Nonna asked with concern.

Auri didn’t even make eye contact with Nonna before she mumbled something and walked into the house.

Whatever she had said left Nonna stunned and expressionless. I comforted her as I took her to my bedroom.

“What happened? What did she say?”

“She whispered, ‘I hate you.’ She meant it toward me, didn’t she? But why? Did I do something to her? Why does she hate me?”

Nonna was a girl who very rarely cried, but now tears streamed down her cheeks, and her voice trembled. As I stroked her head, my heart ached so much it felt like someone had told me they hated me instead.

Growing up, I’d encountered plenty of people like Auri both in the academy and when I’d worked undercover in noble society.

They’d hated me for getting better grades than them, for being closer to the boys they had crushes on, and for receiving more attention than they did.

Insulting me and dragging me down gave them some kind of satisfaction. And instead of working harder to best me, they just tried to belittle me to make themselves feel better.

There were always people like that everywhere, and they never grew beyond that behavior. It was best to leave those people be.

I had been resilient and confident in my hard work, so their harassment and insults hadn’t bothered me. But Nonna had never experienced this sort of malicious behavior before. It was her first time, and it must have hurt her.

“It’s not your fault. I think Auri’s just jealous of you.”

“But me and you and Dad only want to help her!”

“I know that. And if she were smarter, she wouldn’t have acted like this. She’s still very childish.”

Nonna didn’t understand that yet.

But if Auri were more cunning and malicious, she would have smiled at us and used us for everything we were worth, secretly harboring resentment against us all the while. The fact that she was openly displaying her hateful feelings now made things easier.

I wrapped my arms around Nonna’s slender body and rested my cheek against her soft, blond hair.

“I wish I could raise you in a world where you’d only see pure, beautiful things. But you’re twelve now, and it’s time you learned that the world isn’t always kind.”

“What do you mean?”

“Now that you’re twelve, you’ll have to attend social gatherings with other aristocratic children. And inevitably, the truth will come out that you and I were born commoners. Some people might mock you for it. You’ll meet girls with personalities so bad you’ll think Auri was a sweetheart, I’m afraid.”

“I don’t want to go to gatherings like that,” Nonna said.

“Well, not going is one option.”

“Are there other options?”

“Hmm, let’s see… I can think of three off the top of my head. Want to hear them?” I asked.

Nonna thought for a moment and then nodded, her face still wet with tears. “Yes. You say it’s always best to have many cards to play.”

“Heh-heh. Exactly. When someone is mean to you, your first option is to cover your face and sob loudly. That’ll make everyone know someone was bullying you, and then your tormentor will panic. But the downside is that it will make you seem like a crybaby.”

“No way! That’d be really frustrating.”

“The second option is to pretend you didn’t hear what they said and ignore them completely. I don’t recommend this one, though, because the cold shoulder will only make them bolder. You shouldn’t let people walk all over you. The third one is to fire back with something right then and there that will put

them in their place. But in order to do that, you have to do some research beforehand and find out their weaknesses."

"You mean I'd have to research everyone who's invited? What did you do in those situations, Mom?" she asked.

I was hesitant to reveal this darker part of myself to my sweet Nonna, but it was important for her to learn these lessons.

"We all lived together at the academy, so mostly I ignored them. But if someone did something I really couldn't stand, I'd use my martial arts to shut them up. No one at the academy could beat me, be they boy or girl."

"Wow, that's amazing!"

"But when it came to the aristocrats, I'd gather every bit of information I could about those attending. That way, if they tried anything, I could hit back with something that would put them in their place right then and there."

"Whoa. You really did that?" Nonna asked.

"Yes. If you just let them bully you endlessly, it draws attention. And it's not worth it to waste your time being miserable."

"I see. Well, I'll go with that option."

"It's tough but effective. But of course, remember that there are kind noblewomen, too, like Lady Eva and Lady Yolana. So you should make friends with people like them."

"Got it."

Nonna began to look like herself again as she wiped away her tears.

"I wish I could always protect you, but I can't. One day, you'll leave my side and venture out into the world. When that time comes, I want you to be strong. I don't want someone else's harassment or cruel words to get you down or make you too scared to leave the house."

"But I want to stay with you forever, Mom. Can't I?" Nonna's eyes wavered anxiously. I felt a pang in my heart, and my nose began to sting.

"I wish you could. I want to be with you forever, too, Nonna. But little birds must leave their nest when they grow up because that's what is best for both the parent and the child."

"Hmm, I guess that's true."

It had only been six years since Nonna had come into my life, but we'd gone through so much together that she'd become a part of me. But Nonna had her own life to live. She was her own person. And one day, I'd have to let her go. That day wasn't so far off. The mere thought of it made me feel like bursting into tears.

"I'm always so grateful that I spoke to you in the town square that day. You've become such a good, kindhearted, and hardworking girl, Nonna. I'm so happy we get to live together."

"I'm glad you talked to me, too, Mom."

"And thanks to you, I met Jeff."

"Mom, why do you think Auri said she hated me?"

"We won't know until we ask her, but maybe…," I stopped myself. I didn't want to make a criticism based on assumptions. But if my hunch was right, the sixteen-year-old had deceived us all.

"Maybe what?"

"No, it's nothing."

That night, Auri vanished from our house.

A sixteen-year-old girl who couldn't speak the local language wouldn't have many places to go.

Jeff reached out to the security force and the Second Order of the knights for help, and I asked Zaharo to gather information about Auri's whereabouts. Word must've reached Hector, the boss of the underworld, by now.

But we had no luck in finding her at all.

It wasn't until then that Master Clark told Jeffrey and me what Auri had told him. "She said Nonna was bullying her and that Miss Victoria worked her to the bone with chores and laundry to the point where she barely had time to sleep. She begged me to help her and take her to my house."

"Well, that was a pretty sloppy lie, wasn't it?" I said.

"Do you think her story about being mistreated in Subartu was also untrue?"

"At this point, I'm seriously starting to consider it."

Some people spent their lives working hard only to run out of energy and collapse at the end, but others seemed destined to fall from the very beginning. Yet everyone started life with a

pure heart that was a clean slate. So how could that heart change so much along the way?

Jeffrey was incredibly kind to me when he heard that Auri had run away.

"You don't have to worry about me, Jeff. I'll be fine. I've seen and heard things like this so many times before that I can barely keep track," I said.

"Really? Then why do you look so sad?"

"Do I look sad? I guess it's because I know better than anyone that kindness doesn't always get reciprocated."

Jeffrey said nothing more. He just stayed by my side. As I leaned against him, I thought to myself how life was sometimes bitter and sometimes sweet, but I hoped Auri would one day find her share of sweetness and happiness, too.

Interlude

✡

Edward's Paternal Instincts

"So they found a source of gold, did they?"

Edward Asher read through the report his nephew Clark had submitted while he sat in a room in the north wing of the royal palace.

He'd hoped that Victoria would find the grave of the lost fifth princess, but instead, she'd found something far beyond his expectations.

However, Clark's report said, *When I was traveling near the border of Subartu, I happened upon a family who joined me in my travels, and we ended up discovering gold.* There was no specific mention of Jeffrey, Victoria, or Nonna.

"Jeffrey must have sworn him to silence. But hiding this will be impossible. People will ask who made the discovery, and they'll want to know why they're hiding their identities. And claiming that the person doesn't want a reward will only make everyone more curious."

Of course, the credit belonged to Victoria. Under normal circumstances, she would be entitled to a handsome reward. But Edward doubted she had any interest in such things or even wanted to be compensated.

Jeffrey would likely refuse it, too, just to keep his wife's identity hidden.

Five years had passed since Hagl had sent the assassins after her.

Memories of Victoria, the runaway spy, had surely faded among the royals and prime minister. It would be best not to reignite their interest now. Still, a discovery of this magnitude needed to be reported.

Edward rose from his seat and raked his fingers through his silver hair while he stared out the window. A moment later, he called for Mike.

When Mike arrived, Edward silently handed him Clark's report. Mike took it from him with a puzzled expression on his face and began reading. Edward watched with great interest as Mike's eyes and mouth gradually widened in surprise.

"Victoria made this discovery, didn't she? What *can't* she do? Oh, what a waste… If only we could get her to teach for us! No, with her skills, she could easily come back on active duty!"

"Neither Jeffrey nor Victoria wants that," Edward said.

"Well, I figured as much. Still, Hagl tried to eliminate someone this talented? What a bunch of fools," Mike muttered.

Edward gave a dark chuckle. "Fools in other countries only help us, Mike. Our team will head to the site to confirm the report. Pick five good hikers for the job. I need to step out for a bit. There's something important missing from this document. I asked Clark, but he didn't know anything about it, so I want to find out why they kept a key detail from him."

"Something important is missing, you say? Well, if that's what you think, I'm sure you're right, sir."

Edward smiled faintly at Mike and set off toward his uncle's residence.

"Uncle Bernard, have you heard from Victoria and the others about what they found at the border? I've come across a bit of trouble."

"Yes, I've heard. What sort of trouble?"

"Clark submitted the report about the gold ore, but it seems Jeffrey and his family don't want their names mentioned."

"Oh? I don't know a thing about that," Bernard said.

"I need your help, Uncle. Will you take credit for figuring out the cipher in *The Lost Crown* and discovering the marker that led to the gold?"

Bernard's eyes widened in shock. "Absolutely not! I had nothing to do with it. I couldn't possibly steal Victoria's thunder like that."

"But you wouldn't be. Jeff and Victoria don't want the attention, and I don't think they care about the reward, either."

"Hmm, they do have their reasons, I suppose."

“But if we say you cracked the novel’s code and that Jeffrey discovered the gold, both of you would receive a reward. And if you say you don’t want yours, you could just give it to Jeffrey.”

“Hmm, I don’t know about that…”

Just one more push… Edward smiled gently, sensing that his uncle was close to agreeing.

“There’s another thing I need from Victoria. The report says five skeletons were found at the site, but there’s no information on how they died. If Elmer used a cipher to reveal the location of the gold, don’t you think it’s strange he would leave out the part about the five bodies?”

“Exactly! Something doesn’t sit right with me about that, either. That’s it. But what if the parchment that information was written on got lost at some point?”

Edward took a moment to consider the possibility.

“No, I don’t think so. The chances of that are slim if it was sealed with wax in a glass jar. Elmer must’ve been the one to seal the entrance to the passageway up with the bodies still inside since he left the signpost on the white stone monument. I want to be sure about that, though, as the head of Document Management. Could you try getting the information out of Victoria and see if she knows anything? She’ll probably talk if you’re the one who asks her.”

Bernard hesitated. As a scholar, taking credit for someone else’s work was simply out of the question. But if it would earn his nephew a reward, then he wanted to help. After all, this was Victoria they were talking about. She was the one who had given him a normal life again after he had isolated himself from the world for so long. Surely it would make her happy if Jeffrey was recognized and rewarded.

“Uncle, even if Jeffrey becomes a baron, it won’t come with any land. You can never have too much money when you consider the future. Nonna’s already twelve. A few years from now, she’ll be someone’s bride. You don’t want her to feel like she doesn’t belong when she marries, do you? And you know how Jeff is. He’ll never accept financial help from either of us,” Edward said.

Bernard's heart stirred when he thought of sweet Nonna's face. He adored her like his own grandchild.

"Well, I suppose I can help, as long as it's for Victoria and Nonna."

"I knew I could count on you, Uncle Bernard. So mention that we should publicize Jeffrey's name and ask about the skeletons."

And with that, Edward quickly left the estate.

Officially, Edward wanted to know why his brother and Victoria hadn't revealed the mystery of the skeletons to Clark, but personally, his real goal was to ensure Jeffrey received the reward. A baron would need money to maintain a respectable lifestyle, after all.

Jeffrey could have lived comfortably for the rest of his days had he remained a knight, but he'd given up his position for Victoria's sake.

"But it's Victoria who will suffer in the end if they have financial problems. And as her brother-in-law, I want to help them in any way I can. None of this would've happened if the prince hadn't decided to give Jeffrey a title."

The crown prince was fond of Jeffrey, which was why he was getting the peerage. But Edward couldn't help but feel sorry for Victoria, who would have been far more comfortable remaining a commoner.

But at the very least, Edward wanted to make sure that Jeffrey could collect the reward. He felt a paternal instinct toward his little brother, and as far as he was concerned, this was his responsibility to his family.



Mr. Bernard invited Jeffrey and me over, so we headed to his estate.

"Uncle, are you saying you want me to use my name in the report about discovering the gold ore?"

"I'll drop the issue if you're really against it. But if I say that I broke the code and you found the ore, you'll get the reward. And I would hand over my share to you."

“But…”

“Besides, if we present it like that, I’ll get the chance to publish the story behind this monumental discovery! I’m a historian, but I love literature. I want everyone to know about the truth hidden in that novel.”

“But Uncle…”

“If you’re granted the title of baron, it’ll cost a lot of money to maintain your lifestyle and social obligations. Nonna will get married eventually, and you don’t want her to feel like she doesn’t belong in her new home, do you? You can never have too much money. Won’t you do it for Victoria and Nonna?”

Jeffrey and I exchanged glances.

I didn’t mind Jeffrey’s name being used for the discovery as long as I didn’t have to attend any of the public events. He could just say, “My wife is feeling unwell,” and that would take care of it.

When I saw how much deeper the wrinkles on Mr. Bernard’s face had grown in the past five years and how the skin on his hands had become thinner, I found myself thinking, *Well, maybe it’s all right.*

In Ashbury and its neighboring kingdoms, people said that life beyond sixty was a gift from the gods. Making it through your forties and fifties and reaching the age of sixty meant you were happy to go whenever it was your time. So from that perspective, Mr. Bernard had lived a very long time.

“I’m fine with it as long as my name isn’t mentioned, Jeff. I understand that Mr. Bernard wants to fulfill his duty as a historian.”

“Victoria, I really think we shouldn’t…”

“If we’re ever invited to a public event for it, you can just say your wife is sick in bed and couldn’t attend. That should do it,” I said.

“Thank you, Victoria. Mike told me why you prefer to avoid the public eye. You were running away from some high-ranking noble who fell in love with you, correct?”

“More or less.”

That was far from the truth, of course, but there was no need to correct him.

“I won’t mention your name. I’d never do anything to endanger you. But could you tell me the full story again, so my presentation sounds natural?” Mr. Bernard asked.

“Of course, Mr. Bernard.”

“Thank you. This way, you’ll get your reward, Jeffrey. Now, Elmer must’ve written something about those five skeletons, don’t you think? That whole part of the story is missing.”

Jeffrey froze momentarily, but then he quickly smiled. “Oh, yes. There was a piece of parchment with some nonsense scribbled onto it. Wasn’t there, Victoria?”

“Yes, darling. I put it aside because I thought the author had made a mistake and discarded it, but I remember.”

We promised to have one of our servants deliver the parchment the next day and left Mr. Bernard’s estate.

The moment we stepped outside, I said, “Historians are scary.” Jeffrey chuckled wryly at first, but before long, he couldn’t hold it in anymore and doubled over, clutching his stomach. His laughter was so infectious, I couldn’t help but join in.

Chapter Six

Mother Superior Eliza and the Used Bookstore

It was easy to decide what to do with the encrypted document on the way back from Mr. Bernard's estate.

"Let's just tell Uncle again that we set it aside thinking it was just a piece of paper the author had made errors on, and then he can take it over."

"Yes, that sounds good," I agreed.

We shouldn't get involved any further in it.

The next day, I had Reed deliver the encrypted document to Mr. Bernard's house. After Reed left, and Jeffrey went out to run some errands, Bertha came in.

"You have a visitor, Your Ladyship."

"Oh? Who is it?"

"The Mother Superior of the abbey in the southern quarter."

I'd never met and didn't know this person, so I changed into a dress to see her. Since I had been born a commoner, I didn't know the ins and outs of these things. My guest wasn't a noble, so I wondered if it was really necessary to keep her waiting while I changed into a dress, but Bertha was adamant that I should.

I respected her opinion since she was much more familiar with the ins and outs of noble society than I was, and I changed into a light green dress with a high collar that buttoned all the way to my throat.

"My name is Eliza, and I'm the Mother Superior of the abbey in the southern quarter. Thank you for receiving me on such short notice."

"It's nice to meet you. I'm Anna Asher. What brings you here today?"

“I’ve come to make a request regarding an ointment you made,” she said.

Mother Eliza was a slender woman in her fifties with impeccable posture.

“Ointment?”

“Yes. Our abbey provides a safe place for women without family or homes. One of them helped with some garden work at a local estate recently, and she developed a rash. It started on the back of her hands, but it quickly spread to her arms, neck, and chest. She turned bright red. She was in a lot of pain and discomfort, and she said it hurt and itched a great deal.”

“Goodness.”

“A greengrocer who stopped by happened to see her condition and said, ‘I have the perfect ointment for you. I’ll bring it over right away for you to try.’ Then he shared the ointment with her.”

Now I was starting to see why the Mother Superior had come to visit me.

“My lady, the ointment worked remarkably well. We were positively astonished. When I asked the greengrocer about it, he told me a Lady Asher had made it.”

“I’m so glad to hear that my ointment was of help.”

“That brings me to my request. Would you consider allowing my abbey to sell your ointment?”

I wanted to agree, but I thought I should first verify the truth of her story and look into the abbey. I could bear full responsibility for any decision when it had been just Nonna and me, but now things were different. I couldn’t risk tarnishing Jeffrey’s reputation or causing trouble for Lord Edward.

“May I visit your abbey first?”

“Why, of course! We’d be happy to welcome you anytime. You’re even free to come right now if you wish.”

“I’ll do just that. I’ll have the carriage pull around so we can go together.”

I asked Nonna to come along, but she said she had things to do, so I went alone.

The abbey was located in the southern quarter of the capital near the castle walls, where the rent was cheap.

It was an old building, but the garden was clearly well-maintained, and repairs had been made to the structure.

“The building seems well taken care of,” I remarked.

“Yes, we manage it together, and our parishioners help us with repairs instead of donations,” Mother Eliza said.

“I see.”

It was cool inside the chapel. There were rows of wooden pews on either side, polished to a gleam. At the center of the altar was a statue of Aer, the central figure in Ashbury’s religion.

Aer had an androgynous appearance, their gender an eternal mystery in the theological world.

After I finished looking at the chapel, Mother Eliza showed me the rooms where women in need stayed at the abbey. There were five rooms, each with two bunk beds. The rooms were simple but tidy.

“May I ask if there’s a sixteen-year-old girl here with light brown hair, by any chance? Her name is Auri.”

“I’m afraid not. All the women here are older.”

“I see.”

I didn’t expect Auri to be here, but I had to ask, just in case.

Next, Mother Eliza showed me to the nuns’ quarters. Surprisingly, their rooms were nearly identical to the women’s—simple with no signs of luxury. Then she showed me her own room.

“Is this really your room?” I asked in surprise.

“Everyone’s always surprised. But I see no reason why I should have a fancy room,” Mother Eliza said.

Her room was the smallest yet. It was completely undecorated, with just a bed, a small table, and a little chest of drawers. That was it.

I think I can trust her, I thought.

“Shall we go to the parlor?” she asked. We continued our conversation there while we were served tea.

“I’ll seriously consider letting you sell the ointment here. But how do you plan to handle relations with nearby pharmacies? Are there any pharmacists among your parishioners?” I asked.

Mother Eliza gave me a sheepish smile. “No one from a pharmacy would come to this abbey. In fact, there are no pharmacies in this area at all. Most of the people who live here can’t afford expensive medicines.”

“Oh, I see…” I felt ashamed of my careless remark. Medicine was expensive and only the wealthiest of commoners could afford it. Everyone else had no choice but to rely on time and their own strength as treatment.

“I’ll do my best to assist you,” I told her as I left.

It was still light out, but I found myself wondering if The Black Thrush was open. I wanted to spend some time there thinking about the medicine and the encrypted document.

I rode the carriage toward the shops in the southern quarter, telling Reed to wait at the carriage stop while I walked the rest of the way to the Black Thrush.

But it was still too early for the tavern to be open, and the door was locked.

With no other choice, I decided to walk around. This street was set a little off from the main road and branched into narrow alleys lined with a variety of shops and trading companies.

One was a used bookstore and lender called Zachary’s Used Bookstore. The only thing that looked new about the place was the brown fabric shades in its four windows.

Most shops had shades that extended outward like awnings, but these hung straight down, completely blocking any view of the inside.

“A book lender… That brings back memories…” As I stood outside gazing at the shop, the door suddenly opened, and a man appeared. He looked around thirty and wore glasses, with soft, wavy brown hair and a gentle expression on his face. He had a beauty mark right beneath one of his eyes. He was very handsome and had the kind of face women loved.

“Feel free to come in and browse if you like,” he said.

“Thank you. I think I will.”

“I keep the shades down to protect the books from the sun. I know it’s hard for new customers to tell if we’re open or not,” he said. Then he returned to his seat behind the counter. There was a government permit hanging on the wall behind him that read, *License for Secondhand Books and Book Lending Operations. Proprietor: Will Zachary.*

The lending section mostly featured romance novels, adventures, and heroic tales, and the secondhand books took

up about a quarter of the store's space.

There were novels, religious texts, practical guides, and just about everything. There was a section of parchment books also tucked into a cabinet with glass doors, most likely to protect them because they were more expensive.

"If you'd like to see one of the books in the cabinet, I can lend you a pair of gloves," he said.

"Thanks. I'll just browse for now," I said.

"Take your time."

The used books were displayed with their covers out, and they varied in age. One in particular caught my eye. It immediately struck me as a forgery. It looked no different from the other old books, but it gave off an air of trying too hard to seem old.

