
Virgin Knight
I Became the Frontier Lord in a World Ruled by Women
WRITTEN BY
MITIZOU
ILLUSTRATED BY
MELON22
NOVEL
1

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WRITTEN BY Mitizou
ILLUSTRATED BY Melonnyinyi
KNIGHT OF POLIDORO
Faust
I Became the Frontier Lord
Virgin Knight
in a World Ruled by Women


QUEEN OF ANHALT KINGDOM
Liesenlotte
"It seems Sir Polidoro would like to say a few words. Don't hold back. You may speak your mind. I shall allow it."
SECOND-ELDEST PRINCESS OF ANHALT KINGDOM
Valiele
"Faust?"
CROWN PRINCESS OF ANHALT KINGDOM
Anastasia


"As usual, you've got a nice ass, Sir Polidoro."
DUKE ASTARTE
Georgine


"And what would that be?"
I've got a goal—a precious thing that's non-negotiable.

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Written by Mitizou
Illustrated by MELON22

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NOVEL 1

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Ghost Ship

Seven Seas Entertainment

Virgin Knight

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Chapter 0:
Commendation from Anhalt Kingdom

YOUR LATEST BATTLE WAS TRULY SPLENDID. I believe a word of praise is in order. This letter is more of a foreword, and I strongly recommend that you read it in its entirety.

Now then, surely you're aware of the phrase "Campaign of Villendorf" flying around in recent times. My cousin, Duke Astarte, and I sought to defend the line. I don't doubt that you may easily ascertain that you were called to join military service because you happened to be stationed at a nearby fort. You came to our aid.

It was a battle for the border between the savages of Villendorf and our Kingdom of Anhalt. It was the barbarians who chose to initiate the battle, and I'm rather certain that it was the minstrels who dubbed our campaign the aforementioned name.

It was truly a grisly war. The grim reaper's scythe claimed heads without exception, taking the lives of knights and lower-ranking soldiers alike. It's all the same to him, I'd imagine. While I've received the proper education any royal would, this was my first taste of true battle. I knew not how one should conduct oneself in war, and the trouble that I must have caused for others is not lost on me.

The House of Duke Astarte possesses a standing army, and they were promptly able to mobilize five hundred people, but that wasn't nearly enough. The war proved disadvantageous for us. Even now, a small army of five hundred fighting against over a thousand barbarians seems like an impossible feat. Had this been a defensive battle, where we needed to hole ourselves up in a stronghold to maintain the line, perhaps my thoughts would be different. Unfortunately, I was out on the field, and this was my first battle. There wasn't much I could do.

Looking back, I cannot understate how horrid the battle was. My aim was to avoid war, even if that meant redrawing the borders to benefit the savages. My mother, Queen Liesenlotte, even admitted that this was the best approach we had.

The issue, however, lies with Lord Reckenbell, the commander-in-chief lauded as the greatest hero of Villendorf. Not once did she try to negotiate with us. She gave us but a minuscule morsel to work with, refusing a peaceful compromise, much less a discussion regarding the border. What choice did I have?

As you may know, the brutal reality for nobles is that, once underestimated, one must carry that burden for life. We nobles shall lose all dignity. Fools and imbeciles who know nothing of society envision an impossibly idyllic scenario. They believe that if we concede, our foes will as well, thereby reaching a peaceful accord. But I shall be the first to tell you that no such logic exists in this world, no matter where you search. Reality is astonishingly cruel—should we concede an inch, it will simply be taken from us, and we shall come out of negotiations having lost a great deal while gaining nothing at all.

It matters not whether we win or lose. Truly, victory in that sense isn't a concern. It was Lord Reckenbell who stormed into our territory to throw the first punch, and I shan't be satisfied until I return the favor, squarely in her face.

With respect to your astute mind, I admit that by that point in the campaign, I had prepared for our army to lose, at the very least. My priorities lay elsewhere—my aim was to preserve the dignity of the Anhalt royal family. Indeed, I had initially planned to end the war as promptly as I could.

But you know the rest.

Thanks in no small part to your aid, Anhalt achieved victory in the Campaign of Villendorf. You've remained humble despite the praise showered upon you, but we cannot even begin negotiations

without your presence, for it was you who took the head of Lord Reckenbell.

I was busy giving orders to headquarters, located a good distance away from the battlefield. As a person who's supposed to stand above others, I can only state how embarrassing my actions are. I allowed Lord Reckenbell's infiltration tactics to penetrate our defenses, and our main army was under attack. As such, I regret to state that I was unable to view your glorious moments personally, with my own eyes.

You may be assured, however, that Duke Astarte tells me the tales of your splendor every time she takes a breath. I can recite her words by heart. She remembers vividly your battle cry that echoed throughout the field as you defeated enemy soldiers and rushed straight into your foe's main army.

"Sir Faust von Polidoro rushed solo into Villendorf's headquarters! He challenged Lord Reckenbell to a duel, and after an onerous battle involving blades crashing hundreds of times, Sir Faust eked out a victory!" Duke Astarte tells me.

Your decisions after the battle were equally impressive. You respected Lord Reckenbell enough to preserve her dignity, and upon taking her head, you gently picked it back up to return it to her barbarians. Your actions are simply elegant.

Had you lopped off her head and sullied her dignity, only to return to our army, the barbarians of Villendorf would've seethed. I'm convinced that they would've risked life and limb to give chase, and in doing so would have lost not only their lives but their spirit as knights as well.