Since I'd done a lot of forgery work before, I understood the mindset of a forger all too well. People tended to overdo it. It was a common mistake for those who lacked confidence. My instructor used to warn us repeatedly, *"Beginners, please be careful not to overdo the weathering process."*

"See anything you like?" The owner asked.

"Oh, yes. This one. *A History of Western Ceramics*."

"One moment, please."

Will Zachary pulled the book from the shelf. "This is a first edition. It's not often you come across one of these," he said happily.

I thanked him and borrowed a pair of gloves from him as I took the book in hand.

I slowly turned the parchment pages. It was a fake, just as I'd suspected. I waited for a moment when the owner wasn't watching and gave the book a quick sniff. There was a faint scent that lingered—one I recognized as a plant extract that we'd grown accustomed to during training. The scent was subtle, almost undetectable unless you had a keen sense of smell.

Hmm, I see.

"Thank you so much," I said, returning the book.

"Oh, are you done?"

"Yes, it was very educational. I'll be back again." I gave him back the gloves and left the bookshop. It would've been kind to

tell him, “That book’s a forgery,” but that would only lead to trouble for me, so I decided to keep it to myself.



After I made a few more stops with Reed, I finished my shopping and headed home. I asked him to cut down a slender branch from one of the cedar trees in the garden and borrowed a saw from him.

“My Ladyship, I can handle the sawing if you’d like.”

“No need. I want to do it myself. It’s been a while.”

I locked myself in my bedroom and laid out everything I’d bought, then I got to work. My plan was to create a solution and soak the brand-new parchment I’d purchased in it to make it look convincingly old.

I spread a sheet over the floor of the balcony, set a low stool on top, and placed the branch on the stool. I held the branch steady with my foot and began sawing it into sections. I watched the sawdust pile up. I intended to boil the sawdust to make a dye.

I finished gathering enough sawdust and moved the stool aside. I was just about to fold the sheet when a voice came from behind that made me jump.

“What are you going to use that for?”

“You startled me! Nonna, how long have you been there?!”

“I just got here. I knocked, but you didn’t answer. And since the door was locked, I came this way instead.”

“This way?! Get down from that railing this instant! We’re on the second floor! What if Reed or Bertha saw you?”

“Aren’t you worried about me falling?” Nonna giggled and nimbly leaped from the railing onto the balcony floor. Barefoot, no less.

“I know you won’t fall.”

“It’s true. I wonder if most thieves out there could manage something like this?”

“That depends on their skills. No, wait! Nonna, I’m serious. You must be careful outside.”

“I know. I will. So what’s this all for? Looks interesting.”

Nonna leaned in curiously. Meanwhile, I was panicking on the inside. *How did I not notice her sneaking up on me at all? Have I gotten rusty?* Even though I was sawing the wood, I should've heard or sensed her climbing up onto the railing.

Nonna blissfully ignored my shock and quickly gathered the sheet. She took it into my bedroom for me.

"So? What are you going to do with it?"

"I'm going to boil it down in the fireplace."

"Okay. I'll watch."

Nonna removed the metal plate from the chimney and started the fire for me. I placed a pot of water near it.

"You'll add the sawdust, right? Want me to toss in the pieces of the branch, too?" she asked casually.

"Yes, everything from the sheet goes in it."

Nonna beamed with excitement once everything was ready.

"Hey, Nonna? I didn't hear a single sound from you earlier."

"Yeah, I was trying not to make any noise so I could surprise you."

"But how did you do it? Can you teach me?"

"Heh-heh… Do you *really* want to know? Should I tell you? Hmm, maybe I should keep it to myself."

She was smiling, but I must've been staring at her with a serious expression on my face because she relented. It concerned me that she'd become this skilled without me realizing it. *Did she learn this from her Shenese martial arts training? Do they teach that kind of technique?*

"Master Khan said, 'When shifting your weight, imagine yourself as the wind. Wind does not make noise—the objects it picks up do.' I didn't understand him for the *longest* time, but then one day, it suddenly clicked! Ever since, I've been able to move without making a sound."

"Now I really regret it…," I said.

"Regret what?"

"Not learning martial arts from him, too!"

Master Khan had been Nonna's Shenese martial arts instructor during our stay in Shen. He was the former head of our landlord's family.

Nonna laughed softly. “I can teach you what I know. You taught me a lot of things.”

“Thanks, Miss Nonna.”

We both laughed as we watched the water in the pot turn brown. She didn’t say anything as she gazed into the pot. I kept my eyes on the water as it changed color.

“Nonna, you are already incredibly skillful and talented at your age. Your knowledge of languages is also excellent. But remember to use all of those things for good.”

“I understand, but I can’t really use any of the things I’ve learned as a baron’s daughter.”

“That’s not true. You can use them if you ever get kidnapped.”

“Well, it’s not like I get kidnapped every day. You say the funniest things sometimes, Mom.”

“Oh, do I?”

Nonna laughed, and the conversation ended there.

After the water in the pot turned a deep brown, I took it out to the balcony to cool.

“I’m going to show you how to make parchment paper look old. It’s been a while since I tried this. There are probably other methods, but it’s good for you to learn how to spot forgeries. The best way is to just look at a whole lot of authentic old things, though.”

“Hmm, okay. I’ll remember that.”

Jeffrey returned home once night fell.

After dinner, I put the parchment I’d worked on all afternoon on the table. Next to it was a sheet of brand-new parchment. The one I’d aged had been soaked in the brown liquid, wiped down, folded to create creases, and then dried. An expert in the field might see through it, but in my eyes, it looked convincingly like aged paper.

“Hmm, so this is what it looks like when it’s finished. That’s impressive,” Jeff said.

“When you and Nonna try to buy old parchment books at high prices, don’t forget about this sort of thing,” I warned.

“I don’t have any plans to buy old books, but I’ll keep it in mind,” he said.

“Me too,” said Nonna.

“Well, it doesn’t hurt to learn this at any rate,” I said.

I folded the two sheets of parchment and put them in a box.

As I sipped on my tea after dinner and enjoyed the sweet, bite-sized desserts, my mind drifted to Auri. Did she have a place to sleep? Was she being exploited by bad people? Maybe she wanted to return to her own country.

I deeply regretted trusting her so easily and bringing her along with us. We still hadn't heard any word about her from the Second Order or Zaharo.

"Oh, right. Victoria, when I was discussing work at the castle today, they told me the date for the ceremony to receive my peerage. It's set for early next month."

"All right. What about Nonna and me?"

"You don't need to attend. I'm the only one who has to go. However, once I become a baron, you'll probably start getting invitations for various tea parties and such. It's up to you whether or not you want to attend. You can decline them all and say you're not feeling well if that's what you want," Jeff said.

"I'll think about it. But it's probably best if we let Nonna attend gatherings with nobles, don't you think?"

"That's right. It would seem suspicious to claim that Nonna was sick, too."

Nonna looked a bit reluctant about the idea, so I wasn't optimistic she would agree.

"By the way, Jeff. Today, the Mother Superior of an abbey in the southern quarter visited me."

When I told him she'd asked me to let her sell the medicine, he said, "I think that's a good idea."

So the next day, I went to the abbey to finalize the sale of the ointment. I set the price, and we agreed to give a portion of the profits to the abbey as a sales commission. I would've let Mother Eliza have the full profits, but it would make it easier for me to manage my accounts if I donated the money later in the form of a contribution.

"Thank you very much. This will release so many poor people from their suffering," Mother Eliza said happily. I was happy that what I'd learned in Shen was proving so useful.

I was also pleased that we had come to such a mutually satisfying agreement.

After that, Nonna and I began visiting Mr. Bernard's estate three times a week to assist with translations.

He copied the contents of the last parchment onto paper, pondering over them daily as he tried to decipher them. My heart ached with guilt as I watched him since I'd already figured it out.

But it wasn't something I could speak up about, so instead I dedicated myself to preparing Mr. Bernard's favorite meal of roast lamb and hearty vegetable stew as a small token of my apologies.

We had no idea what happened to the gold ore from Mount Sybil after that.

Chapter Seven

A Peerage Ceremony and a Tea Party

Finally, the day when Jeffrey was to receive his peerage arrived.

He stood before me in a black coat embroidered with intricate silver ivy, wearing a waistcoat underneath and a silk shirt with a cravat at his neck. He also had on a pair of fitted black trousers that accentuated his long legs.

"You look wonderful, Jeff."

"Today officially marks our family's entry into noble society," he said.

"Then why do you look so down about it? It's something to celebrate," I said.

"I know it'll be difficult for you, but I'm still determined to protect you."

"I don't think it'll be difficult in the slightest. I'm just happy to live my life beside you."

Jeffrey tenderly gazed at me with his blue eyes, then gave me a gentle hug, as though I were some delicate thing, before heading for the carriage.

I'd thought that getting married might change the way we loved each other, but even after five years of marriage, Jeffrey's attitude was the same, as was my love for him. I vowed to myself that I would protect both Jeffrey and Nonna.

Around noon, I decided to go out to buy some herbs.

The ointment I'd made had developed a good reputation. It was quietly growing in popularity, and buyers were lining up as soon as I produced it. The main herbs used in the concoction were ones we'd brought from Shen, which I still had plenty of, but I was running low on the supplementary herbs.

I considered inviting Nonna to come with me, but she had been busy at her desk or visiting Lady Yolana lately. I asked if she was going to see Lady Yolana today, but she said she wasn't.

When I asked her what she was studying, she said she was keeping it from me for now. She was at the age where she wanted to keep secrets, after all.

"Reed, will you take me to the shopping district in the southern quarter?"

"Of course, My Ladyship."

I bought various items at the herbal shop and handed my bags to Reed as we walked through the shopping district. Just then, I caught sight of the alley and noticed that the door to The Black Thrush was open. I could see Zaharo cleaning inside.

"It's nice to see you again, Zaharo!"

"Oh, perfect timing. I was just about to contact you tonight. I got some information about that girl Auri."

"Did you? Where is she?"

"Hanging out with Hector's underlings."

"Well, I figured as much. Is she doing well?"

"Yeah, she seems fine. Apparently, she's learned quite a bit of Ashburian and is already giving orders to her partner's underlings. She seems to fancy herself as a boss lady to them."

"I see. Well, as long as she's doing well. I thought she might fit in with that crowd."

"Cheer up. There are plenty of times in life when people don't want to accept help, right? Want some lemonade?"

"Sure. Thanks."

I told Reed that I'd be back soon before stepping into the pub. The scent of freshly squeezed lemons greeted me, along with the pleasantly sweet aroma of honey. The sugary and slightly tart lemonade was incredibly refreshing.

"My lemonade's the best, right? And if you need to vent about anything, I'm all ears."

"It's not so much venting, but… If I tell you something, will you promise to forget about it?"

"Sure. Forgetting things quickly is my specialty."

"I found out that Auri lied to me. And I discovered what it's like to be deceived by someone you trusted."

Zaharo quietly sipped on his lemonade.

"It really hurt, being deceived. But I don't think I would do anything differently if I were in the same situation again. When someone is in trouble, I want to help them. Even though I was

deceived one time, I'd still help the next person who needed it. That's my way of atoning."

"Atoning? What do you mean? I don't know all the details, but you've been working since you were eight, right? Haven't you had to claw your way through life every step of the way?"

"Yes, that's true. I was always struggling, but I had no other choice. I've done many things that I want to make up for. Anyway, I should probably be heading home now. My driver is waiting. Thanks for listening."

"Of course. Come by anytime."

As I left, I turned around and gave a slight bow before leaving The Black Thrush.

I felt bad about many of my past actions but didn't regret them. Nothing comes from regret except heartache. I wanted to focus on not repeating the same mistakes and moving forward. That was how I chose to live.

I'd resolved to live this way for a long time, and that should have been enough, but I couldn't shake the feeling of helplessness.

Later that night when Jeffrey returned home, I smelled alcohol on him.

"His Majesty announced the discovery of the gold in front of the major nobles at the ceremony," he said.

"In front of everyone?"

"Yes. He presented both the stable import of medicines and the discovery of the gold as my achievements. And I was surrounded by nobles who wanted to speak with me at the party after the ceremony," he said.

"I suppose that makes sense after that kind of announcement!"

He pulled his cravat off his neck and tossed it onto the sofa.

"Prince Conrad was very pleased. Ashbury is a commercial kingdom, so the more gold we have, the better. They've already begun investigating the crater, and it appears they can extract a significant amount of gold via open-pit mining."

"Wow, that was fast."

"It sounds like both Uncle Bernard, who prompted the discovery, and I will receive a substantial sum as a reward."

"How substantial?"

The amount Jeffrey mentioned seemed like it would be enough to allow us to live comfortably as nobles for the rest of our lives with plenty left over.

“That means we’ll probably be receiving more invitations from now on, huh?” I asked.

“There’s no doubt about that.”

Suddenly, it felt like I was being thrust into a world full of challenges, and Jeffrey looked very worried.

However, Nonna’s reaction was totally different.

“You don’t need to worry about me. If I get invited to a tea party, I’ll go,” she said.

“Oh? Why the sudden change of heart? Before, you said you didn’t want to go,” he said.

“I put in some work, and I think I can tough it out,” Nonna said.

“Nonna, you know you have to speak properly at a tea party.”

“I know, Mother. I only meant that I have thoroughly prepared myself.”

“That’s much better,” I said.

“Oh-hoh-hoh-hoh!” she laughed.

“Nonna, don’t laugh like that! You sound like an old lady!”

“Yes, ma’am.”

From that night on, our household resolved to practice proper etiquette as much as possible. This was for Nonna’s sake, of course. I was her teacher, and she was my apprentice.

“But I already know all this,” she protested.

“Knowing something and putting it into practice are two different things, Nonna,” I said.

“Lady Yolana already said I have good manners! I mean, Lady Yolana has said I have quite good manners.”

“Then let’s practice at home.”

During dinner, we spoke quietly and calmly and took small bites like little birds. We didn’t laugh out loud, even during fun conversations.

It was incredibly exhausting for me, to be honest. But I was doing this for Nonna’s sake.

I glanced over and noticed Jeffrey eating his meal calmly. Moments like this highlighted the difference in our upbringings.

Although he had grown up in a broken family, he must have had a tutor. Or perhaps Lord Edward had taught him etiquette.

When we finished dinner, I told Jeffrey about Auri, about her association with men from the underworld, and how she seemed to be fitting in there. All Jeffrey said was, “I see. That’s a shame.”

Meanwhile, Nonna looked like she was going to cry at any moment. “Aren’t you going to help her, Mom?”

“I can’t. She doesn’t want any help. If I brought her back here, she’d just run away again.”

“Your mother’s right, Nonna. Auri is sixteen, and she can choose where she wants to live. She decided she doesn’t like it here, so there’s nothing we can do.”

“Sure, but…she’s still only sixteen, right?”

I didn’t want to make Nonna sad, but I knew I had to say it. “I’ll make sure that the information is accurate. But listen, Nonna. Sometimes, even if you mean well, trying to help someone can be a nuisance if they don’t want it. Our values of what is right and wrong may not necessarily align with other people’s all the time.”

Nonna suddenly got up and ran out of the room, even though tonight’s dessert was her favorite, cherry tart.

I waited until things settled down a bit and then knocked on Nonna’s door.

“It’s open. Come in.”

“Nonna…I’m sorry things didn’t go the way you wanted.”

“I don’t think what you and Dad said was wrong, so you don’t have to apologize.”

“You just wanted to be friends with her, right?”

“Yeah. I really thought we could be friends.”

“Maybe from Auri’s perspective, you looked like a wealthy, sheltered, happy noble’s daughter.”

Nonna gave a mature, dry chuckle.

“So that’s why she said she hated me? But I’m not like that at all.”

“I know. But people judge others by appearances. And when they look at you now, that’s what they see.”

“Hmm, that makes sense. Mom, from now on, I’ll be really careful not to judge people based on appearances.”

“I think that’s a good idea.” Nonna still seemed down, so I gave her a hug.

Children grow up so fast, and every step of raising them presents new challenges. I was learning that parenting was a constant series of first-time worries.

I tried to figure out the right answers as the problems arose while I raised Nonna. I’d always made my own decisions and handled things on my own, but when it came to her, I suddenly lacked confidence.

I found myself wondering every day, *Am I really making the right decision?*



Ten days had passed since Jeffrey had officially become a baron.

There were around twenty envelopes laid out on the table in our living room. They were invitations to tea parties for me and Nonna, along with invitations to soirees for me and Jeffrey.

“I don’t want to go to any soirees,” Jeff said.

“Then I’ll decline both my individual and our couples invitations. But there are three invitations for Nonna. What should we do?” I asked.

“I’ll go. I mean, I would like to attend all of them, Mother.”

“All of them? One of the invitations is for a garden tea party. Maybe you could ask Master Clark to escort you,” I suggested.

“Master Clark? I’d rather just play with him instead if he’s coming over.”

Nonna, I don’t think Master Clark climbs trees or throws rocks anymore, I thought, feeling troubled. Jeffrey joined in on the conversation to come to my aid.

“This is a great chance for Clark to see what a fine young lady you’ve become, Nonna.”

“Oh, right! Then I’ll go with him. Leave it to me, Mom. Now that Lady Yolana has given me her approval, Master Clark is going to be so surprised when he sees how ladylike I am.”

“Yes, this will be the perfect opportunity.”

Truthfully, the reason I suggested Master Clark as her escort was so that other girls would think twice about being mean to her since she’d have a handsome young man at her side,

especially since he was the son of the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

The tea party was in four days, and I confirmed that Master Clark was free before asking him to escort Nonna.

It was finally the day of Nonna's first tea party.

"Have fun, Nonna. You look like a lovely young lady."

"Thanks! I'll be back later, Mom and Dad."

Nonna set off for her tea party arm in arm with Master Clark.

She wore a navy-blue dress with a delicate white lace collar and a wide sash at her waist, which was tied in a bow at the back. Since it was her first tea party, we'd chosen something appropriate for her status as a baron's daughter. It wasn't a fancy dress, but the dark blue accentuated her golden hair perfectly.

Just as she was about to step into the carriage, she suddenly swung her hand out sharply to the side with a quick, chopping action.

What in the world…? I stared at her in surprise as she turned toward me with a sheepish expression on her face.

"A beetle flew at me! I just swatted it away, though. I didn't kill it!" she yelled loudly.

I blinked, frozen on the spot, while Jeffrey gave me a reassuring smile.

"Don't worry. I'm sure she won't do that in front of others."

"Don't say things like that. It only makes me even more anxious," I said.

"Sorry. But really, I don't think she'll do anything to disappoint us."

"You're probably right. And worrying about it won't accomplish anything," I said. But I was still uneasy. *Nonna, please tell me you'll make it through the party without any incidents.* She would probably be home around six o'clock that evening. I decided to go out and do something because waiting at home would only make me feel more anxious.

I decided to visit the abbey while Nonna was at the tea party to distract myself. Maybe I could get some feedback from people who had used my medicine.

When I arrived at the abbey, I passed by an elderly woman dressed in plain clothing. Her eyes looked red.

The Mother Superior and a young nun were quietly seeing the old woman off in the entryway. She gave me a small bow without making eye contact and walked away from the abbey grounds.

"Welcome, Lady Asher."

"Good afternoon, Mother Eliza. It looked like that woman was crying just now," I said.

"Yes. She came to say good-bye. She's leaving the house she's lived in for many years."

"Oh, I see."

I thought perhaps she was moving in with her children, but Mother Eliza seemed awfully sad for that to be the case. "Is something the matter?" I asked.

"No, it's just that her situation is so unfortunate. Anyway, I expect you're here today to ask about the medicine?"

"Yes, I thought I'd drop by to see if anyone had given you any feedback."

Mother Eliza gave me a kind smile. "We've received many thanks from those who used the ointment. It's been very effective for rashes, chapped skin, and eczema. Everyone has been very pleased."

"I'm very glad to hear that. Did you also explain how to use it?"

"Yes, we told them to apply only a small amount at first and not to rub it in too much," she replied.

"Thank you. My instructor was very insistent on using it like that."

Mother Eliza led me into the parlor and delivered the payment for the ointments. I subtracted the cost of the materials and then gave the remaining balance to Mother Eliza. We exchanged written receipts to confirm the transaction.

"If it's not too much trouble, could we exchange receipts each time like this for our mutual peace of mind?"

"Of course, Lady Asher," Mother Eliza replied, but then I noticed her gaze growing distant.

"Is there something on your mind?" I asked.

"Pardon me. It's just… I know four people who have had to give up their homes due to old contracts just this year alone.

There's nothing to be done, but they were long-standing parishioners here, so I can't help but fret over it," she said.

How strange. That seems to be an awful lot of old contracts causing trouble…

"May I ask you for some more details, if you don't mind? You don't need to tell me any names, of course."

"Certainly, I'll explain it."

According to Mother Eliza, the elderly lady I saw earlier was informed there was a loan her parents had taken out forty years ago that had gone unpaid, so it had accumulated interest all this time. It had grown so overwhelming that she had no choice but to give up the house and land.

"How in the world did they go forty years without making a single payment?" I asked.

"She didn't know about the debt until recently, she said. And now, all of a sudden, they tell her she owes thirty thousand gold coins. There's nothing she could do."

"Thirty thousand gold coins?!"

"Well, somewhere around twenty-nine thousand."

"Still! How much was the original loan?"

"Just a mere twenty gold coins. But with a yearly interest rate of twenty percent, compounded over forty years, it adds up to quite a large sum. Her parents likely borrowed the money to furnish the new home."

A single gold coin could buy a foal, and a junior civil servant's monthly salary was two gold coins. So borrowing twenty was quite a lot but perhaps the right amount for newlyweds to buy furniture or rent a house.

"But how did it go unpaid for so long? Even if someone finds it difficult to repay the loan at some point, they'd usually make at least the first few payments, right?"

"Apparently, there was someone in the family with an illness, so she said they must've prioritized medicine and treatment before repayment of the loan. But most importantly, her father's signature was on that contract."

"But what about the lender? Wouldn't they have demanded payment much sooner?"

A troubled look came over Mother Eliza's face. She wasn't the one I should be accosting like this. I apologized and left the abbey, still feeling unsettled.

When I got home, I sat on the sofa in the living room lost in thought, and Nonna suddenly called out from behind me.

"I'm back, Mom!" Nonna said with a giggle.

"Nonna, how many times have I told you to stop sneaking up on me? So? How was your first tea party?"

"It went just splendidly, Mother! Oh-hoh-hoh!"

"Stop laughing like that and tell me the truth."

"It really did go well. Master Clark even told me I did a good job."

So then why does something feel off?

The more she tried to reassure me, the more uneasy I became.

That night, Nonna came into my bedroom, clutching her pillow. She lifted up the covers and slipped into bed beside me.

"I thought maybe you'd be worried, so I came to tell you the truth."

"Thank you. Go ahead and tell me."

"There were fifteen people at the tea party today. One of the girls was acting really snobby and kept giving me nasty looks, so I decided to greet her first."

"And?"

"Her name is Miss Elizabeth McGrey. She's the daughter of an earl. And when I said hello to her, she said in front of everyone, 'What were you before you were a baron's daughter?' and I said, 'I was a commoner, Miss Elizabeth.'"

I knew something like this would happen.

"But Lady Yolana was amazing. She gave me a list of twenty noble daughters to watch out for, plus tips on how to respond if anyone made fun of me for being a commoner. So when Elizabeth let her guard down, I went over to her and said, 'By the way, your grandparents' love story is just *so* wonderful.' She turned bright red and didn't say another word about me."

"So what did that mean?"

"Well, apparently, the earl's mother was a commoner and a singer! She wasn't famous and was pretty unknown. But anyway, she was adopted into a noble family before she got married, and not many people know that. Of course, it makes no difference to me, and I wouldn't have brought it up if Elizabeth hadn't been so mean to me."

Lady Yolana, you gave Nonna that information right off the bat?

"But revenge leaves a bad taste in my mouth. I've decided just to ignore people from now on."

I gently stroked Nonna's golden hair.

"Mom, being a lady is really a pain."

"Nonna…"

"I'm really glad that you're my mother. I really, really mean it. I don't ever want to become someone like Elizabeth. I want to be just like you." She smelled sweet, like a little girl, as she nuzzled her head against my chest and drifted off to sleep. She'd been anxious about this tea party for a while, so now she could finally relax. She would have to face many more people in her life from now on. And she was no longer at an age where I could protect her from everything.

Ever since she'd turned ten, I'd wished for something I knew was impossible.

If only I could take on all the heartache she'll experience in life.

"A foolish mother's nonsense…"

I held Nonna close and fell asleep.



A fortune in gold coins was delivered to our house as a reward for our discovery of the gold ore.

It was a heavy chest, painted a deep black and adorned with fancy metal studs. The inside was lined with red velvet. And it was packed to the brim with gleaming gold coins.

"Wow! Look at all that gold, Dad!" Nonna exclaimed.

"Don't you think sending it all at once like this seems careless? I wish we would've gotten paid in installments instead…"

"Is that really your first thought, Anna?" Jeff asked, struggling to keep a straight face.

"What? Did I say something odd?" I asked.

"No, it's nothing." He bit his lip to stifle laughter, turning his face away.

Keeping this much gold at home feels dangerous, doesn't it? Surely I'm not wrong, am I?

That night, Mr. Bernard came to visit us at our estate.

"This isn't my achievement, so I want you to take this gold, Jeffrey," he said, offering us the entire amount of his reward.

And so we ended up with yet another fancy chest filled with gold coins. Jeff looked troubled and tried to explain the situation. "Anna, I told him we already have plenty of income from the Shenese trading company."

"Now, now. Don't say that. I don't have much time left, so I couldn't possibly spend all this money. Besides, the trading company you established belongs to the kingdom. No matter how you spin it, you won't receive enough income from it to support your lifestyle. You should save this for Nonna," Mr. Bernard insisted.

"For Nonna?" I asked.

"It's hard to say no when you put it like that, Uncle."

"Nonna's practically like a granddaughter to me."

Since neither Jeffrey nor I were the type of people to live luxuriously, the sight of these two chests filled with gold left us speechless.

"By the way, I've delivered the encrypted document to the prime minister through a government official. I've asked for the Third Order of the knights to decode it. I told them it was beyond my capabilities as a historian," Mr. Bernard said.

"I see. It did seem rather difficult," I agreed.

"I'm looking forward to the Third Order decoding it. But more than anything, I have the task of bringing Elmer Archibald's unpublished works to the masses. Thanks to you two, every day feels so exciting now I can hardly take it!" he said.

After we bid Mr. Bernard farewell, Jeffrey gently slipped an arm around my shoulders and pulled me close.

"It must've been hard for you to watch my uncle struggle with that code."

"It was. But it's like a weight's been lifted off my shoulders now. The cipher may have come from Hagl, but it originated from old mathematical formulas. Surely the Third Order will be able to crack it."

Chapter Eight

An Old Contract

Our family had come into a fortune.

We stashed the chests of gold deep inside Jeffrey's wardrobe and piled his old knight uniforms and gear on top to hide them. Once we finished hiding the boxes and Nonna had gone to her room, I told Jeff I wanted to talk to him about something.

"Sure," he said casually.

We sat close together on the chaise longue in the bedroom, and I started to explain everything that had been bothering me since I'd visited the abbey.

"I know sometimes contracts turn up that are very old, but it seems impossible that it's happened so frequently. The heirs often have a fair amount of property, and the signatures look genuine. That's a classic forgery scheme. I even saw an expensive counterfeit book in the used bookstore, which was aged to look like an authentic, expensive antique. I have a gut feeling that one of these counterfeiting groups is operating here in the capital," I said.

"So they're using experts in document forgery. What do you want to do?" he asked.

"Taking advantage of the elderly and forcing them out of their homes is too cruel. I want to get those peoples' houses back."

"Hmm…" Jeff stroked his chin thoughtfully. "This would be a good chance for the Second Order of the knights to get some credit for their achievements."

"But do you think it's all right for me to get involved in exposing a crime?" I asked.

"You can handle it without revealing your identity, right? Like I said before, I have no intention of clipping your wings."

"Jeff…"

I couldn't help but throw my arms around him and hug him.

“Thank you, from the bottom of my heart. I promise I won’t cause you any trouble.”

“Let’s hear your plan. Then I can pass along the information to the knights,” he said.

“That sounds great.”

That night, we sat together and carefully crafted our strategy.

The next day, Jeffrey and I visited the abbey together.

“Welcome, Lord Asher. Your wife’s ointment has been such a help to us,” Mother Eliza greeted him warmly.

“Thanks so much for handling its distribution, Mother Superior,” Jeff said.

“Well, what brings you two here today?”

I was sure Mother Eliza was wondering why I’d come back so soon, but we had anticipated that.

“My wife told me about your parishioners being forced to repay an inherited debt.”

“Yes. Four families have lost their homes in the past six months. It’s been absolutely heartbreaking. Fortunately, they’ve all been able to move in with their children, but if this trend keeps up, we’re terribly worried some might end up on the streets,” she said.

Jeffrey nodded as he listened. “For the past few years, I was setting up a trading company in Shen, so I’ve had to deal with many contracts and have become quite familiar with them. I was hoping I could review the contracts for any possible loopholes. If we find one, we may be able to get those people’s homes back,” he said.

“Oh, that would be wonderful! Please wait here, and I’ll send someone to get the contracts.”

“No, it’ll be faster if we go ourselves. Would you come with us, Mother Eliza?”

“Yes, of course.”

We quickly boarded our carriage and went to the elderly woman’s house I’d seen a few days before.

She looked baffled to see a carriage bearing the crest of a noble family stopped outside her house. But once Mother Eliza explained the situation, her face brightened.

“Please come in. It’s a bit cramped, but I have enough chairs for everyone.”

“Thank you,” we said as we went inside.

The four of us sat down in the small living room. The old woman pulled out the contract from a box. Jeffrey examined it carefully. It was a piece of parchment that looked old and yellowed.

Once he confirmed there were no loopholes, he handed it to me. I read through it thoroughly. The language and phrasing were without any mistakes. Then I leaned in close and sniffed the paper.

“Lady Asher? What in the world are you doing?” Mother Eliza asked, looking puzzled.

“One moment, please,” I said.

There was no doubt about it. It was faint, but I could smell the scent of cedar shavings and tea leaves. I wanted to be careful not to give the old woman false hope, so I chose my words carefully.

“One of my hobbies is making books out of parchment. A teacher of mine taught me a technique to soak new parchment in tea and boiled cedar shavings. This method gives even brand-new parchment an aged look. And this contract smells exactly like parchment aged with that technique,” I said.

“Pardon?” Both Mother Eliza and the old woman looked confused, not understanding what I meant. Jeffrey directed his question at the old woman.

“What is this Goodwin Lending Company mentioned in the contract?”

“It’s an old association on Sixth Street in the southern quarter. My father borrowed money from them several times, but he always repaid it quickly. That’s why it just doesn’t make sense that they never demanded repayment for forty years. I disputed the debt, but they said the management had changed since then, so they didn’t know any details. And they insisted that a debt is debt, so I have to repay it,” she said.

“Hmm, I see.”

“I just resigned myself to the idea that I should’ve checked the paperwork more thoroughly after my father’s passing,” she said.

“My husband and I will visit the lending company to see what we can find out. Hopefully, we can help, even just a little,” I said.

The woman handed me the parchment with a look of hope and anxiety on her face, and we got back in the carriage. We were headed to the castle. I stayed in the carriage while Jeffrey went inside, and he returned with a man I didn't recognize who boarded the carriage with him.

"Anna, this is Dale. He works in the castle's Document Management department and specializes in identifying forgeries. My brother has arranged for him to help us."

"Hello, Lady Asher. I'm Dale. The contract Lord Asher showed me has definitely been treated to make it appear aged. I'd like you to take me to the lending company right away. The head of the department has already arranged for the knights of the Second Order to accompany us."

Dale was a man in his late forties of average build. He wore glasses and had a distinguished air about him. I glanced out the window and saw knights in uniform gathering on horseback.

"It's truly unforgivable, using falsified contracts to seize homes from honest citizens of our kingdom," he said.

"The knights are ready, Dale. Shall we head out?" Jeff asked.

And with that, the carriage departed. I thought our carriage would lead the way, but the knights clearly knew our destination and rode in front of us.

But once I thought calmly about it, the notion that Jeffrey and I, who were ordinary citizens, would lead the way and charge in was quite funny.



Goodwin Lending Company was located a few streets off the main road in the southern quarter, and there was already a huge crowd gathered in front of the building.

Our carriage stopped by the side of the road, and I leaned my face toward the window to watch the scene unfold.

About twenty knights on horseback arrived and dismounted before entering the building one after the other. Curious onlookers gathered, whispering, "What's going on?" I spotted some familiar faces among them.

I heard shouts from within the building followed by sounds of smashing and crashing, as though things were breaking.

They're actually putting up a fight against the knights? Well, that'll be in vain.

I watched as several men were dragged out of the building with hands tied behind their backs. They were all young, and they looked like your average ruffian, as I'd expected.

Then came an older man, followed by a middle-aged one. In total, the knights arrested ten men.

But then they brought out a young woman, and I let out a sharp gasp.

She glared at the knights taking her away and spewed venomous words at the onlookers. It was Auri. Her heavy makeup and revealing clothing made her look like an entirely different person from when we first met her.

Once everyone was arrested, they were loaded onto a prisoner's carriage parked behind ours. It resembled a large box, but instead of solid walls, it was enclosed by bars with no visible seating. The men and Auri were crammed inside, forced to stand.

"Anna, is that…"

"Yes. It's Auri."

"So this is where she was working?"

"If you can even call committing fraud *working*."

By now, nearly a hundred people had gathered to watch. Jeffrey called out to Reed to take us home.

We sent off a letter to the abbey explaining what happened and sat on the sofa together, quietly sipping tea. Bertha must have sensed something had happened because she brought us thinly sliced buttered toast with several kinds of jam.

"Sweets always help when you're feeling tired," she said.

Nonna waited until Bertha had excused herself from the room and then asked, "Mom, what happened?"

"Do you remember when I showed you how to dye parchment to make it look old? Well, a group of swindlers used that method to forge contracts and steal people's homes away from them. Your father contacted the Second Order of the knights, and they arrested the criminals."

“Wow! Why didn’t you take me along? I wish I could’ve seen that!”

I hesitated for a moment and then decided to tell Nonna the truth. “Nonna, one of the people who got arrested was Auri.”

“…What?”

“She chose to make money by joining those criminals instead of living a quiet, peaceful life here. She looked completely different. Nothing like how she was when she stayed with us. Honestly, I’m glad you didn’t see her.”

“What do you mean, you’re glad I didn’t see her? Aren’t you worried that Auri got arrested, Mom?!” Nonna’s eyes and tone were reproachful.

Jeffrey immediately intervened, speaking even more calmly than usual. “Nonna, what if it were you?”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“If you were the mother in this situation, would you have wanted your child to see Auri being arrested? What would be the point of it?”

“That’s not what I meant! I just think Mom’s being so cold about it.”

Nonna must’ve wanted me to show more concern for Auri, but…

“I want to make this clear so that there are no misunderstandings here, Nonna. Auri lied to Master Clark about our treatment of her, and once she realized she was no longer welcome here, she ran away. Then she joined those con artists and helped them commit fraud. No one forced her. She made those choices herself.”

“But maybe she didn’t know it was they were con artists!”

“Maybe. But ignorance isn’t an excuse. She’s an adult now, and she’ll have to face the consequences. If she needs help after atoning for her crimes, I’ll be ready to offer some,” I said.

Nonna still didn’t look satisfied, so Jeffrey continued. “Auri’s a smart girl, Nonna. I think she knew exactly what they were doing. She chose to make money by deceiving others instead of making an honest living. If you were in her place, I would hand you over to the knights or the security force myself, even if it broke my heart. That’s what love and responsibility mean to me,” he said.

Nonna stared at Jeffrey for a moment, then slumped and left the room.

“Do you think we handled that right? I’m still not confident in my skills as a father, but I’ve always tried to raise Nonna with that kind of resolve,” he said.

“I’d do the same if Nonna ever committed a crime and was making money off people’s pain and suffering. Even if I had to turn her in while sobbing.”

We had more money than we could ever need, so I wanted to believe that Nonna would never commit a crime out of financial desperation, but there were plenty of examples of wealthy people dealing in shady business.

Money and integrity didn’t necessarily go hand in hand.

“We just have to raise Nonna to make the right choices. Beyond that, her life is her own.”

Jeff looked surprised to hear me say that, given how much I adored Nonna.

“I love Nonna, and her life is more precious to me than my own, but one day, you and I will pass away. We can’t protect her until the end of her life. I want her to be strong enough to live without us, to get back on her feet when she falls, and to endure the hard things life throws at you. We can’t shield her forever.”

I sighed and continued. “Still, sometimes I wonder if things would be different if I’d carried her inside me and given birth to her myself. Maybe a mother’s love isn’t about right or wrong but protecting her child unconditionally, even if the whole world turns against them.”

“Anna…”

“I’ll never have the answer to that question,” I said with a quiet smile.

Jeffrey pulled me into his arms, cradling my head against his chest.

“We can figure it out together. You don’t need to carry this burden alone. Raising children is incredibly difficult.”

“It is. I don’t have a role model to look to in that regard, so I always feel like I’m lost. But at least I don’t have any doubts about living my life with you, Jeff.”

“Neither do I. Even if I had to choose time and time again to live with you, I’m confident I would always choose you no

matter what. But I'm always uncertain when it comes to making the right choices raising Nonna."

We decided to leave Nonna alone for the rest of the night. I figured this was something she had to come to terms with by herself.

The next morning, she came to breakfast with a smile on her face, as if nothing had happened.

"Mom, I'm sorry about yesterday. That was just me taking it out on you. I'm not going to do anything that would get me turned over to the guards. I know you and Dad would probably turn me in yourselves if I ever did anything wrong. And I feel like you'd cry a lot more than I would if that ever happened," she said.

Raising children is tough, but there are a lot of happy moments, too, I thought with a soft smile.

That evening, Lord Edward came by our house.

"Well done, Jeffrey. Those criminals had already set their sights on lower-ranking nobles for after they were done with the commoners in the southern quarter. During our investigation, we found that the attic of Goodwin Lending Company was filled with half-finished forged contracts. According to the captain of the Second Order of the knights, they're planning to recover as many of the commoners' homes as possible."

"I see. I'm glad I could help."

"I heard it all started with Victoria's ointment," Lord Edward said.

"That's right. When I told Jeffrey about the old contracts, he immediately thought it sounded suspicious and acted on it right away," I said.

"Hmm, is that so? I didn't know you had expertise with aged documents, Jeff. Truly impressive work."

Lord Edward left in high spirits.

Everything seemed to be going smoothly.

After that, I took Nonna along with me a few times to visit Auri. She was sentenced to two years in prison. She'd been shown some leniency since she wasn't the ringleader, and it was her first offense. We went to visit her and brought gifts each

time. She accepted the gifts but never agreed to see us. I'd gotten used to cheering up Nonna on the way home.

"Mom, Auri said she was tricked, right? Maybe she joined them because she had no other choice. I mean, she ran away and didn't have anything to eat. So maybe she couldn't help it," Nonna said.

I didn't say anything.

"Mom?"

"Are you trying to believe Auri for her sake, or is it because you can't accept the fact that she betrayed you? Do you really think believing her excuses will help her situation?" I asked.

"What do you mean, I can't accept it?"

"When you cover up for someone else's lies, it's usually because you don't want to admit they deceived you, too."

"I…don't really know."

I knew my words had come out harsher than I'd intended. I didn't feel like going straight home yet, so I wandered over to that used bookstore I'd visited before.

The door to Zachary's Used Bookstore had a sign on it that read, OPEN.

"Wow, this brings back memories! Remember how we used to visit the book lender all the time when we lived in Lady Yolana's cottage?"

"Yes, but that shop is gone. We can come here from now on, though," I said.

"Okay!"

"Welcome. Feel free to browse as long as you like," Will Zachary, the owner, greeted us with a warm smile, then returned to reading behind the counter.

I looked at the locked bookcase that held rare and expensive tomes. There didn't seem to be any suspicious old books today. Perhaps they'd already been sold.

Nonna rushed around the shop, bursting with excitement. Before long, she came back hugging three books to her chest. "Mom, may I borrow these?"

"Oh, those aren't for lending. They're for sale, but yes, you can get them."

"Really? We can buy them? I'm so excited!"

She chose three books from a series called *Dell Dolgarr: Messenger from Hell*, which was a swashbuckling adventure story. They seemed like something a boy would enjoy, but I kept that thought to myself as I took them to the counter and paid.

"Do you like action-adventure stories, Miss?" Will Zachary asked Nonna.

"Yes, I love them! I've only borrowed books before, so this is my first time owning some myself. I'm really excited!"

"I'm glad to hear it. I hope you come again." When Zachary smiled, his eyes narrowed into little crescent moons, and I couldn't help but smile back.

Nonna was completely absorbed in her books the entire carriage ride home.

"Reading in the carriage could make you sick," I warned, but she didn't seem to hear me. After dinner, she rushed off to her room and stayed up late reading her books.

"I'm glad she's getting into reading," I told Jeffrey later.

"I am, too. But *Messenger from Hell*? Ha-ha."

"Don't laugh about it in front of her. Apparently, Dell Dolgarr is her new crush," I said.

"Really? She has a crush on the messenger from hell?" Jeff looked baffled, trying to understand the feelings of a young girl.

The truth is, when I had been training at the academy, my first love had been the protagonist of a swashbuckling adventure novel, too.

"Fictional heroes have a certain charm real people just don't have," I said.

"Oh, really? Even a guy with a name like that? Ha-ha!"

I decided I would take my story about my first love to my grave.

A few days later, we had an unexpected visitor. A girl around Nonna's age arrived via carriage. Her driver helped her down and escorted her to our front door. She was a beautiful little girl with curly hair, and she had a dark pink dress on.

"I'm Elizabeth McGrey. Is Nonna here?"

She stood at the front door with her head held high, looking a bit haughty.

I just so happened to be in the foyer arranging some flowers, so I answered the door. She must have thought I was a servant.

"Nonna's in her room. I'll call her down. Please come wait in the parlor."

"Are you Nonna's mother?"

"Yes, I am."

"I'm terribly sorry. I am Elizabeth McGrey, the oldest daughter of Earl Roderick McGrey. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Likewise, I'm sure. I'm Anna Asher. Please come this way." I returned her perfect curtsey with one of my own.

She blinked, clearly surprised by my graceful gesture, but quickly regained her composure, her expression turning haughty again as she followed me.

When I opened the door to the parlor, I found Nonna there, sprawled across the sofa and reading a book.

"Nonna, get up. Miss Elizabeth is here."

"Oh. Welcome."

"Nonna! That's rude. Sit up," I told her.

"Nonna, I have something I wish to tell you. Please sit up," Elizabeth said.

Nonna had a look of pure irritation on her face as she reluctantly sat up but thankfully didn't click her tongue. She stared at Elizabeth blankly. "What is it?"