Propelled by rage and wrath, they would've done their utmost to ensure that not a single chunk of your flesh remained in this world. They boast great strength, and had they rushed us with every ounce of their strength, our chances of victory would have been immediately snuffed out. The head of Lord Reckenbell is simply that important to them. It speaks to her influence in Villendorf as well.

The defeat of Lord Reckenbell will be met with praises and criticisms, and discussions regarding it will surely continue for years to come. But perhaps this warning is redundant, for I'm certain that you know that best of all, as the one who personally ended her life. Yet I hope for your lenience, as I would like to be a touch repetitive with this warning.

Your actions have brought me immense pride. It goes without saying that I know your deeds are anything but calculating—your conduct is a display of your character, the person that you are. However, not everyone views things so simply. You'd best be aware of that.

Now then, I suppose I shall get down to business. Know this: My letter comes from a place of goodwill, and nothing more. I only wish to warn you as a friend who has braved the conflict of war by my side.

However, as I've previously touched upon, I found it imperative to provide an explanation through this letter which has been enclosed with a note of commendation from my mother. You've defeated Lord Reckenbell and have magnificently guided our nation to victory. And yet, all you've asked for as a reward is a paltry sum of money.

Personally, I was eager to pay you a more handsome amount, but I could only provide you with money through the campaign funds. I couldn't give you much. My name of Anastasia will weep should I be thought of as a miser. Just the other day, I asked my mother Her Majesty to provide you with additional rewards. You fought in a losing battle and turned the tables to valiantly seize the victory for us. She has been informed that money isn't nearly sufficient to express our gratitude.

To make up for it, the letter of commendation from the royal family has thus been enclosed. This isn't a simple parchment that merely documents your feats in the Campaign of Villendorf—no, this is more akin to a contract between a master and a vassal. You may see this as a promissory note of sorts, acknowledging the debt of

the royal family. Should you or your descendants fall into a predicament with the royal family, I ask that you please make use of this commendation letter.

This shall be your compensation for your feats in Anhalt. Just once, you may do as you wish; you can insolently step upon the head of your master should you so desire.

P.S. You're my comrade in arms, but you also serve as the advisor to Valiele, my younger sister by blood. I suspect that you will serve as her assistant for her first battle as part of your military service this year. It's far less troublesome than the Campaign of Villendorf, but I trust that you shall do your work well, fitting for your title as a knight.

To: Sir Faust von Polidoro

From: Anastasia von Anhalt, first heir to the throne of Anhalt Kingdom, and your comrade in arms during the Campaign of Villendorf

Chapter 1:
Prologue

M*Y DICK HURTS,* I THOUGHT. I WASN'T IN the Middle Ages, but in an era eerily similar to it. I was in a world of miracles and magic. In fact, I was a product of a miracle; I was reincarnated from Earth and into this other world. But only one thought ran through me, Faust von Polidoro.

My dick hurts.

I couldn't take it anymore. I was in a metallic chastity belt, but I hadn't been forced to wear it by anyone. No, I wore this belt of my own volition. If not, I wouldn't be able to last. There was no chance that I'd make it.

"Faust?" Valiele asked curiously.

She sat next to me and shot me a dubious look. This girl, not even four and a half feet tall, was fourteen years of age, and in the midst of receiving training as a knight, which was imperative for nobles to undergo. However, she had less muscle and more fat on her—fitting for a girl her age, but unsuitable in a soldier. Perhaps she would have her use as a commander. That was my opinion as a war veteran, anyway.

Her red hair made gentle waves down her back, and she was unable to fully hide her youthful appearance. In short, I could only see her as a child who was in need of a guardian. Adorned in a lavish silk dress, her attire made her seem suitable as the princess of our kingdom, but to me, she looked like a child who was trying to do her utmost to look like an adult.

But I didn't really care about that. Valiele could do as she liked.

"It seems your advisor, Sir Polidoro, would like to say a few words," Queen Liesenlotte said. "Don't hold back. You may speak

your mind. I shall allow it."

Her Majesty was around five foot seven; the red locks that flowed down to her waist were a symbol of royalty. While the length of her hair resembled her daughter's, Princess Valiele didn't seem to take after her mother very much. The queen exuded dignity, and her cool-headed demeanor only accentuated her beauty. Her brazen attitude was fitting for her royal status.

But none of that did any favors for my groin—quite the opposite, actually. Why in the world was she naked underneath, cloaked only by a thin silk veil? She was still only thirty-two years old. Sure, women showing off some skin wasn't seen as shameless in this world, but for a healthy twenty-two-year-old man like myself, this was a troubling sight. I mean, why *wouldn't* I get hard when this was the view? My cock tried its hardest to burst out from my metallic chastity belt. Only one thought ran through my mind.

My dick hurts.

This world was crazy. That was all I could conclude. This was a world where the gender expectations of chastity (and other roles) were switched. Only one in ten babies born into this world were men. Hence, women stood at the helm, and men were left in the shadows—or rather, they were securely protected. In fact, many men were captured from battlefields so that they could be sold off as sex slaves or prostitutes. This was the world I was in.

What an absurd world I was reincarnated into, I thought.

"This is Princess Valiele's first battle," I replied. "And yet, only her corps and I shall be with her."

"As I explained earlier, we need not allocate much of our forces for mere bandits," Her Majesty said.

I was a deviant in this world—a person who would be sexually excited by seminude women. *If I was gonna be reincarnated at all, I wish my common sense would align with my new world's.* But it seemed like God wasn't willing to do that for me, and bemoaning my situation to a God I'd never met would have been in vain.

"Her Highness Crown Princess Anastasia fought against Villendorf, an enemy nation, for her first battle," I said. "She stopped one thousand barbarians that invaded our territory, silenced them into a sea of blood, and invaded their land instead."

My dick hurts. So, so much. I looked away from the practically naked queen and stared instead at Princess Anastasia, the elder daughter of Queen Liesenlotte and the older sister of Princess Valiele. Anastasia stared right back at me; she was scary. The whites of her eyes showed underneath her irises, and she seemed to have a smaller iris than most, which further accentuated her sclera. Her pupils looked almost reptilian and left the impression that they were vertically long. If one didn't know any better, she came off as nefarious.

Once, I wouldn't have been surprised if she consumed human meat in secret. Needless to say, she did no such thing, and if one got to know her better, she came off as a person who was fair and just. Every now and then, she would display sympathy and a depth of emotion that humanized her to me. It was truly a pity that her personality didn't shine through her intimidating exterior, and if she made a claim that she ate humans, no one would doubt her words. As I continued to lock eyes with her, I couldn't stop the fear from gripping my body; she looked as though she might hack me into pieces and swallow me whole.

I reluctantly averted my gaze back to the practically naked queen. She shook her body ever so slightly, those big tits bouncing along with her. *Sexy.*

"And yet, Her Highness Princess Valiele will face mere bandits for her first battle," I continued. "As Her Highness's advisor, I find this to be quite the difference in conflicts. I fear that some may compare her to Princess Anastasia, and Princess Valiele will become a laughingstock amongst the people."

My cheeks began to turn scarlet. I could no longer keep my cool. *My dick hurts.* The only way out of this situation was to win a war of words against the half-naked queen. I had to become

emotional in hopes of distracting myself from the pain in my lower half.

"It's a different situation, naturally," Her Majesty replied. "Defeating bandits is an important part of our duties."

"Why don't we invade Villendorf, our enemy nation?" I suggested.

"Enough of your jokes, Faust von Polidoro. Are you planning on starting another war against those barbarians?"

I banged my fist on the table. The deafening sound echoed throughout the room, silencing those who heard it. Queen Liesenlotte, Princess Anastasia, and even Princess Valiele became as quiet as a tomb.

"Do you believe that my power is lacking?" I inquired.

My face turned redder still as blood rushed to my head. It wasn't because my dick was crying in pain; it was because I was angry. That was my current excuse, anyway.

"I said no such thing, Sir Polidoro," the queen said quietly.

My display of anger had done the trick. Her Majesty spoke serenely to calm me down, and her voice resonated throughout the royal palace.

"Not once have I underestimated your power, Faust, the Knight of Wrath," she went on. "When Villendorf invaded us, you stepped up during the time of crisis and rushed to the aid of my Anastasia. You claimed the heads of over ten savage knights, and engaged in a duel against the knight captain, only to come out victorious. Indeed, I know very well not to underestimate you."

My dick hurts. I was tempted to cry out and jump up in pain, but I was not inept enough to lose control. Still, I was reaching my limit. *My dick hurts.*

"I ask that you regain your cool," Her Majesty said.

Want me to fuck your brains out? It's your *fault that my dick hurts. Why the hell are you only wearing a veil over your naked body? Are you a nymphomaniac?*

I kept it all bottled up inside me and instead said, "I understand."

I turned away from the queen, hoping to dull the pain that assaulted my groin. *I guess it's time for me to leave.*

"If you'll excuse me," I said. "I've said all that I need, and I find further discussion to be pointless. May I please leave the room?"

"Very well," the queen relented. "You may."

"Thank you."

My dick was spared. If I'd maintained an erection for much longer, I was convinced that my dick would've undergone necrosis. I'd managed to protect my family jewels. That was good enough. And so, I stepped out of the room of the royal palace.

***

I'd made a mistake. I, Liesenlotte, had committed an error.

"And yet, Her Highness Princess Valiele will face mere bandits for her first battle," the man before me said.

It felt like a waste to allocate Faust von Polidoro to such a trivial matter. In the Anhalt royal family, the second daughter Valiele was more of a backup. Faust von Polidoro was too good to stick by her, and a knight of his caliber could surely be used elsewhere. What use was there for him by the younger princess?

"It's a different situation, naturally," I replied. "Defeating bandits is an important part of our duties."

It was the best excuse that I could muster. It was reasonable to create a military force to rid us of bandits. It was reasonable. However…

"Why don't we invade Villendorf, our enemy nation?" Faust inquired.

"Enough of your jokes, Faust von Polidoro. Are you planning on starting another war against those barbarians?"

Surely this mission was humiliating for Faust, the Knight of Wrath. He had already battled the barbarians of Villendorf, taken the heads of over ten knights, and won a duel with the knight captain. His valor was fitting for a heroic tale, and he'd even taken the head of the enemy's captain. No doubt dispatching a man of his ability to defeat a few bandits was a humiliating task. However, he served as an advisor to Valiele, the second in line to the throne, and fighting against bandits was the perfect first battle for her.