"I asked you something quite rude in front of everyone, and I feel very sorry about it."

"Hmph."

"Despite that, you were thoughtful enough to keep your comments about my grandparents to a whisper."

"And?"

"I'm now indebted to you, Nonna. If you ever find yourself in need, I shall do everything in my power to repay my debt. Although I may not look it, I'm rather—"

"No, thanks."

"…Pardon?"

"I'm not in need of your help. Please do not concern yourself with me and act however you please. Oh-hoh-hoh!"

Nonna, how many times have I told you to stop laughing like that?!

"Y-you're being terribly rude. I came all this way to apologize, and you're rejecting my offer of assistance?" Elizabeth huffed.

“Hey, I’m really sorry about that, but your help isn’t worth a damn to me. Won’t make any difference. Anyway, I’m busy reading *Dell Dolgarr* right now. Go home.”

Elizabeth’s eyes flashed as she stomped toward Nonna. I was so intrigued that I decided to stay quiet and see what happened next.

“You like Dell Dolgarr, do you? Well, my family owns the *entire* series.”

“Really?” Suddenly, Nonna’s deadpan expression vanished in an instant, her face sparkling with excitement. I couldn’t help but laugh.

“It’s true. My brother was obsessed with it for a while. Would you like to come over and read it sometime?” Elizabeth asked.

“Absolutely! Can I come right now?! I’ve read all the books I own twice already.”

“Certainly. Our family’s chef is renowned for his cakes, so I’ll even treat you to some.”

“Yay! I’ll go, then! Is that okay, Mom?”

Should I let her, or should I make her review her etiquette lessons first?

“Moooom!” Nonna whined.

“Lady Asher, may I take Miss Nonna home with me? My mother will be thrilled to meet her.”

“I’m sure she will ’cause you don’t have many friends, Elizabeth,” Nonna said.

“I most certainly do!”

“Oh, please. Those girls at the tea party weren’t your friends. They’re just your followers. There’s a big difference, you know!” Nonna said.

“Hmph…”

“Well, I won’t be your follower. But I *will* be your friend. Mom, can I go now?”

How could I say now when I had two lovely young girls staring at me so hopefully?

“All right…”

“Yay! She said yes! Let’s go, Elizabeth!”

I was surprised to see Elizabeth beaming, and the two girls boarded the carriage together.

Is this really the right thing to do? Should I just let her go like that? A wave of anxiety washed over me, but Bertha spoke from behind before I could think about it anymore.

"Miss Nonna is quite the charmer, isn't she, Your Ladyship? Winning over a proud young lady like that is no easy feat! I'm quite impressed by her skill," she said.

Really? That was a good *thing?*

Nonna returned just before dinner in a wonderful mood. "The pastries at Elizabeth's house were *delicious*!" she said, putting a basket filled with leftover treats on the table.

"I'm glad you had fun. What are all those treats?"

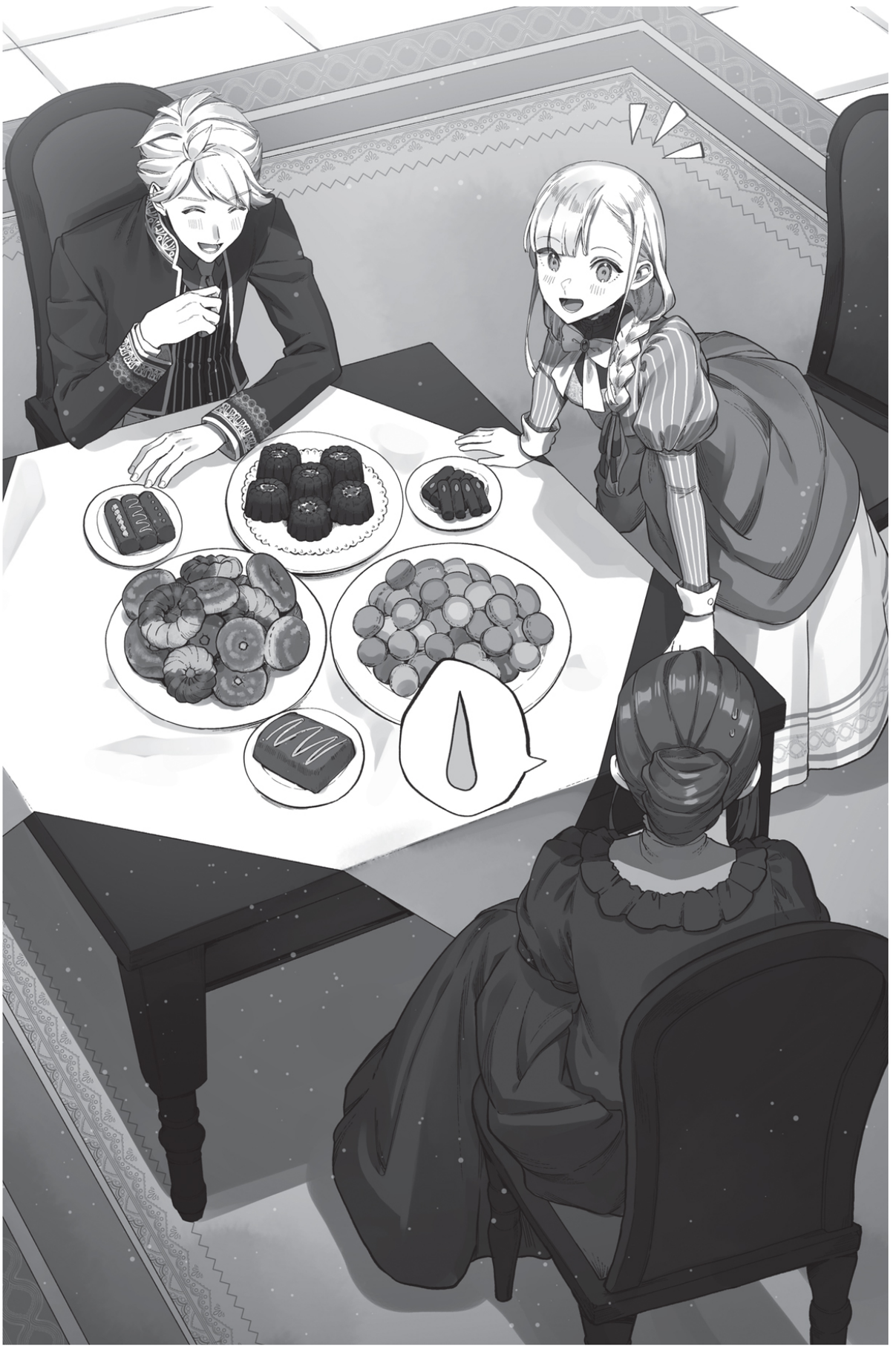
"Elizabeth's mother insisted I take them home. She packed up all the leftovers for me."

"Oh, I see…"

I suppose the most important thing is that Nonna had a good time…right?

Later on, I told the whole story to Jeffrey, and he laughed.

"I suppose her time with Yil in Shen made her quite tough. Nonna's really strong. But she's really nothing like the tragic beauty with a dark past I'd thought she was." He kept chuckling, wiping tears from his eyes. I hadn't noticed he was capable of this much laughter until recently.



Chapter Nine

Beautiful Old Books

After that, Miss Elizabeth started visiting us quite often, and when she wasn't here, Nonna could usually be found at Earl McGrey's estate. I had no idea how they'd become so close, but I was happy that Nonna had finally made a female friend.

Thanks to her friendship with Elizabeth, Nonna began attending more tea parties. I hadn't heard of her causing any trouble so far, so I assumed she was on her best behavior. Or that's what I wanted to believe, at least.

However, one evening Master Clark stopped by after work.

"Is Nonna no longer attending tea parties, Miss Victoria?"

"She is. She's going even more often lately."

"Who does she go with?" he asked.

"Her new friend, Miss Elizabeth McGrey."

"Oh, *her*? That's surprising. Wasn't she rude to Nonna?"

"Yes, but Nonna stood her ground, and for some reason, they became friends."

"I see…"

"Are you worried about something, Master Clark?"

He seemed hesitant to tell me something, so I coaxed the story out of him. Apparently, at Nonna's first tea party, she had been surrounded by young gentlemen. In his words, they had been "like ants drawn to sugar" and were very eager to talk to her.

"Nonna acted like a completely different person at the tea party. She was a perfect, well-mannered young lady. She caught the attention of all the young men, which was why Miss Elizabeth took notice of her."

"I see… Well, Nonna still prefers spending time with her female friends for now. This is the first I've heard of those young men, and I doubt she even remembers any of them."

“Really? You think so?” Master Clark’s expression instantly brightened. I thought it was adorable. Was he worried that some noble’s son would steal away his childhood friend?

“Master Clark, would you like to spend some time with Nonna now and then?”

“Of course! I’ve barely seen her since we returned, which I think is a shame. That’s why I had so much fun in Sybil. It felt like old times. We had such fun.”

He promised to visit again on his next day off, then went back home.

When I told Nonna about it later, she seemed very happy and said, “Wow! I wonder what we should play together!”

Elizabeth was at our house as usual today, giving Nonna advice. “Nonna, I think you should put more effort into your hairstyle.”

Nonna disliked having her hair pulled up into a tight updo, saying it gave her headaches. Most days, she preferred to either braid it or let it hang loose over her shoulders.

I busied myself making ointments while the two of them played.

I’d heard that the ointments sold by the abbey had earned a reputation for their effectiveness, so now even servants who served nobles in the eastern quarter were going to buy them.

I filed all the necessary paperwork with the city hall and had an official inspect the ingredients, but since I was the only one making the ointments, it was starting to become more work than I could handle.

Today, I gave the ointments to Reed to deliver to the abbey. I decided to get some exercise and changed into casual clothes before heading to Zachary’s Used Bookstore.

As usual, Will Zachary sat at the counter reading a book. There were two other customers besides me in the store.

“Welcome. Take your time.”

“Thanks.”

First, I checked the usual bookcase for any fake antique texts. Once I was satisfied with that, I browsed the other shelves. I wasn’t sure whether it was because the swindlers from Goodwin Lending Company got taken down or not, but the fake books seemed to have disappeared. Or perhaps others in the

counterfeiting business were just lying low for now. Either way, it was a good thing that fewer people were being deceived.

Nonna had been borrowing all sorts of books from Miss Elizabeth's collection and was reading her way through them. Even when I offered to buy her new ones, she didn't tag along with me much to this bookstore anymore.

I ended up buying two old books about embroidery, and just as I was about to pay, Zachary said, "Pardon me, but are you particularly interested in antique books? Every time you come in here, you look at the bookcase with the glass doors, so I was wondering if you might be a collector."

"You might say that."

"Actually, I recently acquired a very rare book. Would you like to take a look?"

"Sure."

The book Zachary showed me was impressive indeed. It wasn't quite on the level of *The Lost Crown*, which was handwritten by Elmer Archibald, but it was still quite old.

The title was stamped in gold leaf and read, *A History of Jewelry*. It was filled with detailed illustrations of fancy necklaces, including chokers, as well as bracelets and rings from various kingdoms and eras.

"This is lovely. The illustrations are beautiful, but the historical anecdotes in the margins are very interesting. I don't know much about jewelry, but this seems like a book one could never get tired of reading or admiring," I said.

"I thought you might say as much. I'd really appreciate it if you could take it off my hands," he said.

"Well," I said, a bit taken aback. I *could* afford it. There were plenty of gold coins gathering dust at home, after all.

But it cost eight gold coins. I hesitated to spend such a sum on a single old book. With that kind of money, I could improve the bedrooms at the abbey, and at the end of the day, that was more important for me.

"It's a tough decision, isn't it? I have some more affordable books in a different building I use for storage, if you're interested. I could take you there. And you're welcome to bring along your driver if that makes you feel more comfortable."

"Well, it's getting late today, so perhaps tomorrow."

“Sure. I’ll be expecting you then. Beautiful antique books will be here waiting for you.”

Nonna was at Master Clark’s house tonight, but she would be home tomorrow. It wouldn’t hurt to ask her to come with me for a change.

I would have loved to bring Jeffrey, too, but he was going to the knights’ headquarters nearly every day lately. The new captain kept summoning him for one thing or another, and Jeff was quite fond of the knights, so he was pleased to go every time. And all I wanted was for him to be happy.

Tomorrow, I would treat myself to admiring some beautiful books. If I found something affordable, perhaps I’d even buy one.

When I told Nonna about it, she said, “Sure, I’d love to come. I want to see some old books with pretty illustrations, too.”

That night, I drifted off to sleep in a happy mood, dreaming about what treasures I might discover the next day.



Nonna and I were about to go to the storehouse with Zachary to see the beautiful antique books.

He flipped the sign on the bookstore’s door to say CLOSED and began leading the way.

“Where’s your driver? Didn’t he come with you today?” he asked.

“Oh, we decided to walk today to get some exercise.”

“I see. Well, it’s not far from here. Please follow me.” He walked ahead of us, but strangely, it didn’t seem like the storage building was getting any closer. We’d strayed from the southern quarter’s shopping district and its borders long ago.

As we rounded a corner, I leaned over to Nonna and whispered, “Nonna, isn’t it time for you to take Sibby for a walk?”

“Sibby? Oh! Yes, that’s right. I completely forgot. It’s a shame I have to leave, but I better head back now and do that.”

“I’ll be home soon, too.”

“Okay! I’ll take Sibby on his walk!”

Zachary turned back, presumably to try to stop her, but she had already disappeared back around the corner.

“She’s awfully fast.”

“She is. Is the storage building with the books much farther, Zachary?”

His eyes softened into even narrower crescents as he smiled, but they remained cold and sharp as they locked onto mine.

“Your daughter may have escaped, but you’re coming with me.”

“Whatever do you mean? I thought you were just going to show me some books?”

“Oh, you’ll see them, Missus. Just not in this world.” With that, Zachary grabbed my arm tightly, a knife glinting in his other hand. “You wouldn’t want me to ruin that haughty face of yours with a big scar, would you? So be a good girl and start walking.”

“Please let me go!”

“Keep quiet.”

He pressed himself so close to me we might’ve looked like a couple to the average passerby. This area was full of dilapidated wooden houses slated for demolition, as it was to be redeveloped soon, and there was no one around. Signs warning against trespassing were plastered onto the vacant properties surrounding us.

Eventually, Zachary dragged me into one of the abandoned houses.

There were four shady-looking men playing cards at a table inside. They barely glanced at me as Zachary shoved me in. All they did was smirk.

“What is this place? What are you planning on doing to me?”

“You’re the one who reported Goodwin to the knights, aren’t ya? You were there, watching from the carriage when they got arrested.”

“So what if I am?”

“Do you really care enough for me to explain when you’re gonna die here anyway?” And with that, Zachary raised his knife toward me and brought it down.

I dodged it immediately. The four other men jumped to their feet in surprise, blocking the door and windows to make sure I had no way out.

“Well, my brave lady, what’ll you do now?”

Zachary smirked, and the other men snickered. I wondered how far away Nonna had gotten by now. Hopefully far enough to bring the guards or the knights. I had my dagger strapped to my thigh, but I’d prefer not to kill anyone if we could have them arrested instead.

One of the men lunged at me to grab my arm, but I quickly feinted a step back, then used the recoil to drive my elbow into his face at full force. His nose was definitely broken.

“Arrrgh!” he screamed and collapsed onto the floor.

The other four took that as their cue to rush at me.

I kicked one in the stomach and sent him flying, then landed a roundhouse kick to the side of Zachary’s head.

Just then, Nonna suddenly dropped from the ceiling and landed on the table with a *thud*! The men all froze, staring at her in disbelief.

Huh? She came back? I thought we had a whole conversation through our eyes! Did she not understand when I told her to get the guards?

“Huh?! Who the hell are you?”

“It’s the woman’s daughter. Perfect timing. Catch her, too!” Zachary ordered, clutching his head where I’d kicked him.

Nonna leaped from the table in a flash and flew over their heads, landing right in front of the door.

All right! Now open it for us, I thought.

But contrary to my expectations, she assumed a Shenese martial arts stance and, with a fierce expression on her face, shouted at the top of her lungs. “From the depths of hell, Dell Dolgarr charges onto the scene!”

You silly thing!

Fine. I’ll just take them all down myself.

Just as that thought passed through my mind, Nonna bolted toward them at breakneck speed and took them down one after the other. She kicked the man closest to her in his solar plexus, and as he doubled over, she hooked an arm around his neck,

using the momentum to slam him headfirst into the floor. That could've snapped his neck and killed him. *That was a close one.*

Next, she drove a straight punch into Zachary's chest, whirled behind him, and then struck the back of his head with her right hand. A moment later, she quickly swept her hand toward another man's throat.

In less than twenty seconds, all five men were sprawled out on the floor. Nonna stood over them proudly, not even out of breath.

"Let's hurry and tie them up, Mom."

"Right."

We pulled off the unconscious men's pants, ripped them into strips, and used the fabric to bind their hands and feet securely. One of the men began to wake up, but Nonna kneed him firmly in the stomach, knocking him out again.

As we tied them up, I said, "I was hoping you'd bring the guards, you know."

"The guards, the knights, Mike… Somebody will come."

"But how? You didn't even go get anyone."

"Oh, I didn't have to. There's bright red smoke billowing up from the roof right now. Someone will definitely show up."

"Where in the world did you get something that could make colored smoke?"

"Remember when I beat Mike at sparring after we got back to Ashbury? It was my reward. He told me if I pulled the string really hard, it would ignite, and bright red smoke would come out of it. He said if it was visible from the castle, either the Second or Third Order of the knights would come rushing to help."

"Oh, so that's what that red ball was for…"

As we chatted, I heard hoofbeats approaching at full speed. The door burst open, and a man rushed in wearing a black knit cap pulled down low and a scarf covering his face.

"Are you okay? Oh… Looks like you already took care of everything."

"Mike, is that you? Yes, we handled it. These men are part of that forgery group. The ringleader is Zachary, the used bookshop owner. Although I doubt that's his real name."

“The Second Order will be arriving soon, so you can go now,” he said.

“All right. Thank you.”

Nonna and I bowed politely and left the house.

“Nonna, I have something to say.”

“I’m sorry! I just really wanted to try it. Dell Dolgarr!”

“But was the ‘charges onto the scene’ bit really that necessary?”

“Oh, that?”

“You can’t be shy at moments like that.”

“Ha-ha. You’re so funny, Mom.”

“Am I?”

By the time Nonna and I made it home, still chatting along with each other, Mike showed up on horseback.

Officially, he was visiting under the guise of a scribe from the castle. Jeff was there, too, and the three of us talked quietly in the parlor.

“When did you first suspect Zachary’s bookshop was suspicious, Victoria?” Mike asked.

“From the first moment I walked in. He had rare, valuable books even I could recognize randomly out in the open but stored less valuable ones neatly in a cabinet, mixed in with obvious forgeries. It didn’t make sense to me, especially since it was supposedly an old, reputable shop. I asked the owner of a nearby pub about the place.”

I remembered how Zaharo’s face had clouded over when I’d asked him about the bookstore.

“That bookshop’s been in business for generations, but the owner just up and vanished about a year ago. I thought we were close since we were neighbors, but the man left without so much as a good-bye. A rumor started going around that he’d skipped town in order to pay off some old debt his parents had.”

“Forgery and unpaid debts from parents. It sounded just like what happened to the parishioner from the abbey,” I said.

“Then what happened?”

“I made a habit of visiting the shop and checking the cabinets in a very conspicuous way each time. When Goodwin Lending Company was raided, I spotted Zachary in the crowd, staring

right at my carriage. That's when I knew he'd suspect me as being involved in the raid and come after me eventually."

"Anna, why didn't you tell me this sooner?" Jeff asked.

I *had* agonized over that decision.

"I'm sorry, Jeff. If I knew the exact day when Zachary would make his move, I would've involved you. But I couldn't ask you just to wait around forever, and if you'd been with me, Zachary would've kept his distance, and it just would've dragged on. Then the people he cheated never would've gotten justice."

Jeff had a grim expression on his face. "You went up against five men."

"Only five. Nonna was the one who took them down, without even breaking a sweat. Shenese martial arts are very practical. I'm sorry, Jeff. I promise I'll tell you next time. Please don't be so upset," I begged.

Mike and Jeff exchanged glances that clearly said, "*She's hopeless*."

"Don't say 'next time' like you getting attacked is inevitable."

"I didn't mean it like that! I was just being hypothetical, of course."

"Wait a moment, Victoria." Mike closed his eyes to gather his thoughts.

"Wasn't there a chance that Zachary *wouldn't* notice your involvement in the Goodwin Lending Company bust?"

"No, he was going to figure it out eventually. I made sure to smell several suspicious-looking books. He acted like he didn't notice, but I saw him watching me through the windows. I think he pulled the shadows down all the way so he could use the windows as mirrors."

Mike sighed and gave me a look. "You knew all that and still kept going to the shop? How reckless. But I suppose it's a relief that Nonna's as strong as she is. Publicly, I'm the one credited with capturing them, but every one of them keeps saying the same thing. 'Some terrifyingly strong little girl took us down.' They scammed a lot of people, including nobles. So even the lowest one in their operation will get ten years of hard labor."

That gave me some peace of mind.

"Well, at least Nonna and I are safe for the next decade."

“That’s right. You really helped us out. We couldn’t figure out who the mastermind behind those forged contracts was. The people we arrested said they only took orders through an intermediary. None of them knew a thing about Zachary.”

“Well, he was very careful. But not knowing the value of the old books he sold was his downfall.”

“No, Victoria. Meeting *you* was his downfall.”