Faust likely assumed that I thought of Valiele as a backup for Anastasia, my elder daughter. In other words, the implication was that I cared very little for the younger daughter. This was bad. Very, very bad. I sounded as though I underestimated Faust's abilities and his position as Valiele's advisor, while belittling my second daughter. His face turned scarlet with rage, but I wasn't sure if he was acting.

I had no way to determine his true thoughts—he was a male knight who was swept away by his emotions. His demeanor didn't change on the battlefield, and thus, he was given the sobriquet "the Knight of Wrath" by minstrels. He was the only child of the female lord who controlled the frontier.

Faust von Polidoro was a source of trouble for the royal family. However, he was competent. His feats were extraordinary and weren't to be treated lightly—this only made him more troublesome. I should've put him under Anastasia's care. Her military prowess had already been proven when she fought against the Villendorf savages, and her fate as my successor was practically set in stone.

To have Valiele's faction increase their power at this stage was a waste of national power. If only Sir Polidoro, our only male knight and lord, had quietly found a wife to settle down with. But I instead placed him as the advisor for the younger princess, in accordance

with her wishes. That was my folly. I wished that I had placed him under Anastasia, and all I could do now was regret having done something else.

"Do you believe that my power is lacking?" Faust asked.

Of course not. *I possess not a shred of doubt about your skills,* I thought. Hence, I was in this predicament. *I understand that I'm repeating myself here, but I should've placed him under Anastasia; I know that she wishes that as well.* I could sense her glaring at me with everything that she had. Her pupils—those eyes that exhibited malice that made it seem like she ate humans for lunch—bored holes through me. Sir Polidoro was too busy scowling at me, his face red with anger, to notice my daughter's gaze. *Oh, Faust. I find you detestable.*

If only he had died in the battle against Villendorf. *No. There's a part of me that finds his death to be a waste. You're a handsome man.* I couldn't deny that I was eager to make him a replacement for my late husband. Unfortunately, I knew that the moment I did, Anastasia would kill me with her own hands.

Oh, the pain! Oh, the emotions! Why did my daughter's taste in men take after her mother's? *Or perhaps Anastasia is seeking a father figure—a man with paternal instincts. Oh, Faust…*

"If you'll excuse me," he said. "I've said all that I need, and I find further discussion to be pointless. May I please leave the room?"

His words would spare me from this situation, and I decided to take his offer.

"Very well," I said. "You may leave."

Those words came from the bottom of my heart. Faust charmed me to such a degree that if he didn't leave, I feared that I would've gone crazy. His spirit so closely resembled my late husband's that every now and again, I felt a desperate yearning for him, but I had to forget that for now. Anastasia desired his love. I offered my approval for my daughter's greed.

"Valiele," I said.

"Yes, Mother?" she replied. She was my spare, the one who wasn't intended to inherit the throne.

"Should you fail your mission to defeat the bandits, I shall remove Faust as your advisor. He will be put under Anastasia's command. Do I make myself clear?"

Valiele opened her mouth in astonishment. "Pardon?"

I didn't mind. I just needed to take Faust from Valiele, my reserved child. As long as that wish was granted, I cared for nothing else. But of course, I didn't expect Faust to ever fail his mission. My words would regain some trust back from Anastasia; this seemed like the perfect solution to my woes.

"Mother, please!" Valiele cried. "Faust is *my* advisor!"

"Oh dear," Anastasia goaded. "I wouldn't have expected a princess such as yourself to cower in the face of a few bandits. I must say that I'm a touch surprised, Valiele."

I allowed my older daughter to tease her sister. In truth, the situation wouldn't change one bit. Any numbskull could take care of bandits with Faust by their side—failing this mission was nigh impossible. Faust would remain as Valiele's advisor and Anastasia's advisor would be the lord of a duchy. The status quo would remain.

Our kingdom would operate with no issues. If possible, I would've liked to welcome Faust as the replacement for my late husband, but the bureaucracy wouldn't allow for such a decision. Above all, neither Anastasia nor Valiele would accept it. That was just fine. This kingdom would resume its normal operations.

"Valiele, I ask only whether you can handle a few bandits," I said. The words slipped out of my mouth.

"I would like to decline to fight against *mere* bandits as my first battle, quite frankly," Valiele replied. "Do you truly believe that I cannot handle such a simple mission?"

“With Faust by your side, I find your failure to be an impossible feat. Victory is assured. But should you not go out and experience your first battle, the other nobles will certainly doubt your skills.”

She fell silent. The fact remained that there were some citizens out there, terrorized by these bandits and desperately in need of help. My young daughter had little choice as she pursed her lips with dismay.

“Mother, as my first battle, I shall go and rid us of these bandits,” she said.

“Very good,” I replied.

Finally, I had begun to find a solution to my problems. I breathed a sigh of relief while Anastasia loudly clicked her tongue with annoyance.

Chapter 2:
Advisor to the Younger Princess

MY FIRST MISTAKE WAS WHEN I BECAME THE advisor to Princess Valiele two years ago. My mind raced back to the past.

"You, become my advisor," Her Highness had said.

When my mother passed away, I had gone to the royal capital to introduce myself as the next lord of the frontier. I was granted an audience with Queen Liesenlotte, but I was forced to wait three whole months to meet her. I couldn't blame her since, as a frontier knight, I possessed little power. With only around three hundred citizens under my control, I lived in a land that was heavily contested by enemy nations. Anhalt Kingdom likely cared very little about me. I continued to wait with resignation as I struggled with the little funds that I managed to scrape together to spend my days in one of the cheaper inns of the royal capital. It was then that I bumped into Princess Valiele and her corps.