Mike finally took a sip of his tea, then paused as if just remembering something. “Oh, right! We managed to decode that encrypted message from Mr. Bernard. Elmer Archibald was actually a spy from Hagl. My team had a hard time cracking it until someone realized it was an old Hagl cipher.”

“Oh, really? Is that so?”

“Don’t play coy with me, Victoria. You already solved the code, didn’t you?”

I smiled vaguely but said nothing.

“Elmer Archibald rather reminds me of you, you know. He defected from the organization, found his soulmate, and ended up living a happy life, just like you.”

“He reminds you of me?”

“He does. Mr. Bernard says Archibald’s unpublished work will be on sale soon. I’m excited about it. I’m a big fan of Archibald’s. Oh, and if you ever need to send me any discreet messages, use that house behind Lady Yolana’s estate. You know the one. It used to be Miles’s place, but now a man named Chester is renting it so I can keep in touch.”

Mike left with a smile on his face.

As Jeffrey and I were relaxing in our bedroom, we heard a knock at the door. We both turned toward it at the same time. Nonna stood in the doorway.

“Dad, you don’t need to worry about Mom anymore. I’ll be there to protect her from now on.”

“Our little hero had quite the day, huh?” Jeffrey said with a smile.

“Yeah. Those guys were really slow compared to Master Khan’s disciples.”

“Nonna, remember that if anything were to happen to you, it would deeply hurt your mother and me.”

“I know. I’ll be careful. By the way, Mom and Dad, can I get a pet now?”

Oh, I’d forgotten. But Nonna was old enough now to care for a dog or cat on her own.

“Sure. But you’ll be responsible for taking care of it yourself,” Jeff replied.

“I will!”

“Well, what would you like? A dog or a cat? Or maybe a bird?”

“I think I want a cat. The one at Elizabeth’s house is so cute, but it’s shy around me. I want one that will love me.”

“Okay. Let’s look for someone who’s giving away kittens,” I suggested.

“Yeah!”

And so the case of the forged contracts came to a close at last.

A few days later, Mr. Bernard visited our house, bearing a copy of Elmer Archibald’s unpublished book.

“Congratulations, Mr. Bernard. I’m sure Archibald’s fans from all over the world will be thrilled.”

“I still can’t believe I got to be a part of releasing Archibald’s lost work. I suppose living this long has its merits. But I owe it all to you, Victoria.”

“No, it was your research that made it possible.”

Mr. Bernard gifted me a brand-new, pre-release copy of Elmer Archibald’s novel.

I smiled as I accepted it from him, but truthfully, I felt a bit scared to read it.

That night, Jeffrey approached me in our bedroom with a look of concern. I’d tried my best to keep smiling, but I must not have been able to hide my worries from him.

“What’s wrong, Anna? You’ve seemed upset ever since Uncle visited.”

“Jeff…”

“Is it something you don’t want to talk about?”

“It’s not that. It’s just… I’m afraid that book might contain another hidden code.”

“Really? Why do you think that?” He sat down across from me and studied my face.

I looked down at my desk, where I kept the copy of Archibald’s unpublished book, *The End of a Long Journey*.

I'd skimmed through the manuscript before I'd handed the stack of parchment over to Mr. Bernard. It wasn't an adventure novel but the story of an adventurer, reminiscing about the peaceful days he spent with the woman he loved after the end of a long journey. And the premise was that it was written after the woman had already passed away.

"Why would Archibald go to such trouble sealing that manuscript up in a jar and hiding it in the attic of a house in the forest? If it were just an ordinary book, he wouldn't have placed it in the same spot as the parchment that was encrypted with such an important secret. There had to be a reason behind it."

"A reason? I'm not an expert on codes. But what do you think it means?"

"I think Archibald only wanted those who decrypted his will to discover the message hidden in *The End of a Long Journey*, and that's why he hid it in the same jar. He didn't want it widely known, but he did want someone to find it to hear what he couldn't say out loud."

"And then what?"

"Archibald had lived a life full of secrets, but I think he wanted the burden of them lifted before he entered the garden of the gods. I tried to imagine myself as him. What could he have written in the end, a man who kept the truth about himself and his wife from his own child?"

Jeffrey moved beside me and placed a hand on my shoulder. The warmth from his hand was comforting.

"If I were Archibald, and I wanted to tell a secret, but it was so entangled with other secrets that I couldn't speak it aloud, maybe I'd write it all down in a book in hopes that someone far into the future might read it. If I were him, that is."



I told Jeffrey I didn't have the courage to read *The End of a Long Journey*, and he said, "You don't have to engage with it until you feel ready. You'll read it when you want to. And you don't have any obligation to solve Archibald's mysteries, you know. Don't push yourself just because you feel responsible."

He didn’t ask me why I didn’t have the courage or what I thought might be written in the code. So the book remained on my desk, untouched.

One day, Bertha told us about some kittens. Someone nearby had a cat that had just given birth, and they were looking for homes for them. Nonna and I went to see the kittens right away.

“Mom, they’re so cute!”

“They really are. There are five of them, and we can choose any one we want.”

“I can’t decide! They’re all so adorable! I can’t just pick one!”

“Well, we could take two.”

“Really? We can?”

“It might be fun for them to have a playmate. That way, they won’t feel lonely.”

The old woman who owned the kittens said, “Take as many as you like. You can have any kittens you want.”

“How about these two?”

“Okay, let’s go with those.”

Nonna carefully put the kittens in a basket, and we brought them home. She decided to call them Ash and Berry because it sounded like Ashbury, the place she’d gotten them. The kittens had just been weaned and were old enough to eat soft foods on their own.

“I won’t show them to Elizabeth until they get used to me. She’s really great with cats, and I’d be sad if they grew attached to her before me,” Nonna said.

It surprised me that she was competitive about such a thing. I hadn’t expected her to care, so I found it amusing.

“What do you think, Lady Asher?”

“Hmm? Oh, I’m sorry, Miss Elizabeth. My mind was wandering. What was that, again?”

“I said, Nonna hasn’t even shown me her kittens, Ash and Berry, even once! Are they real? Or are they like that rock she told me was her pet?”

“No, Miss Elizabeth. Nonna really does have kittens.”

“Does she?”

“I do! But I won’t let them meet you until they’re attached to me.”

“So you *are* keeping them from me on purpose! I’ll see them eventually, you know! And besides, what is *he* doing here? I thought this was a *ladies-only* tea party,” Elizabeth huffed.

The *he* she was referring to was Master Clark.

Ever since he found out that Nonna and Elizabeth were attending tea parties all over town, he insisted on escorting Nonna every time. When I mentioned the girls were having tea at our house today, he came over right away.

“Just pretend I’m not here, Miss Elizabeth,” he said with a smile.

“That’s impossible! You’re standing right in front of me! And Master Clark, why must you tag along like Nonna’s guard dog to every single tea party she attends? It’s *so* obvious you’re trying to keep other young men away from her, even though you two aren’t even betrothed!”

“Nonna and I are childhood friends. It’s fine.”

“That’s right. Master Clark’s like a brother to me.”

“…”

I saw Master Clark’s expression tighten slightly. I couldn’t help but wonder if he had feelings for Nonna beyond mere friendship.

Still, I couldn’t help but want to see him acting like her “guard dog”. He’d grown into such a dignified, handsome young man—a far cry from that delicate little boy who used to get kneed in the stomach by Nonna. I would absolutely *love* to see him be her guard dog.

Our lively tea party finally came to an end, just as Jeffrey came home from another visit to the Second Order of the knights.

He’d recently been appointed their advisor. Although he no longer went out on missions, he still trained the knights and lent his expertise when needed.

“The kingdom manages the trading company I set up now. I’ve got the title now but not much else to do,” he said.

“If you’re bored, maybe we should start a business selling my ointments and tonics?” I teased.

“That sounds fun.”

“I was kidding! I can’t make them in large enough quantities for that anyway. Besides, we don’t have to worry about money anymore, so why not start a new job if you’re bored?”

“Maybe I will. I’ll think about it. But first, I’m going to take it easy for a while. I’ve worked hard for a long time now.”

“You really have.”

I told Jeffrey what I’d heard at the tea party about Master Clark.

“Do you think he has romantic feelings for her? Maybe he just sees her as a cute little sister,” he said.

“Well, he was quite speechless when Nonna said he was like a brother to her.”

“You know, it’s not uncommon for sons and daughters of nobles to get betrothed to one another as early as five or six years old, so age isn’t a problem.”

“Nonna doesn’t seem to have any romantic feelings for him, though,” I said.

“Of course not. She’s far too wrapped up in her romance with Dell Dolgarr and those kittens.”

“Heh-heh-heh.”

Just then, Nonna came in. “Mom, Ash and Berry learned a trick. Watch this!”

“Oh? What kind of trick?”

Nonna placed the two kittens on the floor and sat a short distance away from them. The two kitties eagerly clamored up her body all the way to her collar. They each pulled something out the back of it and held it in their mouths, then plodded over to place the object in her hands.

“That was amazing. But what is it?”

“A saw blade. Reed gave it to me when it broke off his saw.”

“You shouldn’t keep something like that in your collar, Nonna. It’ll cut your skin.”

“I thought you’d say that, so I asked Bertha to sew a little pouch for it. She did ask me why I wanted a pocket there, and I wasn’t quite sure how to answer, though…”

“But, Nonna, why do you want to keep a saw blade handy in the first place?”

“So I can cut through rope and free myself even if my hands and feet are tied!”

Jeffrey smiled wryly. “Nonna, you talk about that like it’s the most natural thing in the world.”

“I can show you a simpler way, Nonna. Watch this.”

I pulled out a handkerchief and had Jeffrey tie my wrists behind my back. Then I sat down and wriggled around until my hands were back to the front, brought the handkerchief to my mouth, and undid the knot with my teeth.

"Oh, I see. So I didn't even need to train them to do that. I could've just done it myself."

"It's a trick only someone with flexible joints can do, though," I said.

"Well, if someone gags you, your teeth won't be much help," Jeff pointed out.

"Right. I didn't think of that."

"See, Mom? That's why the kittens will still come in handy."

What kind of strange family conversation is this?

But I had to admit, Nonna's idea wasn't half bad.

Ash and Berry were so tiny, but they grew up in no time. I didn't know cats grew so quickly, and it took me by surprise.

"Will they sit on my shoulder?" I asked.

"Berry, go sit on Mom's shoulder," Nonna urged.

Berry's nose twitched before sniffing me for a moment, then darted right back to Nonna. Ash did the same. Nonna looked very proud of herself.

"They won't do it with Dad and Master Clark, either. It's just me."

"You took them to see Master Clark?"



“Yes. I took them over in their basket, and he said they were really cute.”

“Come to think of it, I’ve never had a pet before, either,” I said.

“We can go back to that lady and get a cat for you,” Nonna suggested.

“No, I’m fine with these two for now. I’ll let you know if I change my mind.”

“Okay,” she said.

That night in my bedroom, my gaze wandered over to *The End of a Long Journey*. I still hadn’t gotten up the courage to read it, but leaving it there untouched forever was starting to weigh on me.

“What am I going to do with you?” I murmured to myself in the empty room. Rain had begun to fall outside.

As I gazed out the window, I wondered how Auri was doing, the girl I’d tried to rescue from her unfortunate circumstances.

Jeffrey told me the knights had investigated Auri’s background. She had been caught stealing money and property from her employer in Subartu, and that’s why she was on the run.

No extradition request came from her kingdom, so she would serve out her sentence here in Ashbury.

I kept telling myself I needed to forget about her, but I knew I couldn’t do that. It was another bitter memory that settled into my heart. That was just a part of life. I accepted that truth as I listened to the sound of rain through the open window.

As I stared out at the dark, rain-soaked garden, I remembered something one of my instructors said long ago. “Life never goes the way you want it to.”

“You were right,” I whispered. Those words really resonated with me now that I’d gone through such hard times myself.

Chapter Ten

A Visit with Lady Yolana

I debated it for a few days but decided to visit Lady Yolana's estate in the end. Nonna came along but disappeared into another room with Susan the moment we arrived. They were probably getting caught up in another conversation about bobbin lace and knitting.

"What's on your mind, Victoria? You look troubled," Lady Yolana said.

"Do I?"

"You're someone who can't tell a lie. I can tell right away, dear."

My heart ached.

I'd told countless lies when I was a spy, and I was still lying to Lady Yolana.

"Well? What is it?" she asked.

"I came across someone's final message. Something they left behind for someone to read."

"I see. And?"

"I know I could read it if I tried, but I'm afraid. Not reading it is weighing on me, but the thought of leaving it alone scares me even more."

"Victoria, if it's weighing on you, then you should read it. If it's too hard, come back and talk to me about it. We can share the burden together."

"Lady Yolana…"

"That's what friends do, isn't it? We share the good times and the bad, don't we?"

Her reassuring smile gave me the strength to head home.

But when I got back, there was no one to greet me. I'd parted ways with Nonna at Lady Yolana's because she was going to

visit Miss Elizabeth afterward, and Jeffrey was still at the knights' headquarters.

We had only a small household staff, so it wasn't unusual for the house to feel empty now and again, but Bertha always informed us beforehand if she was going somewhere. And it was strange that both the cook and the other young maid were gone. That never happened.

I entered my room and checked the thin layer of baby powder like I always did. And there it was—the unmistakable footprint of a man's shoe. I took a deep breath and straightened my back.

No male servants ever entered my bedroom, and I'd put the baby powder down *after* Jeffrey had left for the day.

I slipped my hand into my pocket, reaching through the hole to grasp the dagger strapped to my thigh.

Who was in here?

"It's about time you got back. I was sick of waiting for you," a voice said from behind me.

I turned to see Will Zachary standing in the doorway.

"Strange seeing you here," I said calmly.

"I've come to thank you. Forced labor really isn't my thing."

"You look well, Zachary. How did you manage to escape the camp?"

"Aren't you the royal family's lapdog? I thought you'd know by now. I started a fire in the camp and fled with some friends. I could've kept running, but then I had a great idea: Why not give your husband something to be miserable about?"

He wasn't much of a fighter. I could take him alone if push came to shove.

"Oh, and don't even think about moving. If you try anything, my friends will send your servants to an early grave. You wouldn't want that to happen, would you?"

"Hello, Lady Asher. I offered to give them a tour of the house."

"Auri!"

There stood Auri, a smile plastered on her face and a knife in hand. She was dressed in clothes she'd clearly stolen from someone. Behind her was another a young man, smirking and gripping Bertha by the arm. He had a small knife in his free

hand. Bertha was gagged, and her upper body was bound with rope.

I see. So they came all the way here just for revenge.

I quickly scanned my surroundings. There was no sign of a larger group hiding nearby.

Zachary sneered at me and spoke again. “You *are* one of the royal family’s lapdogs, aren’t you? Those damned dogs have been meddling in my business for years. I figured it’s time I took care of at leas—oof!”

Before he could finish his sentence, he doubled over. I’d buried my dagger deep in his thigh. As soon as it left my hand, I lunged forward and drove my fist into his solar plexus. As he bent forward, I slammed my elbow into the back of his head. He dropped silently to the ground.

I spun around toward Auri and struck her arm with a sharp chop, making her drop her knife. Then I punched her hard in her stomach. She fell onto her back, out cold.

The other man was now clearly frightened, and I delivered a kick to his groin. As he rolled around on the floor in agony, I kneed him hard in his abdomen. Before long, he was out like a light as well.

I wasted no time and quickly tied up Zachary, Auri, and the other young man with belts and ropes, then rushed to free Bertha, who was shaking like a leaf.

“I’m so sorry, Your Ladyship. I tried to run, but they caught me.”

“It’s okay. There’s something I need you to do. Go find Reed and tell him to fetch the Second Order of the knights. Tell him we’ve had intruders.”

“Y-yes, right away!”

Bertha’s legs wobbled as she hurried off, leaning against the wall for support.

Once she was gone, I immediately began searching for the cook and the young maid. As I reached the staircase, I ran into the cook, who was rushing up from below. His uniform was torn and smeared with blood.

“Your Ladyship! Thank goodness you’re safe!”

“I am. Are you hurt?”

“It’s nothing serious. Most of this blood isn’t mine. Those scoundrels barged into the kitchen and attacked me.”

“And? Then what happened?”

“They knocked me out, but I came to quickly. I waited until they let their guard down and tackled them. I was lucky to make it out alive.”

We searched for the young maid together and found her tied up in the laundry room, completely unharmed. She told us Zachary was planning to sell her off.

I went back to my bedroom and slapped Zachary across the face until he roused.

“Wake up.”

“Argh…”

He winced with pain as he opened his eyes.

“Looks like forced labor is no longer an option for you. If you’d just behaved yourself, you could’ve walked away with your life. You fancy yourself as some kind of veteran, but you’re nothing but an amateur who can’t even assess your opponent’s strength. As you might’ve guessed, I’m no ordinary civilian. But I’m not the royal family’s lapdog, either. Just a stray mutt. Too bad for you, huh?”

After that, I ignored everything Zachary and Auri had to say as I waited for the knights to arrive. Auri kept making up excuses, but I was in no mood to listen to them.

What a shame for Auri and for Nonna. It was a crying shame.

Once the knights finally arrived, they took the intruders away. Jeffrey had come with them, and when he saw Auri, he shot her a glare as cold as ice.

“Jeff, I want you to be present during their interrogations.”

“I’ll make sure of it. Don’t worry.”

With Jeff overseeing things, I knew he would keep any information about me from getting out.

Now it was time to have a conversation with Bertha.

“I need you to keep what you saw today to yourself. Forget what I did to those three. I’ll make sure you’re treated well as long as you work here. But I must swear you to secrecy. I don’t want any stories spreading.”

“Of course, Your Ladyship! Thank you for saving me. I swear I won’t tell another soul for the rest of my life!”

I gazed long and hard into Bertha’s eyes, expecting to see fear. Instead, I saw something like admiration and respect.

Thinking she may have misunderstood me, I considered correcting her but concluded it was best to leave the issue alone. There was no point in saying anything that might make her want to leave.

After a thorough search to make sure there were no more intruders lurking in the estate, I informed the cook that I'd managed to subdue the assailants while they had been distracted. My story was quite far-fetched, but I would figure out how to explain it properly later.

"Mom, I'm home."

"Welcome back, Nonna."

Nonna returned that evening.

"We had some intruders break in today. I caught them and handed them over to the knights."

"Some people broke into *this house*? Wow, talk about bad luck on their part," Nonna said with a laugh, not particularly surprised.

I decided I would tell her about Auri soon, just not right now. Nonna didn't ask about who had broken in. Instead, her eyes sparkled as she said, "How'd you take them down?"

"With one of them, I threw a knife into his thigh, then punched him in the stomach and finished him with an elbow drop to the back of the head."

"Like this?"

Nonna mimicked throwing a knife, then lunged forward, jabbed her fist upward into her imaginary opponent's stomach, and finished with an elbow strike.

"Yes, just like that. Impressive."

"So you grabbed him like this, kicked him like this, and *bam*! Huh? Something about this seems really familiar… Why's that?"

"I wonder."

I couldn't help but laugh. Those were the exact words I'd said to Nonna when I first showed her how to fight.

Jeffrey came back home later that night.

"I'm glad I'm serving as an advisor to the knights now. I handled the interrogation myself to make sure no unnecessary details got out. Mike showed up to help, so I let him take care of the rest."

"We sure do owe Mike a lot, don't we?"

“Anna…”

“Hmm?”

“I’m so glad you’re safe.”

“Jeff, I’m fine. Those three really weren’t much of a threat.”

“This time, yeah. But what if next time is different?”

He hugged me and rested his head on my shoulder, letting out a deep sigh.

“I was the one who trusted Auri and got us into this mess. I’m sorry,” I whispered.

“It’s all right. This doesn’t change my faith in you one bit. Leave the rest to me.”

“I’ve been a burden to you.”

“I’ve never once thought that. But more importantly, let’s hire some guards so we can keep our home safe when you aren’t around.”

“…You’re right, I think that would be for the best,” I agreed.

“I know it may feel constricting, but I hope you can put up with it.”

“It won’t be a problem at all, Jeff.”

If I hadn’t saved Auri in the forest, none of this would have ever happened. But I just hadn’t been able to leave her there or send her back to Subartu. At the time, I’d thought I was doing the right thing.

I’d made my choice. I could feel down about it but regretting it would be pointless.

That night, I read Elmer Archibald’s new book, *The End of a Long Journey*, and deciphered the hidden code within it.



The conclusion of our life together began with my wife’s illness.

That was the opening sentence. *Oh, I knew it.*

I figured the story must contain things he couldn’t bear to reveal openly, even disguised within a code. The new book was packed with layers of hidden messages. Archibald had poured his emotions into this novel, then stashed it away in his house in the forest.

It was filled with heartfelt sentiments from his older years.

My wife is losing her memories, starting with her newest ones. She was panicking today about our son going missing. He's forty-two, married, and left home long ago. But she keeps searching for the boy he once was. What memories will she newly lose come morning? I'm terrified to go to sleep.

At times, Carolina would be completely lucid, and Archibald would become optimistic, thinking her condition might have stabilized, but his "hopes were repeatedly betrayed."

Eventually, he came to terms with reality.

There was even a moment when he couldn't bear it any longer and confided about his situation to a priest at the settlement church.

"Father, my wife's memories are fading bit by bit. She keeps regressing further into the past."

The priest gently comforted him. "Your wife is returning to the time of her birth. Do not be sad. A pure soul is beloved by the gods."

After Elmer Archibald took care of his ailing wife for four years, Princess Carolina, now in her late sixties, had regressed to the mindset of a teenage girl. She would often cry to Elmer, "Why am I here? I want to go home to the castle. Please take me back!"

"I promise I'll take you back to the castle tomorrow, Princess." Elmer would comfort her for hours until she fell asleep. And once she was asleep, he would hold his elderly wife in his arms and weep.

Carolina no longer remembers she loved me or that I love her. She's forgotten the life we shared as husband and wife.

How lonely and devastated Elmer must've been, I thought, wiping tear after tear from my cheeks as I read.

I set out for the capital in a carriage, carrying my wife when she could no longer walk, until we reached a place where we could see the castle.

When Carolina saw the castle in the distance, she said, "Thank you. I must reward you. Let's hurry back to the castle now." She spoke to Elmer as if he were a servant.

"Princess, tomorrow we shall dress you in a beautiful gown and attend a ball."

“Oh, wonderful. Have a crown ready for me. A prince from some faraway land might take notice of me!”

“Of course, Princess. You’ll be so beautiful, you’ll steal the heart of every nobleman.”

“I hope so. Thank you.” Carolina smiled faintly at Elmer, then closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep. Eventually, her breaths grew shallower with each passing moment until she stopped moving completely.

I held my wife, who’d grown so light, and sat with her there for a long time. All I had wanted was to let her gaze upon the castle one last time to her heart’s content.

When she first asked to return home, I sold all the gold ore we had at home and bought a piece of land with a view of the castle. After she passed, I dug her a grave there and buried her. And with that, I lost my crown and became nothing more than an old man.

Elmer Archibald had defected from Hagl and had chosen to live with the woman he’d loved.

He had lived a long and happy life until finally coming to rest at his wife’s side.

It was impossible to not feel connected to Elmer’s life story after I read it, and it sent pangs through my heart. I took a moment to compose myself and dry my tears before getting ready to head out.

“Reed, take me to the house behind Lady Yolana’s estate.”

“The one directly behind it? Yes, Your Ladyship.”

When I’d lived in Ashbury five years ago, a man named Miles had lived in that house while keeping an eye on my activities. The man who greeted me today looked like he was in the military or had served at one point. He introduced himself as Chester, and he seemed to be in his late fifties.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Lady Asher. Are you here today to send a message?”

“Yes. I need to contact Mike as soon as possible.”

“I can head to him immediately or have him come here if you prefer.”

“No, just tell him to meet me at the location written on this note tomorrow morning at eight.”

I handed him the note. It was the location of two graves I'd discovered after decoding the cipher in the book.



"Thank you for waiting for me, Lady Asher."

"I'm sorry to bother you. I know how busy you are."

"This is Princess Carolina's grave, isn't it?"

"Yes."

We stood atop a high hill overlooking the royal capital, just beyond a forest at the end of a road. At the summit of the hill was a perfectly square white stone monument.

"This is one of the stones from that crater, isn't it?" he asked.

"Yes. And if you look closely, you can see two names carved into it. Archibald probably did the carving himself."

"He even carved his own gravestone?"

"After he lost Princess Carolina, the only thing keeping him going was the thought of resting by her side."

Mike stood before the monument, offering a silent prayer.

"We also suspected the new book might contain a hidden code, so we tried to decipher it. But we couldn't figure out the key to crack it. What was it?"

"It was the words, 'my crown.'"

"I see."

"Princess Carolina was Elmer's shining crown."

Mike looked at the gravestone. "I assumed the crown in *The Lost Crown* referred to the gold mine," he said.

"The encrypted text in the jar only mentioned Carolina briefly. I found that odd for a man so utterly devoted to her."

I stepped closer to the grave and traced Elmer Archibald's name with my fingertips. "In the book and the coded messages, his deep love for his wife was abundantly clear. And yet he rarely described her. That led me to suspect there must have been something about her that was too painful for him to write on openly. I had to work up my nerve to read that new book, you know."

"Well, you've done it again. Everyone at headquarters will be astonished when they hear this," he said.

“Tell them you cracked the code and found the grave, Mike. I’ll tell Mr. Bernard the same.”

Mike kept insisting he didn’t feel right taking credit, but in the end, he relented and thanked me before leaving.

Later, I joined up with Reed, who had been waiting nearby. He took me to Mr. Bernard’s estate. We arrived unannounced and found him reading in the parlor.

“Oh, what brings you here today, Victoria? You’re not supposed to work today.”

“I’m not here for work, Mr. Bernard. I came to tell you about Elmer Archibald.”

“Archibald, you say?”

I made a pot of tea and served the pastries I’d bought on the way here, then took a seat.

“Mr. Bernard, Archibald’s latest book also contained an encrypted message.”

“It did? What did it say?”

I shared what I had uncovered about Archibald’s final years.

I thought it was a sad story, but Mr. Bernard’s response was unexpected.

“He was a very lucky man.” He pressed a hand against his forehead and seemed to be regaining his composure.

“Mr. Bernard?”

“Forgive me. It’s a story of deep love between a husband and wife, Victoria. You’re still young, so maybe this is hard for you to understand. But it’s clear to me that this is a tale of a man who was lucky enough to meet a woman he could love completely.”

“Really…”

“Yes, I can tell. Losing Carolina must’ve left him terribly lonely, but the fact that he loved her fully and completely until her final moments… Not many people are so fortunate.”

“Is that how it is?”

“Yes. When one finds one’s soulmate, their life is complete.”

But she forgot even her memories of Elmer, I thought but didn’t say out loud.

“Perhaps, to you, death seems like an eternal separation and something to despair over. But for us older folks, we think of it

as a final resting place. The thought of reuniting with my wife makes it something to look forward to, and the idea of passing away is far less frightening. I think Elmer lived each day with the hope of seeing his wife again."

Suddenly, the code that had once felt like a record of Elmer's despair now seemed warm, and I was filled with relief.

"That's how it is. He may have been lonely after his wife passed away, but he wasn't miserable. Elmer's last coded message was his way of expressing his most guarded feelings, ones he did not want a soul to know about—not even his own child. It gave him an outlet for the pain of living with a wife who no longer remembered him. He was the kind of man who just couldn't *not* write, just like I can't resist pursuing historical mysteries." Mr. Bernard smiled fondly and turned his gaze to the portrait of his late wife on the wall.

"Married couples can't journey to the garden of the gods together, but it's only a short wait. Sooner or later, we'll see our loved ones again. Elmer must've lived with that thought in mind." His smile brightened as he bowed his head. "Thank you, Victoria. Because of you, I know the story of Princess Carolina's life. I can visit her grave and introduce myself and say, 'Hello. I'm the historian who has spent over thirty years researching you.'"

I supposed my talent for deciphering codes had proven useful after all.

Seeing Mr. Bernard's boyish excitement made me think how hard it must've been for his wife to leave him behind. She was probably more worried about him than her own passing.

That thought brought unexpected tears to my eyes, startling Mr. Bernard.

If I ever ended up like Carolina, I knew Jeffrey would love me just like Elmer loved her until my very last moment.

But Jeff can't bear loneliness. He'll suffer terribly if I go first. I have to make sure I live a long life and make my husband happy until the very end.

That was my new goal. With it in mind, growing old and being the one left behind didn't feel scary anymore.

"I think I understand now, Elmer. This must be how you felt, too."

Later on, Mike told me he used the Third Order's information network to look into Elmer's descendants.

"Even with all the knights' resources, we couldn't trace the whereabouts of Elmer Archibald's descendants. The person who published his novel seventy years ago wasn't one of his children, either. It was someone he'd entrusted with settling his affairs after he passed." Mike looked very disappointed when he relayed that news to me.

"I followed a trail of identification papers but lost track of Elmer's son after he left the settlement. We have no idea where he went. Not every land administrator keeps detailed records of newcomers, either. Some only check their papers and move on. It's stricter when people leave than when they arrive."

"Perhaps it's for the best that things ended up this way. The royal family wouldn't want descendants from a relationship with a foreign spy."

Mike nodded, a conflicted look on his face. "The royal family will keep the matter of Princess Carolina private. They plan on buying the hill with the two graves."

"All that matters to me is that Carolina and Elmer's graves are protected," I said.

"I feel the same way," he said.

That night, when it was just the two of us, Jeff told me he had an idea about how we could spend the reward money.

"I know what we can do with the gold we received, Anna. How about starting a sheep farm? We could buy the land, raise sheep, and spin wool. Isn't that the life you always wanted? After all the detours we've taken, I think we can finally make your dream come true."

"A sheep farm! My dream is really becoming reality?!"

The thought of standing in the middle of a farm left me stunned and dreamy.

"From the day I left Hagl and changed my name to Victoria, I never imagined I'd find a place where I could live until I grew old. Even when I told you I wanted to raise sheep before we went to Shen, I thought deep down it was a flight of fancy."

"I never forgot."

"I'm just surprised you even remembered that, Jeff. It feels like a dream. I have a proposal of my own."

I suggested the idea of repairing the abbey.

“I abandoned my past and came into a large sum of money thanks to Elmer, who did the same. So what if we used some of the money to help women who are trying to put their pasts behind them, too? I think it would be really meaningful use for the gold.”

Jeffrey agreed with a smile. I knew he wasn’t the kind of person who was attached to money, but even when I’d presented him with a proposal that required a lot of it, he immediately agreed and said, “If that’s what you want.”

Starting that next day, he began enthusiastically making arrangements to repair the abbey.

“Lord Asher, thank you so much for everything you’ve done. We’ve fixed the leaks, repaired the walls, and even replaced the beds with better ones. We bought a large supply of firewood for the winter and built a shed to store it. Now we can all welcome winter with peace of mind,” Mother Eliza said.

“This was my wife’s suggestion,” Jeff replied.

“Well, my husband fully supported my idea.”

Mother Eliza smiled brightly at us. “I feel the blessings of the gods from your harmonious union, Lord and Lady Asher.”

“Thank you,” we both said in unison, then shared an embarrassed smile.

“I have another suggestion. Do you think the women living at the abbey would be willing to work if we built a workshop to make the ointments? I would pay them a fair wage, of course.”

“Oh my!” Mother Eliza was speechless when she heard the amount I suggested for wages. “That’s more than anything they’re making now.”

“Is that right? Well, there are surely still many women in need of a place to stay. If the ladies here can get back on their feet and rent their own rooms, it’ll open up more space for others to come to the abbey. I think this will be crucial to helping them to become more independent, step by step.”

Mother Eliza clasped her hands together and offered a brief prayer. “Thank you, Lady Asher.”

“And we have one more proposal. My husband bought a large piece of land outside the castle walls. Right now, it’s completely undeveloped, but we plan to dig a well and sow grass seeds and eventually turn it into a sheep farm. We want to raise sheep

there, shear their wool, dye it, and build a workshop for spinning. It will be a long-term project since we have to start from scratch."

"You're going to spin yarn yourself?"

"That's right. I have a bit of experience."

Jeffrey chimed in, "This is my wife's dream. She should've already been living that life by now, but she had to put her aspirations on hold for a while. Now we can finally make it a reality, though."

"I hope there are people interested in such work. A farm requires a lot of physical strength."

"I'm sure there will be plenty of willing folks. There are quite a few women who yearn for a solitary life, wishing to live without seeing anyone. Most of them were treated poorly by their husbands or families."

I thought as much.

Women who had thrown everything away and sought refuge in the abbey must have heavy burdens from their pasts.

After that, our discussion shifted toward more practical matters, and Jeff took charge of the conversation. When we returned home that evening, Bertha greeted us with a smile and said, "Master Clark is here."

The door to Nonna's room on the second floor was wide open, since our guest had called on a young woman. Bertha must have done so out of consideration.

"Welcome, Master Clark."

"Thank you, Miss Victoria."

"Mom, Ash and Berry are fond of Master Clark now, too!"

"Really? That's wonderful. The cats must sense how close you and Master Clark are, so they feel safe around him."

"Oh, I see." Nonna nodded. Meanwhile, Master Clark blushed abruptly while holding the cats.

He was at that age where he was no longer a child but not fully a man. I puzzled over how he viewed Nonna as I left the room.

"I'll be coming to check on you often," I overheard Bertha say, and I couldn't help but wonder if that was necessary.

But as he was leaving, Master Clark said, "Miss Victoria, may I invite Nonna to the opera?"

“Of course. I’m sure she would love that.”

Once he was gone, I was getting ready to have tea with Nonna when she looked like she’d just remembered something. “One time, when we were at Master Clark’s house five years ago, we were studying Randallish together, and…”

“Yes?”

“He asked, ‘Will you marry me when we grow up?’”

“…”

“Mom? Mom! You’re pouring the tea on the table!”

“Huh? Oh no! Nonna, will you get something to wipe it up?”

I’d meant to pour the tea into a cup but ended up pouring it right onto the table as I stared at Nonna, creating a small puddle.

“Nonna, you never told me that before.”

“Well, Master Clark said, ‘Don’t tell anyone until everything is ready,’ so I kept it to myself.”

“I can’t believe you kept such an important secret from me all these years…”

“I’m sorry. But ever since we went to Shen, I kept wondering if Master Clark really meant it. Plus…” Nonna frowned, a cute little wrinkle forming between her pretty brows.

“When I first saw him after we got back to Ashbury, he didn’t mention it at all. So I thought, *Oh, it must have just been a childish promise he forgot about*. He was only twelve years old when we made that promise. The same age I am now. Just a kid, you know?”

“I wonder if he remembers, too…? So what did you say back then?”

“I didn’t really understand what marriage was at the time, so I said, ‘Sure!’ But who knows if he even remembers that promise now.”

“You don’t know? He hasn’t said anything?”

“Nope, and I’m thinking of forgetting about it, too. Even if he does remember it, do we need to decide on marriage right now? I sure don’t think so.”

I couldn’t really say without talking to Master Clark about it, so I decided to put a pin in it to discuss with Jeffrey that night when he got home.

Nonna told me that promise was from a long time ago, so she didn’t care about it, but I felt anxious about what we should do.

I didn't want to let go of my sweet Nonna, but at the same time, I knew she couldn't stay with me forever. I began to think of her future possibilities.

Calm down. Calm down, I told myself. First, I needed to consult Jeffrey about this. After all, he was Master Clark's uncle, so I needed to be sure to avoid causing any trouble. With that thought I mind, I prepared myself.

The moment Jeffrey got home, I immediately told him what happened. He gave me a puzzled look and chuckled softly. "Anna, that's just a childish promise."

"I know, but can we pretend it never happened? I don't know the rules of noble society around these sorts of things. I know engagements are usually decided by the parents, but what if a boy from a higher-ranking family proposes?"

"Settle down, Anna."

I nodded and took some deep breaths.

"It's all right. I think I'm okay now."

"Good." Hearing Jeffrey suppress laughter irritated me a bit.

"Childhood promises don't mean anything when it comes to engagements. Even if a boy from a higher-ranking family was the one who made them. So Nonna and Clark's vow to be married isn't valid. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"If Clark is serious, then the Anderson family will have to come to propose the engagement, and we'll have to agree before formally giving them a notice of acceptance. Only then will it be officially established."

"So they're not engaged? Not at all? And I don't have to worry about it?"

"Right. But it might be good to hear what Nonna thinks about it."

We called for Nonna, who had apparently been reading a *Dell Dolgarr* book from Elizabeth's collection. She was still holding it when she came into our room.

"What's this about? If it's about Master Clark, I'd rather forget it."

"Why?"

“Because he’s an only child, right? So that means he can’t live here with us. And if I end up over at his house, I won’t be able to protect Mom.”

“Nonna…”

“I want you and Dad to remember something: I don’t want to get married because I want to protect Mom.”

I felt my lips purse and my eyes narrow. I wondered if I looked scary. If I relaxed the tension in my face, I was afraid I’d cry.

“Nonna, please listen…”

“I understand. You put me first, Mom. And I know you want me to be happy. But the most important thing to me is keeping you safe. I made that decision when you started teaching me self-defense a long time ago. I just hadn’t ever planned on telling you.”

“Nonna…”

“It’s not about repaying you for taking me in. That’s not why I’m saying this. I just want to protect Mom. I like Master Clark as a friend, but I want to forget about that promise. I thought I should let you know since we’ve been spending more time together recently. So, in case anything like that ever comes up, I want you to turn him down. Anyway, I have to go. This *Dell Dolgarr* novel is getting really juicy.” And with that, she left the room.

As soon as she shut the door, I covered my face with both hands and sighed.

For so long all I’d been thinking was, *I have to protect Nonna. Keeping her and Jeffrey safe is my job.*

But had she really made that decision to protect me all this time? Was that why she’d been so dedicated to learning Shenese martial arts?

“Children grow up so fast,” Jeff said.

“Yes, they do.”

“Nonna’s just like you, you know.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Her determination to protect those she loves is just like you.”

But she didn’t need to protect me. She should just forget about me and fall in love, get married, have children, and live her own life.

I sat there in a daze as Jeffrey reached over to give me a gentle hug.

"I've never seen you so out of sorts, Anna."

I realized what he'd said was true. I tried to recall if I'd ever been so rattled, but I couldn't remember an example.

"You must be right. Up until now, no matter what happened, I always told myself, 'This isn't the time to panic because doing so won't solve anything. Instead of panicking, you need to think clearly.'"

"It's okay now. You don't have to try so hard. Just having you here with us makes both of us so happy."

"Jeff…"

I thought my value was determined by my ability to protect others, and I considered it my reason for living.

But now Jeff and Nonna were both trying to keep *me* safe. Neither of them asked a thing from me. They just said it was enough simply to have me there.

"I'm so lucky, Jeff."

His expression softened gently.

Some time had passed since Nonna told me the story about the childhood promise of engagement.

We hadn't received any word from Master Clark's family, so we decided just to wait and see for now. It wouldn't be appropriate for us to ask about the promise since there had been no formal proposal, nor would it have been right for us to say, "Nonna wishes to decline."

After all, it was entirely possible that Master Clark had forgotten about the proposal he made five years ago.

Nonna and I were in our carriage heading outside the castle walls. Two of our hired guards were watching our home during our absence.

Our security had protested, saying, "It's simply unacceptable for us not to accompany you, Your Ladyship," but I didn't think Nonna and I needed guards when we were together. I wanted them to look after our staff, our home, and our money.

We purchased some land that was about two hours from the castle walls by carriage. It was an undeveloped area surrounded only by the property of other farmers. Vast wheat

and vegetable fields surrounded our farm, producing the food supplied to the royal capital.

The barn where the sheep would live was still under construction, along with a workshop and place to spin wool. I saw workers in the distance building fences to prevent the sheep from escaping onto nearby fields.

In the middle of the property, someone was guiding a horse to slowly plow the earth and sow grass.

As Nonna and I approached, some workers who were digging wells noticed us and bowed, taking off their hats.

"So do you think we'll hit water?" I asked.

"Oh, certainly. Ashbury has plenty of groundwater."

"I hope it's cold and delicious!" Nonna said.

"When we find it, we'll let you have the first drink, Miss."

"I can't wait!"

The wind blowing over the undeveloped land felt incredibly refreshing.

"It's almost scary being this lucky. Isn't it, Nonna?"

"Everything here feels like it moves in slow motion. I'd love to live here, Mom."

"Me, too."

I'd always assumed I would spend my whole life bouncing around from place to place, never settling down and getting married. Yet here I was, my life filled with so many treasures.

"Maybe we could live here most of the year and then at our estate in the capital during the social season?"

"Yeah! We can play with little lambs again!"

"I'd like to try spinning and dyeing yarn."

After that, we headed back to the southern quarter.

We were going to visit the used bookstore. Zaharo had tracked down the original owner and had convinced him to come back.

"Just leave it to me. I'm good at finding people," he'd said, and sure enough, he found the man in no time.

"Zachary's Used Bookstore" was now "Sandor's Used Books." The shades had been removed from the windows and replaced with thin, white curtains.

A little bell above the door jingled as we entered the shop. A quiet old man sat reading a book at the counter. It hadn't changed much since changing hands from Zachary. When I took

a look at the locked cabinet, I saw books with titles I didn't recognize.

"Pardon me, but are you Lady Asher?"

"Yes, that's right."

The man bowed. "Thank you for helping me recover my store. After I lost this place and my home, I fell into despair at the thought of dying somewhere else. But thanks to you, I can go back to the life I had before."

"Please don't mention it. All I did was report it to the knights."

"No, Mr. Zaharo told me the whole story. Thank you from the bottom of my heart."

Just then, Nonna came over holding two *Dell Dolgarr* books.

"Mom, can we buy these?"

"Sure."

"Your Ladyship, please allow me to buy your daughter the entire *Dell Dolgarr* series as a token of my gratitude. I only wish I could do more," he said.

I tried to decline, but he insisted repeatedly, so I relented and finally accepted the books.

Dell Dolgarr was a popular series, and we ended up taking home all twenty-three volumes of it.

"Mom, this is *incredible*! We really made out like bandits!"

"Nonna, let's not use that phrase in this situation. It's a bit inappropriate."

"How about, 'Look at all our spoils from givin' those guys what they deserved'?"

"Nonna."

"I know. I'm only joking."

Nonna spent all day in hog heaven reading her new books, but when evening came, Master Clark showed up at our house, changing the mood completely.

Before I even had a chance to say a word, Nonna announced, "By the way, we can forget that old promise we made about getting married."

Master Clark suddenly froze.

"Well, I had a feeling you'd say that once I saw how much you'd changed after returning from Shen. I understand. Let's pretend it never happened," he replied and took a sip of the tea

I'd made him. "I'll take my leave now, Miss Victoria. Nonna, don't forget about our promise to go see the opera."

He left seeming completely unfazed after having his proposal turned down.

"That was pretty simple," I said.

"See? I told you. We made that promise when we were just kids who didn't know any better."

"I have to laugh at how flustered I was when I found out. Master Clark is a wonderful and charming young man, but I can't imagine you two marrying. I don't want you to be worried about my opinion, though. You're free to make your own decisions."