"You, become my advisor," she ordered.

"Huh?" I replied.

I scratched my head with confusion. Her Highness, Princess Valiele von Anhalt, had made her way to the outskirts of the city and stepped into the cheap inn with her corps to meet me. She was twelve at the time.

"What's with that attitude?" she demanded. "I said that I shall make you my advisor."

"Uh, well, you say that, but…" I trailed off.

I was twenty. My mother had kept her title until she passed away, and there was a bit of delay until I took over. My position made it difficult for me to decline the princess's request, but I wasn't going to bow my head all willy-nilly.

"Are there any benefits to taking that role?" I asked.

Princess Valiele fell silent. It may have been difficult for me to decline a royal's request, but that didn't mean that I *couldn't* do so if I wished. Every inch of the Polidoro fief belonged to me and no one else. Since I was now in a different world, we didn't have prince-electors like the ancient Romans, but we had a similar system where the monarchy hinged on elections. Queen Liesenlotte was a powerful fief lord who possessed voting rights for the empire's sovereign. The Polidoro fief on the frontier swore loyalty to her.

By loyally upholding my end of the bargain, my fief was assured of its safety. In exchange for the safety of my land, I agreed to conscription as a display of my loyalty. I had finished my military service for the year—my mission was to kill around twenty weak bandits. *What a waste,* was the thought that ran through my mind as I sliced off the heads of beauties using the magical greatsword that was passed down from my ancestors. *But that's not the point right now.*

"I shall allow you to meet my mother by the end of the week," Valiele offered.

"I'm very grateful for that, but that won't be nearly enough. There's one more issue that I must tell you," I said. I added that I didn't wield enough power before I posed my question. "Why do you want *me* to be your advisor? I'm but a humble knight and lord of the frontier with not even three hundred citizens to my name."

Her Highness didn't answer. She silently pointed to my greatsword that was propped up in the corner of the room.

"How many people have you killed with that sword of yours?" she asked.

"I don't know," I replied. "I stopped counting after I reached a hundred."

It had been five years since I entered the military in lieu of my sickly mother. I was tasked with trivial matters like killing a few bandits, but some of my foes were former knights who were

experienced in combat. Still, none of them stood a chance against me. I didn't mean to huff my own hype, but I was confident that my swordplay skills were among the best within the empire. In a duel, I'd only lose to a handful of people, probably. I could only use my best guess here because men like myself weren't allowed to participate in the Swordplay Competition that was hosted in the royal capital. This world, with its swapped gender roles, continued to vex me.

"I'm just making the first move to secure pawns that I deem competent," Valiele said. "I don't find that to be a problem."

"I'm honored to hear your praise, but as I've said, accepting this role won't benefit me at all," I replied.

"For your future military campaigns, why don't I provide you with some funds? It shall come straight out of my budget."

Money, huh? That's not a bad deal. To mobilize soldiers—that is, the residents of my lands—I needed money. The more citizens I mobilized, the less I could collect in taxes. The citizens would also have their hands full defeating bandits, leading to fewer workers in my fief; I had to provide those who went off to the campaign with some money as an incentive.

"And you'll be allowed to make some choices during your military service," Valiele went on. "I'll at least let you select your own battlefields."

"You're saying that I don't have to chase bandits around anymore," I said. "I can just keep an eye on enemy nations that have no intention to start a war, and that'll be that."

This wasn't a bad deal at all. Naturally, during times of emergency, I would likely be the knight sent to the front line as Her Highness's advisor. But frankly, I would probably be dispatched during emergencies anyway. That was fine by me. It wasn't like a frontier lord had much power to wield.

Hmm…this is lucrative. Truthfully speaking, I had zero interest in the royal palace and its family; as long as House Polidoro and its

fief were safe, that was all that mattered to me. What's more, Princess Valiele was the younger sister of Crown Princess Anastasia, renowned for her brilliance and intelligence. The younger royal had no means of competing against her older sister. I'd only met Princess Anastasia once before, but she truly seemed to be in a league of her own. She was a head above her peers. *She's still fourteen, isn't she?* She exuded an aura fitting for a royal and brought her powerful corps in tow as she strolled through the city.

She had never experienced war before, but her visage was reminiscent of a haggard war veteran, exhausted by the bloodshed. I could hardly believe that Her Highness was only fourteen. Clad in Maximilian armor and equipped with her trusty halberd, there was talk that she had already decapitated several criminals.

In stark contrast to their appearance, the women of this world conducted actions that were so separate from reality without batting an eye. *But she still hasn't had her first battle yet.*

Whoops, went on a tangent there. I focused back on Princess Valiele, who stood in front of me. She looked like a cheeky little twelve-year-old girl, but she was rather bright for her age. *Yeah, okay.* She didn't seem like the type to drag me into power struggles within the royal palace—she didn't possess the power to do so. And so, I gave her my response.

"Very well," I said. "I shall become your advisor, Princess Valiele."

"I'm glad to hear it. Now then…" Her Highness replied. She extended her hand toward me.

I went down on one knee and kissed the back of her hand. This was the beginning of my contract with the princess.

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"God, that was the worst deal I've ever taken," I said to myself.