"Yeah, yeah."

When Jeffrey got home that night, I told him what happened. "Hmm. I don't think he'll give up. He probably decided making a fuss now would only make Nonna dig her heels in, so he backed off." He let out a chuckle.

"What do you mean?"

"My mother's brother is Uncle Bernard. Lord Edward manages the archives in the Document Management department, and he's also the head of the Department of Institutional Maintenance, where they diligently ensure all the rules are followed. I've never given up on you. And Clark is Eva's son, and she was a Fitcher. The Fitchers are known for their stubbornness."

"Hmm. Well, I won't worry about it now at any rate. I just want Nonna to live the way she wants."

Master Clark was a wonderful young man, and it was shocking when the word *marriage* came up, but I would be lying if I said I wouldn't be a bit pleased if Nonna changed her mind.

"Things will work out. I'm sure of it," I said.

"That's right. There's no need to worry. And since I wasn't expecting to get this peerage, I have no intention of clinging to it, and I don't plan on making Nonna's future husband inherit it. More importantly, how is the farm?"

"It's starting to take shape. I was thinking I'd love to live there and spin yarn when I get older."

"That sounds nice. Then I'll become a shepherd, and we can live happily together until we're old and grey."

I stood on my tiptoes and gently stroked his hair. “Even if you grow old and forget me, I’ll make you happy until the very last second.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Nothing. Just my own personal goals.”

I hugged him with all my might and whispered into his ear. “Jeffrey Asher, you are my shining crown.”

There was no way to tell how much longer Jeffrey and I would be together. But I knew I would continue loving my husband until the very end.



Epilogue

A Tea Party at the Asher Estate

“Hey, Jeff. Don’t you think it’s a problem that Nonna’s been getting invited to tea parties all over, but we haven’t hosted a single one at our house?”

“Hmm, come to think of it, you’re right.”

“So I was thinking of having three separate tea parties. That way, we can invite all the young ladies who have had Nonna at their houses for tea.”

“Three parties? Wouldn’t it be easier just to have one big one?”

“You think so? I’ll ask Nonna what she thinks.”

I went ahead and asked her, and she immediately replied, “One big party!”

“You’ve been attending so many events, though. And you’ve even shown up as Elizabeth’s guest at parties when you weren’t directly invited. Can you remember everywhere you’ve been?”

“No, but you can ask Elizabeth. She’ll know. She keeps a really detailed notebook of who was invited to every party and who attended.”

“That’s awfully helpful.”

“Elizabeth’s family is loaded, but they’re really stingy.”

“Stop that, Nonna. It’s not nice to speak that way about a dear friend.”

“Oh, it’s fine. Elizabeth says it herself all the time. She says all the McGreys are stingy and meticulous.”

“…”

Lately, I was beginning to see why Nonna and Elizabeth had hit it off so well.

At first, I’d thought Elizabeth was a haughty young lady who had to be handled carefully, but that wasn’t really the case. She

had a good sense of humor and was intelligent enough to view herself, her family, and her position objectively.

Sometimes her brutal honesty could lead to misunderstandings, but I found that endearing.

The next day, Nonna invited Elizabeth over to our house. She arrived carrying a burgundy leather satchel.

"Nonna, I expected nothing less of you! If you need records of tea parties, just ask me, and I'll have everything you need!"

"I remembered that you wrote down every detail like the names of the guests, the dishes served, and the decorations. I'm counting on you!"

"Leave it to me!" Elizabeth's cheeks flushed slightly with excitement. She probably wasn't used to receiving such compliments from Nonna.

Jeffrey happened to be home as well, and he and I took a look at Elizabeth's notebook, which left us in disbelief.

The notebook was neatly organized into the following entries:

1. *Date and Time (start and end)*
2. *Name and age of the host's daughter or son, and their parents' titles*
3. *Number of guests, tables, and total attendees*
4. *Menu*
5. *Flowers on display*
6. *Names of the guests who attended*
7. *Main topics of conversation that day*

"This is…," Jeff started.

"Impressive," I said, finishing his sentence.

"Mother always laughs and says it's like I'm writing a research paper."

"I'll bet," Jeff said.

"Elizabeth, when do you have the time to write all this?"

"I do it as soon as I get home from a tea party, Nonna. That way, it's still fresh in my mind and before I forget any details."

Jeff had a serious expression on his face.

"What's wrong, Jeff?"

"Miss Elizabeth, did Nonna attend all of these parties?"

“No, but I marked the ones she did attend with a flower symbol last night.”

“Victoria, it looks like we’ll have to invite nearly thirty people over to our house,” he said.

“Goodness.” I quickly counted all the cute little flower symbols Elizabeth had drawn. There were twenty-eight in total. “This will be quite the gathering, Nonna. I knew you were busy attending tea parties, but I suppose I didn’t realize you’d been to so many! It would be rude not to invite them over to our house.”

“Most of the time, Elizabeth just dragged me along, you know.”

“Oh my. Is that really how you thought of it, Nonna?”

“Elizabeth, do you think I could borrow this notebook while I think of the menu?”

“Sure, go right ahead.”

Nonna and I decided on the menu along with Lady Yolana and Lady Blythe, sent out invitations, and then figured out how we would decorate.

The day had finally come for the party. Master Clark was the first to arrive.

“Thank you for inviting me today, Nonna.”

“You’re very welcome, Master Clark. You’re the first one here!”

“I know. I wanted to be the first,” he said with an easy smile. “This is for you.” He handed Nonna a small box of pastries from a well-known bakery.

“Wow, pastries from this bakery are so popular! I’ve been dying to try these, Master Clark! Thank you!” Nonna exclaimed.

“I remember you saying you wanted them.”

“You remembered that?”

“Of course.”

“Thank you! I’m so happy!” Nonna took both of Master Clark’s hands in hers, then let go of them to grab the box of pastries. “Mom, look! I’ve been wanting to try these!”

“That’s wonderful, Nonna.”

As I spoke, I couldn’t take my eyes off Master Clark’s slightly flushed face. I felt a little sorry for him. Nonna hadn’t held

hands with him intentionally—she was just such an innocent girl.

While I made excuses in my mind, more and more carriages arrived.

Young ladies and gentlemen dressed to the nines descended from their carriages, looking around our garden and admiring the estate as they made their way to the front door.

We'd sent out twenty-eight invitations, but just like Nonna had been Miss Elizabeth's guest at parties, it was expected that our guests would bring along a friend. The total number of attendees ended up being thirty-eight people. It was a very grand tea party.

Nonna had insisted it would be better to have one big gathering, but I knew the staff must've been having a tough time.

We used our spacious great hall, which was large enough to host a ball, and had arranged tables, chairs, and silverware. The inside and outside of our estate were impeccably clean. The head chef had been so overwhelmed with preparations for the past week that I thought I should probably send him a token of appreciation. Or maybe he'd prefer a special bonus.

Nonna made an elegant speech to start the party off, which went swimmingly.

I quietly observed from the shadows as Bertha and our other staff members moved efficiently while maintaining just the right amount of sophistication. Everything went completely smoothly…until the very end.

The incident happened just as I was considering calling the party to a close.

By then, the guests had eaten nearly all the light snacks and sweets on the tables.

A boy raised his voice a bit and said, "Nonna, would you like to go for a ride on horseback with me sometime? You can ride, can't you?"

"On horseback?" Nonna adored riding, and her eyes began to sparkle. She was about to respond when Elizabeth beat her to it.

"Goodness. Aren't you aware that Nonna used to be a commoner? Don't you think your suggestion is a bit inconsiderate?"

"Um, Elizabeth, I—"

“No, Nonna. I can handle this one,” Elizabeth interrupted again, a cool smile on her face.

The boy shrank back, clearly intimidated. “My apologies, Miss Nonna. I wasn’t thinking.”

“No, it’s not that. Actually, I—”

But this time, it wasn’t Elizabeth who interrupted. It was Master Clark. *Oh, now things are going to get interesting.*

“Sorry, Hendridge, but I’ve already made plans with Nonna to go horseback riding.” His tone of voice was so firm, the room filled with tension.

Master Clark, just because you asked her to go once doesn’t mean she’s booked up solid for horseback riding until the end of the year. She can go as much as she likes, you know, I thought as I anxiously watched over the situation.

Some of the boys standing at the back of the room lowered their heads to stifle their laughter. I heard others whispering amongst themselves, but they were too far for me to make out the conversations, so I had to read their lips.

“There he goes again. Miss Nonna’s guard dog.”

“Poor Hendridge has no clue it’s useless trying to get close to Miss Nonna with him around!”

“Ha. You think that’s bad? Master Clark glared at me just for talking to her at another tea party.”

“He did that to me, too!”

“Why doesn’t he just get betrothed to Miss Nonna already if he’s going to be so uptight about it?”

“Exactly.”

Oh my. Master Clark is carefully laying the groundwork, isn’t he? I thought, my heart pounding.

Nonna was the type of girl who knew what she wanted. No matter how much he plotted, if she wasn’t interested, it wouldn’t happen. That was why Jeffrey and I had decided to watch over things quietly and not get involved.

As I kept my eye on the boys, another one chimed in. I focused on reading his lips.

“Master Clark’s father is the Minister of Foreign Affairs. That means he’ll probably take over for him one day, so we should avoid getting on his bad side.”

“That’s odd. Once I asked him if he wanted to be the next Minister of Foreign Affairs, and he said, ‘Absolutely not.’”

“What? He’s not? What could be a better position than that?”

“Think about it.”

“What’s higher than that…? Wait, are you saying Master Clark wants to be the prime minister?!”

“That’s what I think.”

The group of boys fell silent for a while.

“Well, it’s possible. I heard he speaks the languages of all the neighboring kingdoms. And not just on a conversational level, either—he’s completely fluent! Apparently, he’s impressed even veteran diplomats. Plus, he knows the laws and histories of those kingdoms inside and out, too!”

Silence hung in the air again.

“There aren’t many eighteen-year-olds with that kind of ambition. Who knows. Maybe in thirty years, our prime minister will be Clark Anderson.”

“You really think he’ll keep at it and work hard for thirty years?”

“With his personality? There’s no doubt.”

“It’s not just persistence, either. There’s something else about him.”

“I wouldn’t want to get on his bad side.”

“Me neither.”

Once the tea party ended and all the guests had left, the house became very quiet again.

Now that Jeffrey was back, the three of us sat together, relaxing and chatting.

“Thanks so much, Mom. I had the best time today.”

“I’m glad to hear that, Nonna. By the way, did Master Clark really ask you to go riding with him?”

“Nope, not at all. But I didn’t want to embarrass him in front of everyone by saying that, so I just kept quiet.”

“You’ve really matured, Nonna.”

“Have I? I feel like that’s normal behavior.”

“It’s not. Being able to consider other people’s feelings is how you know you’ve matured.”

“Heh-heh.”

Incidentally, Nonna was very skilled at horseback riding. When we had gone on the run and lived at the farm in Randall,

I borrowed a horse from the owner and trained her thoroughly.

Nonna could gallop at full speed, leap over tall obstacles and wide ditches with no problem, and even jump from one horse to another while riding in tandem.

Her skill far surpassed that of the average noble lady, who only knew how to ride gracefully.

I wondered if she would keep those skills a secret from Master Clark until the moment called for it or if she'd reveal it to him.

Either way, good luck, Master Clark. I'm rooting for you.

Exclusive

Bonus Short Stories

Bonus Story

A Boy and His Mother

This story takes place over a century ago.

In a small village of this kingdom, there lived a husband and wife who ran a little shop. The husband was named Elmer, and his wife was Violet. They had a son named Jack.

"Mom! Mom!"

"What is it? Why are you shouting like that?"

"Bob from the tailor shop is going to the capital with his dad! Isn't he lucky? I want to go, too! Have you ever been to the capital, Mom?"

"…Yes."

"Really? What's it like?"

"Well, it's a bustling place with lots of people and shops."

"And what else?"

"I don't really know much else about it. I'm sorry."

"I want to go so bad. I heard the festivals there are huge! I'd love to go to one someday."

"I've never been to a festival, so I wouldn't know."

"Oh…"

With that, Jack gave up on asking any more questions.

Whenever he asked his parents about their lives before they came to the settlement, they always gave him vague answers. Maybe there was something they didn't want to talk about.

His mother sat on a plain wooden chair as she quietly sewed. She was delicate and couldn't do much heavy labor, but she worked hard managing the household and serving their customers.

His father was a serious, hardworking man who loved his mother deeply. Jack's friends always teased him and said his parents acted like newlyweds, but Jack thought it was great how close they were.

“Hey, Mom. Don’t you ever want to go to the royal capital? Don’t you ever get bored living out here in the middle of nowhere?”

“No, Jack. Every day I spend here with your father is like heaven. I love this place. I love walking in the forest, fishing in the river, and collecting walnuts and chestnuts to cook with. It’s so fun that I never get tired of it. And I got to give birth to you and raise you here, Jack. I can’t put that happiness into words.”

His mother always spoke of the simple things as though nothing could make her happier. Every time Jack heard her talk like that, he wondered what kind of hardships she must’ve faced before getting married.

“Well, when I grow up, I want to work in a big city. Maybe the capital or somewhere else. I want to see the world. But you and Dad will be lonely if I leave, won’t you?”

His mother just gave him a quiet, vague smile as she thought about it.

Some time later, when Jack had already forgotten he’d even asked that question, she arrived at her answer.

“Go wherever you want, Jack. You only have one life to live. So you should go where your heart takes you, see everything you want to see, build a family with someone you love, and live freely.”

“But what about when you and Dad get older? I’m an only child. What will happen then?”

“Don’t worry. When one of us leaves this world first, we’ll just wait for the other in the garden of the gods. No matter how big it is, I know you’ll find your father there, and he’ll find me. We’ll live happily together again. So don’t worry about us.”

“You really love Dad, don’t you?”

His mother gave him a warm smile and resumed mending his father’s work clothes. “Yes, I love him very much. He’s like a god to me. He’s kind, wise, and strong, and he can do anything. I’m so lucky to be his wife.”

“Yeah, yeah. I get it already!”

Jack thought it was so strange. His father was a dependable man, but he was rather plain in appearance. His mother, on the other hand, was so beautiful that even when she wore her old, faded clothes, she looked like she was glowing. If she’d lived in

the capital, she probably could have married someone rich and had a much better life.

But Jack was grateful that his parents were still together when he heard his friends tell stories about how their parents didn't get along.

Ten years later, Jack got married when he was twenty-two years old and left the settlement with his wife.

On the carriage ride to their new home, Jack thought back to the last thing his father had said to him. "Listen, Jack. It's best if you don't come back. Don't worry about us. Your mother and I will support each other. We have the rest of the settlement to help, too. You focus on living your own life to its fullest."

"Live life to its fullest. Don't you think that's a bit dramatic?" Jack muttered to his new wife as he unwrapped the packed lunch his mother had given him. "Oh, roasted venison and four boiled eggs! And white bread with wild strawberry jam. Mom really packed us a fancy lunch."

His young wife smiled beside him. "Your mother's roasted venison is so delicious. I want us to have a marriage just like your parents, Jack. I've always thought they were such a wonderful couple."

"I know. They still act like newlyweds, even after all these years. I want us to be that close, too."

The carriage carrying the newlyweds continued on its way to the capital.

After that, Jack would send a letter home every year, but his father would always reply with the same message:

Don't worry about us. There's no need to come back. Just take care of your family and live a happy life.

Bonus Story

Reed's Daily Life

Reed had worked as a stableman for a major trading company ever since he'd left the country village where he grew up. The company supplied equestrian gear to the castle.

The owner of the business retired due to personal circumstances, and although someone else took over, half the employees were laid off, and Reed found himself without a job.

He desperately searched for work, but it was no surprise that every trading company already had its own stable hands. It was common for the sons of stablemen to take over their jobs, and when the companies did hire, they typically did so through personal connections.

He didn't know many people in the capital, so he was at a loss.

That was when Mike approached him with an offer. "Would you like to work for a noble family?" he asked. At the time, Mike was the assistant director of Document Management.

"Really? That would be more than I could ever ask for! I'd be grateful for the opportunity."

"Every time I visited your old company, I always noticed what a hard worker you were."

"Thank you so much!"

Reed was known for his earnest personality and healthy constitution. He immediately accepted Mike's offer.

Mike introduced Reed to a nobleman named Edward Asher. When Reed heard that he was an earl, he was shocked.

"An earl? But I don't know anything about nobles. Are you sure I can manage?"

"Oh, you won't be working for me. It's for my younger brother. He's about to become a baron, and he'll be returning

from living abroad soon. He doesn't have any servants yet, and he's in need of a stableman."

"Oh, I see."

"And don't worry. Both my brother and his wife are easygoing people."

"All right. I'll do my best. Thank you again for this opportunity."

And so he became Jeffrey Asher's stableman. The working conditions at the Asher household were ideal. Reed's duties involved caring for four horses, managing the stables, and serving as a driver when any member of the household needed to go out via carriage.

Most nobles treated commoners harshly, but his master, mistress, and their daughter were all very kind and even skilled with horses. They made no unreasonable demands of him. Reed learned that his master had once been the captain of the Second Order of the knights. *That explains why he's so muscular*, Reed thought.

"I'm so glad I found a job as good as this," Reed thought—until the trip.

The family was taking a vacation to relax from their five years of work abroad and wished for Reed to accompany them as their driver. His first shock came when he observed the martial arts skills of his mistress and her daughter. His jaw literally dropped when he first saw the two of them in action.

They moved with such agility and precision, they rivaled that of trained soldiers.

Huh? What in the world is going on? Reed wondered as he stared in disbelief.

His master noticed and said, "My wife and daughter learned martial arts while we were in Shen."

Although Reed had heard the family had spent five years in Shen, he couldn't believe that a woman and child could become so skilled in such a short time.

But Reed didn't want to risk losing his position, so he told himself not to overthink it and stay quiet.

Unfortunately, an incident occurred during the trip when they were attacked by a group of large men wielding machetes.

They were eating dinner around the campfire when his employer suddenly announced, “There’s a group of suspicious men lurking nearby. Four or five of them. They’re heavy, and I think they’re quite muscular. I’m fairly certain they’re armed.”

The fact that he could sense the assailants’ numbers, size, and weapons without even laying eyes on them impressed Reed. *No wonder he used to be a knight captain*, he thought.

But the real surprise came when the fight broke out.

His employer’s slender wife effortlessly took down men who were easily twice her weight. Reed and the daughter took shelter inside a nearby house, where the daughter watched the fight from the window as she munched on a meat skewer.

She didn’t look even the slightest bit afraid, leaving Reed utterly baffled. *How can anyone eat while they watch a fight like this?* he thought with amazement. Traveling with this family was an endless series of surprises for him.

Who are *these people?*

Reed began to feel a bit scared around this strange family, but they all continued to treat him with kindness.

But humans are highly adaptable creatures. At first, he thought, *What kind of dangerous family have I become involved with?* Over time, however, he grew used to their odd ways and was no longer surprised by them.

After the eventful vacation came to a close and they returned home, Mike started inviting Reed out for meals on his days off.

Mike would always treat him to good food and drinks, and since Reed didn’t have a girlfriend, he started to look forward to those outings.

Mike was a good listener and always showed a lot of interest in Reed’s work. “That’s part of caring for the horses, too? You really know what you’re doing,” Mike would say with respect. “You’re such a hard worker. I’m proud I was the one who introduced you to the earl.”

Once they were back home, Mike continued to take Reed out and said, “It must’ve been a tough journey, traveling so far. Was there any trouble on the trip?”

“Oh, I’m just a servant, so it wouldn’t be right to talk about my master,” Reed said.

“Aww, come on. There’s nothing about the Ashers you have to keep a secret, right? I heard that the baron works hard and that he’s very close with his wife.”

“Yes, they have a wonderful relationship. Truthfully, sometimes I blush watching them. But I’m proud to work for them. Oh, and you’ll never believe what happened on the trip!”

His lips loosened by the expensive alcohol he could never afford under normal circumstances, Reed soon found himself recounting the entire journey, including the parts about the wife and daughter’s martial arts skills, the attack at the campsite, and how the couple had defeated the men with ease. He even mentioned how the guards had come to burn down a field of illegal red poppies the assailants had been growing.

“That sounds like something out of an adventure novel!” Mike exclaimed.

“Doesn’t it? The family I serve is incredibly strong. Oh, and there’s one more thing.”

Reed told Mike about how after he took the mistress home one day, they found that burglars had broken into the estate.

“By the time I had the horses put back up, the burglars were already taken care of! I only realized something happened when Bertha ran up to me and said, ‘Call the guards!’ It all happened so fast and so quietly. The lady of the house claims it was the cook who stopped the burglars, but I’m convinced she’s the one who did it. She’s really something else, you know.”

“That sounds like something out of a book, too! Does she go out often? What kind of shops does she like? Maybe she has a favorite place.”

“The lady doesn’t socialize much. Oh, but she does go to a pub once a week. She stays for a very short time, though. Never more than an hour. She drinks very elegantly. It’s an ordinary pub, too. Nothing fancy.”

“A baroness at a pub, huh? I’d like to see that. What kind of pub is it?”

“I can take you there, Mike.”

And so Reed and Mike ended up visiting The Black Thrush. This was Reed’s first time inside the place.

The Black Thrush seemed like an ordinary pub, and Mike seemed to take a liking to it. He kept saying, “This place is great.” Reed was happy he’d brought him there.

The owner was a black-haired man with an intimidating air, the type of man whose bad side you didn't want to be on. He wasn't talkative, but he wasn't unfriendly, either. He served them the house special, which was perfectly grilled homemade bacon. It was delicious.