Things went south starting from my first year with her. I stopped chasing bandits around and instead began a glaring contest with the enemy nation of Villendorf. I took a mere twenty citizens under my command to protect one of the forts by the border. That was all I was supposed to do. But that year, a war broke out.

We had kept peace with them for the past two decades, but Villendorf suddenly launched an attack on our land. Needless to say, I was forced to fight in the battle. Princess Anastasia led her corps and mobilized the troops of her advisor, Duke Astarte. They had a total force of 550 people against Villendorf's thousand as the fight began. I was sent to the front line under the command of Her Highness, where I desperately fought for my life. I didn't want to die a virgin.

Why did God send me to this crazy world? The ratio of men to women was a whopping one to nine, and I absolutely hated it. The vitriol that I felt was indescribable. It was then that I became hard. My metallic chastity belt suffocated my erection.

"My dick hurts."

My survival instincts kicked in. *I don't wanna die. I don't wanna die a virgin. I was a virgin back on Earth too. That was all I was. I don't wanna die a virgin here.* I unsheathed the magical greatsword that had been passed down by my ancestors and kicked the sides of my steed, Flugel.

"I, Faust von Polidoro, challenge those who wish to test their luck! Fight me if you dare!"

Killing the first person was easy. It seemed no one expected a man—a man who wasn't a prostitute—on a battlefield. Many froze in astonishment as they heard my voice, and I used that opportunity to behead the person nearest me. I expertly rode Flugel straight for the enemy knight captain, who was surrounded by dozens of knights.

I couldn't stop myself from voicing obscenities. "I'm erect!"

Amid the din and chaos of the war zone, I was still left with a predicament. *My dick hurts.* I killed the second knight and then a third as I shouted at the enemy.

"Knight captain of Villendorf, I challenge you to a duel!" I roared.

But my enemies declined my confrontation as a fourth knight hurled a spear at me. I used my greatsword to slice off the tip of the spear and slashed at the knight's torso. My magical greatsword could slice through chain mail like it was butter. *Ugh, my dick hurts.*

Despite my woes, five more knights chased after me. Did they determine that they could only beat me through numbers? Or did they want to restrain me and keep me as their sex slave? *Probably the latter.* I had no intention of becoming one. I welcomed harems with open arms, but to be sexually assaulted by unhygienic people who likely carried diseases of all kinds would probably end in a grisly death, and that wasn't how I wanted to go. I used my free hand to send a signal.

The crossbows were fired. I had my archers stand at the ready, and a volley of arrows struck the five knights dressed in chain mail. My fief possessed five expensive crossbows; the church nagged at me to stop using the weapons, but I didn't care. I had the right to use the tools at my disposal, and nothing was more important than the lives of my citizens. As my crotch cried out in pain, I arrived in front of the enemy knight captain, and I raised my greatsword in the air.

"Knight captain of Villendorf, I challenge you to a duel!" I bellowed.

"Male hero, I've got a name!" the knight captain yelled back. "My name is Reckenbell!"

My challenge was duly accepted. I was sure of it as I silently lowered my greatsword.

"Then let us begin our battle, Lady Reckenbell!" I shouted.

"Very well!" Reckenbell said. "But you must promise me this first!"

"And what would that be?"

She took a deep breath before she shouted at the top of her lungs. "Should I emerge victorious, you will be my second husband! What do you say?"

Villendorf had their unique values, fitting for their barbaric nature. Strong men were valuable in their land, unlike in Anhalt. In the kingdom I was in, the popular taste seemed to trend toward wimpy, almost creepy men. *Damn, I should've been born in Villendorf.*

"I accept that offer," I said. "Should you win, I shall be your husband, or whatever you wish for me to become!"

Maybe I should just lose. I can't imagine she would treat me all that poorly. Since she's not wearing a helmet, I can see her well. She's a bit older than me, but she's pretty. I can't see her body because of her armor, but I'm sure she's got a real rack under there.

"But I can't lose," I muttered under my breath.

My shoulders were heavy with various responsibilities. I may have been a man born into this world from Earth, but I was my mother's only child. As Sir Polidoro, the lord of the Polidoro fief, I was in charge of nearly three hundred residents. That may not have been much, but I wasn't going to let them wander in poverty because of my selfish actions. *You'll die here, Reckenbell.*

I raised my greatsword diagonally in front of me and headed straight for the knight captain. Needless to say, I emerged victorious from the duel—or else I wouldn't be here to tell the tale.

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"I screwed up," I said.

I never should've become Princess Valiele's advisor. I clearly misread that situation. As I walked out of the room where Queen

Liesenlotte and her daughters were and made my way through the courtyard, I pondered on the result of my actions. My future was clear as day—I would ultimately be sent out to handle a few bandits this year as part of my military service. I gazed at the well-trimmed garden as I breathed in the faint floral scent of the colorful petals. *I've gotta nut once.* The image of Queen Liesenlotte, dressed in only a thin veil, remained seared into my mind, and I decided to envision her body as I jacked off. My mind was filled only with the eagerness to return to my lodging so that I could relieve my little guy downstairs. It was then that I noticed some people drinking tea at an outdoor table. The servants weren't quite maids—perhaps they would be called page boys—and they possessed slender, delicate frames.

"Is that man Sir Polidoro?" one man asked. "He looks so muscular and hideous."

"He looks just like a savage," another insulted me. "Perhaps his predecessor, Lady Polidoro, was unable to birth a child and picked up an abandoned orphan from the streets of Villendorf."

Seems like my alone time has to wait. I was insulted, and by extension, my entire fief was as well. My mother, ancestors, citizens, and even my land had been disparaged by these puny worms. A loud sound rang through my head as though my temple had been clocked by a piece of metal. At once, I felt compelled to beat these idiots to the ground. I stepped out of the walkway and toward the garden as I headed to break the noses of these foolish, brainless men who repulsed me to no end.

Chapter 3:
Duke Astarte

MY MOTHER WAS AN ODDBALL, TO SAY THE least. In this world where gender roles were flipped, she taught a man like me to wield the sword and the spear. I grew up mastering martial arts. I didn't mind being taught how to run and control the fief when I was young; it was my duty to learn these important concepts. When I came of age, I was set to marry a noblewoman who would take on the title of "Lord Polidoro," and I would support my powerful wife.

What use was there for me to learn martial arts and other fighting methods? I was confused when, at fifteen, I learned that only a single male knight had emerged from the village because men didn't usually go out to battle. Ever since I was young, I began to recall memories of my past life and thought it was normal for the heir of the family to be taught some military skills. Not once did I assume that my mother was unusual.

Polidoro Fief had 30 men and 270 women. With such a clear difference in numbers, polygamy was natural, and prejudiced thoughts such as assuming that this world was filled with idiotic logic had never entered my mind yet.

"What did you bastards just say?" I growled. "You can laugh at me all you want, but you dared to mock my mother as well."

I stormed toward the table where the two page boys drank tea, and hot liquid spilled from their cups. They hadn't expected me to confront them. The tea fell onto their pants, which made it look like they'd pissed themselves as they frantically stood up to make excuses.

"I-I said no such thing!" one stammered.

Again, my mother was an oddball. A lung disease took my father when he was still young. She was greatly encouraged by

relatives, the fief's village chief, and nobles around her to take on a new husband, but she refused them all. In lieu of the daughter that she never gave birth to, she taught me martial arts and fighting tactics.

Thinking back, my mom was probably fighting desperately in her own way. She was frail herself. Did she think that it would be difficult to give birth a second time? Or did she love my late father very deeply? She was sickly and weak, yet she forced herself to get out of bed every day to teach me everything she knew about land management. My mother continued to do so for twenty years after my birth until she passed away at the young age of thirty-five due to illness. In her final years, her body became so slender and frail, like a small piece of thread, as she took her last breath. Now, I finally understood what she had tried to do.

"You dare to ridicule my mother?" I growled.

She tried to teach me everything she knew—it was the only thing she could leave behind for me. She knew that she wouldn't live long. And so, she used what little time she had to provide me with everything she could until I became an adult. When I was a kid, I viewed my mother as a bit strange and nothing more. She became bedridden when I turned fifteen, and I took on the role of military service in her stead, but I wasn't sure if this small gesture was enough to repay her. *No, it probably wasn't.* I'd only realized what her true intentions were when she had passed. I may have been a human who was reincarnated from Earth, but even so…

"You dare insult my mother, ancestors, citizens, and land? You dare scorn the entirety of the Polidoro fief?" I rumbled.

Ever since I turned five, she did her best to teach me the ways of the world—to ensure that I could survive in this place—even if it meant cutting her own lifespan short.

"I'll *kill* you both," I snarled.

My mother was an irreplaceable existence. She meant the world to me. I didn't mind if I was insulted; I knew that muscular

men were unpopular in this society. Unfortunately, I wasn't blessed with the kind of appearance that was favored in this nation, and I was accustomed to the condescending words that were hurled at me. But my mother? I would forgive no person who dared to mock her. I grabbed the collar of the nearer guy and lifted him into the air.

"I-I'm related to Duke Astarte, the advisor of the crown princess!" he gasped.

I see, I see. Which is why you thought you could talk shit about me, the advisor to the younger princess. Did he seriously assume that he had some kind of immunity just because he had someone to back him up? *What a delusional ass.*

"So what?" I asked. I shoved my index finger into his nostril.

"W-wait! I'll apologi—" the man shrieked.

But it was too late for that. I shoved my index finger deeper up his nose until the entirety of my finger was inside. He let out a loud wail, a howl that was unfitting for his petite frame.

"Huh, so you *can* let out a manly voice that isn't so frail and feeble," I remarked. My lips curled up to form a malicious grin.

I pushed my finger deep inside until it reached his throat before I slid my finger right out of his nose, completely soaked in his blood. He fell to the ground with a thud, red foam frothing at his lips. *One down, another to go.* I wiped off the blood on my index finger with my handkerchief and turned to the next guy.

"Don't run, all right?" I warned.

Not like he's got a chance in hell to escape. The man fell on his butt, shit and piss leaking from his pants. He must have been literally scared shitless.

"You guys are so helpless," I said.

I wasn't going to kill him, but he wouldn't walk away unscathed from this ordeal. Emotionally, I was sticking up only for my mother, but I also needed to preserve my dignity as a noble. I shouldered the honor of everyone in my land—that was my duty as

Lord Faust von Polidoro. I couldn't let nasty insults slide, even if that meant that I'd be up against a duke who had more land and manpower than I did.

"What's going on here?!" a familiar voice echoed.

I'd heard this tone hundreds of times on the battlefield; I turned around to greet the newcomer.

"Ah, Duke Astarte," I said. "How are you on this fine day?"

"Well, right now I feel awful," she replied.

Duke Astarte served as Princess Anastasia's advisor. She commanded enough land to house tens of thousands of citizens and even had a standing army of five hundred that could be mobilized at a moment's notice. Her personal force alone outnumbered the citizens in my fief. But that didn't matter to me.

"I shall be frank, Sir Polidoro," she said. "Have these men done anything to you? They are servants to my estate."

"They mocked my mother, ancestors, citizens, land, and, by extension, the entirety of the Polidoro fief," I replied. "They claimed that I was an abandoned orphan, picked up from the streets of Villendorf because my mother couldn't conceive me."

The duke's face twitched as she stepped out of the walkway and into the garden. She approached the man on the ground, soaked in his own urine.

"Are Sir Polidoro's claims true?" she asked.

"N-no, we're—" the man stammered.

"So, they *are* true."

At once, her face transformed into the visage of a demon. "Demon God Astarte" was the moniker she'd been granted from minstrels because of her terrifying appearance.

"You blithering fool!" she roared.

She used the tip of her boot to kick the man's nose. I was satisfied to hear a sickening crunch as his nose was broken, and I

gazed at the duke's profile. Despite her usual demonic exterior, she was a beautiful lady. And her rack—man, they were melons. Her long, red hair fluttered behind her, and she was stunning. I stared at her braids that covered her nape. A single glance at her didn't make me hard, but I couldn't stop the indecent thoughts that flooded into my mind. She had already punished her servant, and the strength had left my body.

"Please forgive me, Sir Polidoro," she said. "I ask that this punishment be a worthy token of apology to quell your anger."

"But of course, Your Grace. Are we not comrades in arms who fought alongside each other against those barbarians of Villendorf? Not to ignore our difference in ranks, of course."

"Ranks? You need not worry about any of that. We're comrades."

I was on good terms with the duke. Just a year ago, she'd mobilized her force of five hundred, and I joined her mission with my group of twenty residents. Combined with Princess Anastasia's corps, thirty strong, we went to fend off Villendorf's invasion with a small army of 550 people. It was all we could muster during that time of crisis, and we still managed to achieve victory. The duke had personally stood with me on the front line as well in order to encourage her soldiers who were fighting at a disadvantage. It came as no surprise that I got along with her. While we were advisors to different princesses, a possible cause for a bit of strife, Princess Anastasia's faction was overwhelmingly powerful, so I posed no threat. The problem with her lay elsewhere.

"As usual, you've got a nice ass, Sir Polidoro," Duke Astarte said.

Her comments about me could be called sexual harassment. Anyone could be called short when compared to me, but she was tall for a lady, all five foot seven of her beside me as she wrapped an arm around my shoulder. In this world, these simple actions were

undoubtedly classified as sexual harassment and definitely not befitting a noblewoman.

"Oh, you jest," I said. "I'm acutely aware that rugged, muscular men like me aren't favored."

"It's not an issue with me!" the duke said proudly. "I'm more of a butt person!"

She was a free spirit. Of course, her high rank likely allowed her to get away with most troublesome behavior.

"Oh, Sir Polidoro, when will you offer your body to me?" Duke Astarte asked. "We've already mixed our blood and sweat many a time in war."

Yeah, I wanna fondle your tits too. What I'd give to rub my dick between your knockers.

"Duke Astarte, as I've told you before, I shall offer my chastity only to my future wife," I said aloud.

I didn't want to just settle for having sex with one lady throughout my entire life. My dream was to build a harem by gathering all the beauties I could find in my fief from ages sixteen to thirty-two. However, this nation saw virginity as sacred. Should rumors spread that I was promiscuous, my reputation and my land's dignity would plummet. I likely wouldn't be able to find an excellent wife, either. And so, I had to remain chaste. In my heart, I wept tears of blood as I gazed into the duke's eyes.

"Then become my husband," she said.

"You're quite the jokester today," I replied. "Our titles and ranks differ far too much. I shall never be suitable for you, Your Grace. What's more, I must ensure that my land is in good hands."

"Can't you become my paramour? I can give birth to many of your children, and I shall see to it that one of your kin takes over your land."

This was a tempting offer, but I would be her paramour. *Which isn't really an issue, I guess…*

"And I'm still a virgin," she added. "I'm only eighteen. When I turn twenty, I must find myself a suitor to sire children, but I'd like that to be a man that I favor."

"That's not really any of my business," I replied.

I didn't care if she was a virgin or not, so long as she let me sleep with her. The only issue I had was the worry about STDs. *Crap.* Continuing this raunchy discussion with a breathtaking beauty like her would give me an erection. My dick would hurt again. *In fact, I'm already a little hard. If only there were brothels in this world.* As it was, I could only hire male prostitutes. This world had nothing to offer me. *Why am I being bullied so mercilessly? I just don't get it. What have I done to deserve this cruel fate?*

The duke peered into my eyes as she spoke. "I don't like beating around the bush, so I'll just tell you straight. Let me have sex with you. I'll pay whatever fee you want."

I fell silent. I wouldn't mind paying *her* to hop in bed with me. I wanted to jiggle her boobs to my heart's content. *But I can't. Our ranks are too different. Of course I wanna have sex. Why's my poor dick living such an unfulfilled life? I was a virgin on Earth, and I'm a