"Thanks for tonight, Reed. I had a great time."

"No, no. Thank you for treating me."

Mike watched Reed leave the pub in high spirits, and he smiled. Edward always fretted over his younger brother, so he'd asked Mike to keep an eye on the family to make sure no one dangerous was getting close to him. But Mike was also curious about Victoria, the former master spy from Hagl, and how she was living these days.

"She took down a bunch of burly forestry guys in no time, huh? That sounds like her. After hearing she discovered a gold mine, nothing surprises me about her anymore."

He glanced back toward the bar as he left.

"So this is the kind of place Victoria likes to go, huh? And she always comes alone. I can't believe her doting husband Lord Asher allows that. And that owner… There's no way he's just an ordinary barkeep. I might have to look into him when I get the chance…"

And with that, Mike turned and went home.

Bonus Story

✡

Blythe Asher's Daily Life

Edward Asher, Blythe's husband, was not only the head of the Department of Institutional Maintenance but two other departments at the castle. It went without saying that he was a very busy man.

Yet no matter how busy Edward was, he was always calm. Ever since they had gotten married, Blythe had never once seen him lose his temper.

Before they were married, some young ladies used to complain about how composed Edward was since it was difficult to tell what he was thinking. But not Blythe. He was always polite and courteous to her. Every time they saw each other at a soiree, he treated her very respectfully.

When he proposed to her, she'd asked, "Why are you interested in me?"

"Your character, most of all. And the fact that you grew up in a happy family with loving parents."

Blythe thought it was strange that Edward had known so much about her family. Her father had always acted domineering toward her mother in public, and her mother rarely socialized. The only people who knew how well her parents actually got along were their few servants, Blythe, and her sister. So how had Edward known?

As their wedding approached, Edward confessed to Blythe that he had scars on his back. When she first saw them, she was stunned speechless by how severe they were.

"My father was ruled by his emotions. Those scars are from when he beat me with a horse whip," Edward explained calmly.

But Blythe burst into tears, overcome by sympathy for the boy he'd once been, and he ended up comforting her.

She'd grown up loved by parents who had a happy marriage, so acting the same way came very naturally to her.

She mirrored the way her parents had treated each other without realizing it, offering small gestures of kindness to Edward and taking care of her mother-in-law. Edward always made sure to thank her for it and praise her.

"I'm so lucky to be married to you," he'd say. She had lost count of how many times he'd said it, in fact.

And each time, Blythe would think, *I'm the lucky one.*

Blythe and Edward had one daughter.

At first, Blythe thought they would have a son-in-law marry into their family to secure an heir. But Edward didn't want to do that. He said he'd already chosen a suitable family for their daughter to marry into and told her they were a peaceful family with a strong marriage.

It was customary in the Asher family to have at least two children so one could carry on the Asher name. Fortunately, their daughter had three children—two sons and one daughter—so there was no fear of the family line ending.

One day, while Blythe was riding in her carriage, she spotted a familiar woman on the road. It was a maid who once served a friend of hers. Unfortunately, that friend had passed away from influenza, and her husband had also recently died from a heart ailment. Blythe vividly remembered sending flowers after his passing.

"Would you stop the carriage and bring that woman here?" she asked her driver.

Just as she thought, it was the maid from her late friend's household.

"Oh, Lady Blythe! It's been so long. I'm Bertha."

"Bertha, what are you doing these days? Did you just come from that employment agency?"

"To be honest, after the master passed away and his eldest son became the new head of household, he dismissed most of the older servants, including me."

"Goodness! But you've been employed by that family for such a long time!"

"Yes, I was the head maid."

Blythe thought for a minute and then said, “Perhaps I could help you. Where are you staying now? At a hotel? I have a few ideas. Stay there for now, and I’ll get back to you.”

“Thank you, Lady Blythe, but why are you being so kind to me?”

“You were my dear friend’s treasured maid. She’d surely scold me once we saw each other again in the garden of the gods if I abandoned you,” Blythe said with a gentle smile.

Bertha was deeply grateful and thanked her over and over again.

Blythe told Edward about the situation later. “I want to find her a good position somewhere,” she said.

“That’s perfect! She can work at Jeffrey’s new estate.”

“Really? But you’ve never even met Bertha.”

Edward gave her his usual serene smile. “I trust your judgment. If you want to help her, then I feel safe leaving her in charge of my brother’s household.”

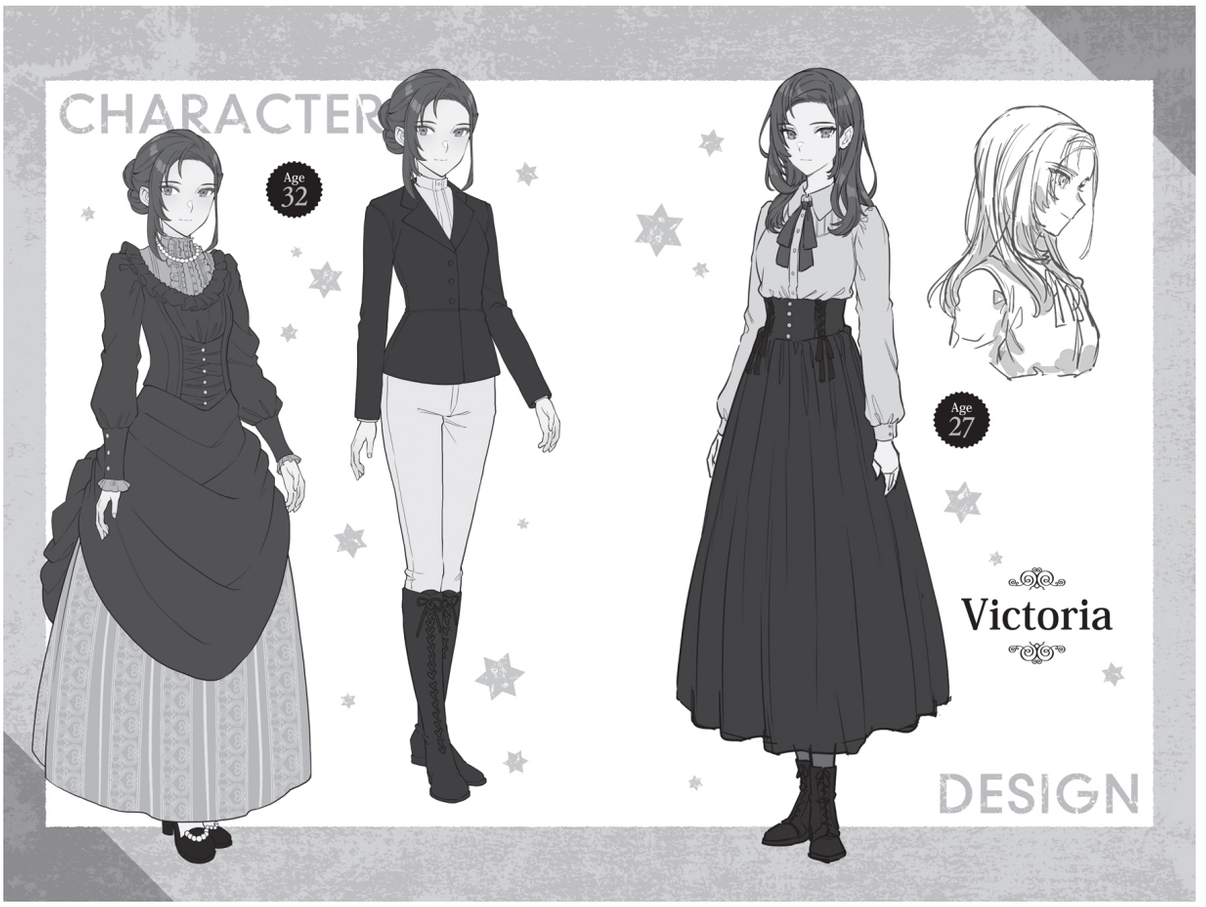
Blythe was both grateful and puzzled by the trust Edward placed in her.

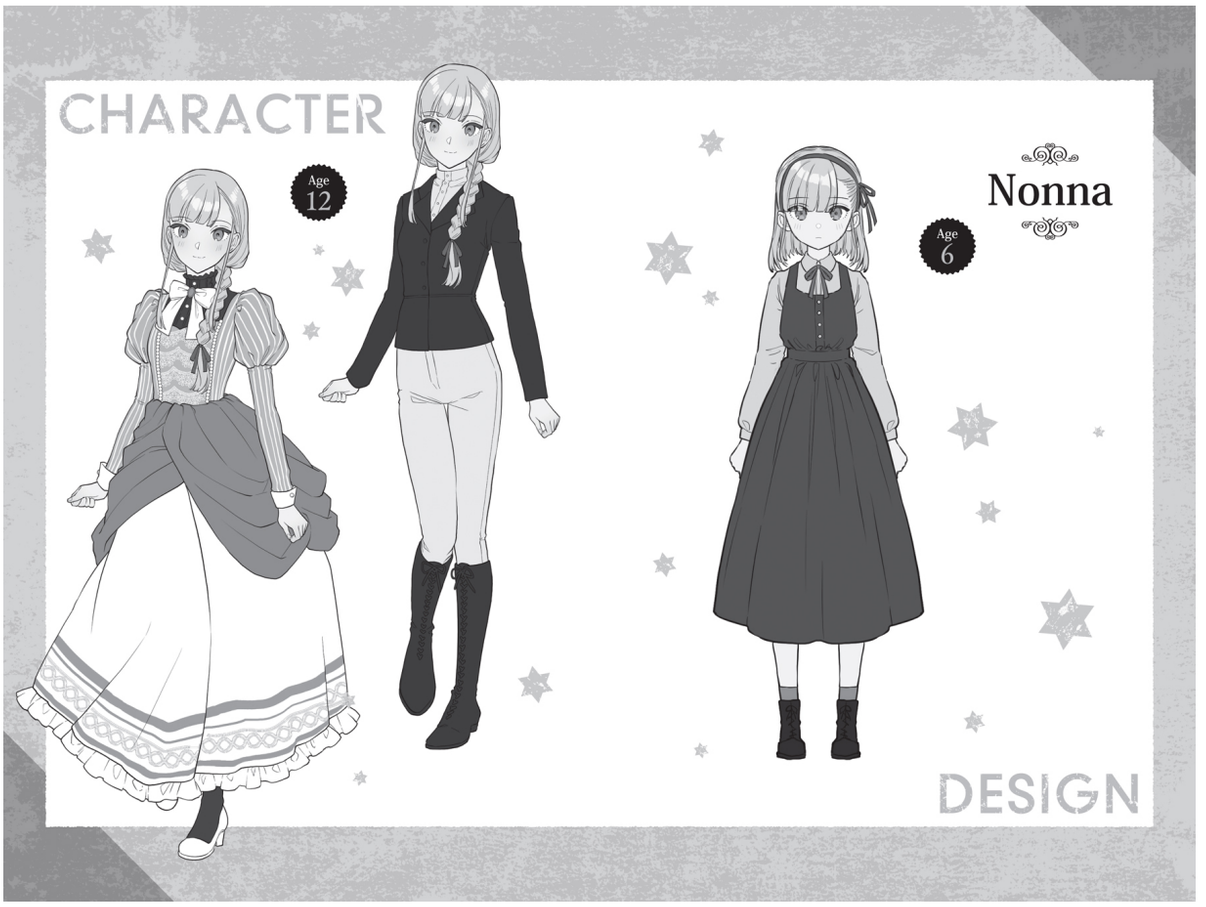
Although he was very busy, and they rarely had time to themselves, she was glad she had married him. He respected her as a person and treated her with the utmost care.

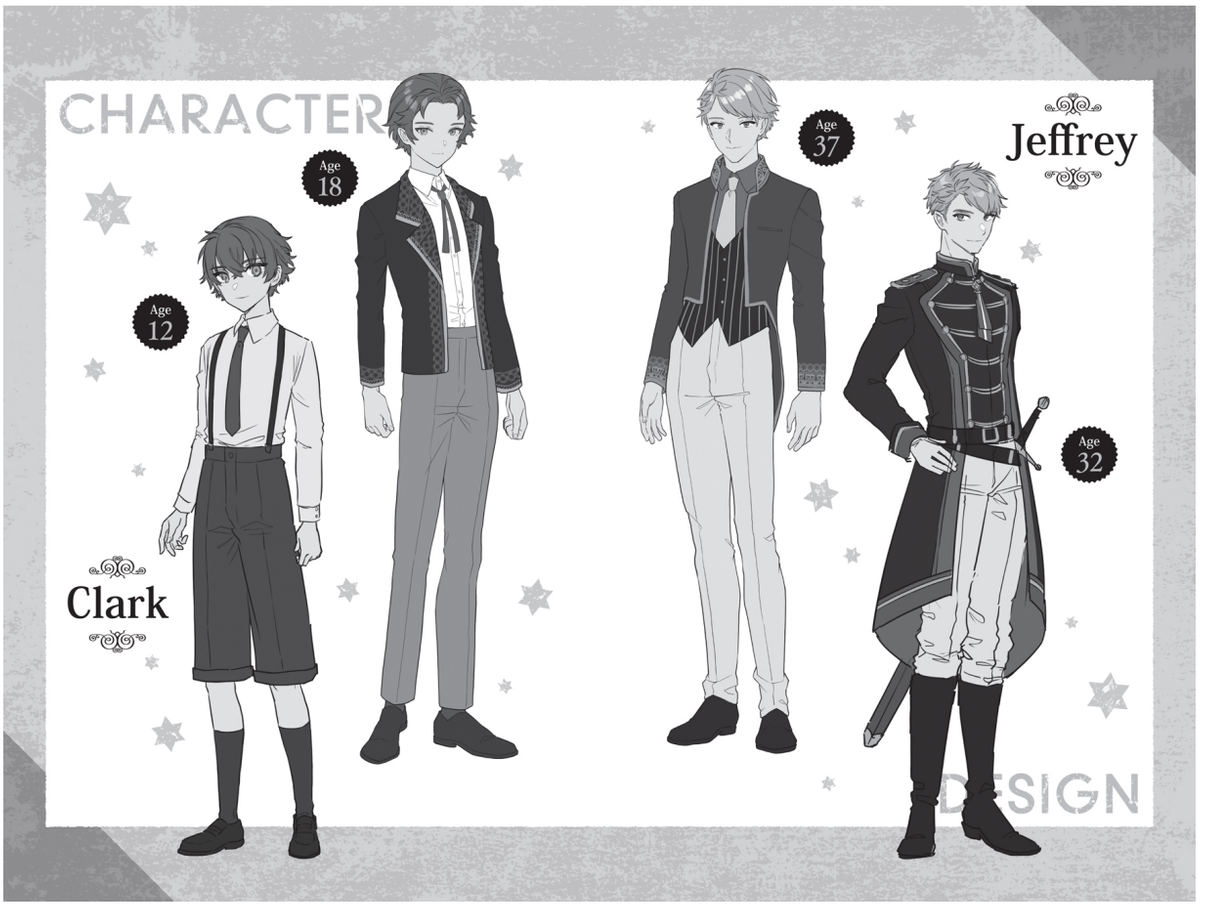
And that was how Bertha was hired as a maid for Victoria’s family.

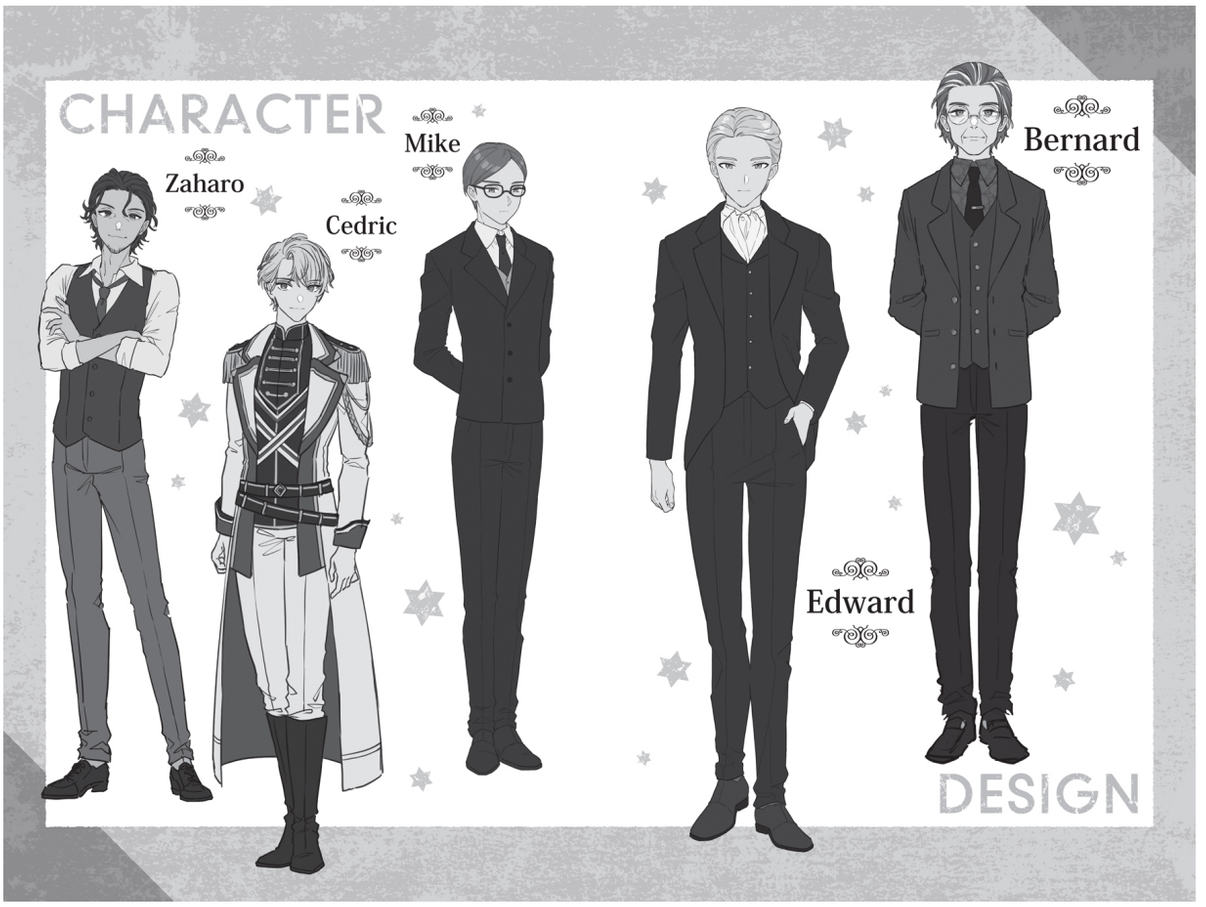
She worked diligently at her new job, but one day, intruders broke into the house, and she stumbled upon her new mistress’s unexpected secret…

But that’s a story for another time.

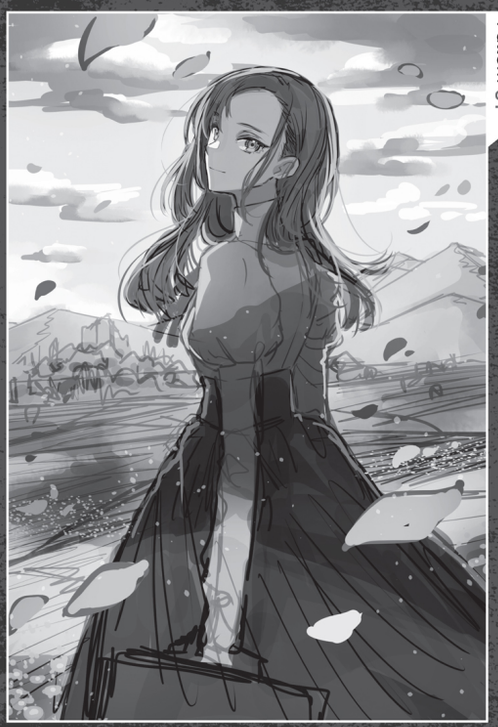

CHARACTER
Age
32
Age
27
Victoria
DESIGN


CHARACTER
Age
12
Nonna
Age
6
DESIGN

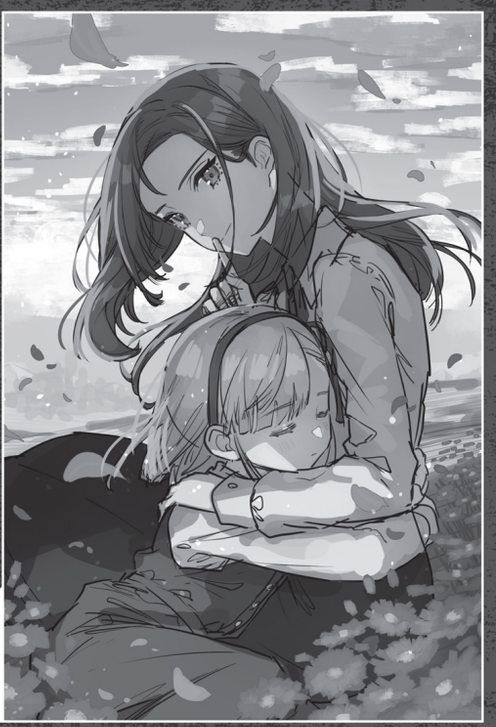

CHARACTER
Age 18
Age 12
Clark
Age 37
Jeffrey
Age 32
DESIGN


CHARACTER
Zaharo
Cedric
Mike
Edward
Bernard
DESIGN

Alternate Cover Illustrations for *Volume 1*



Pattern 01



Pattern 02

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Sign Up

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink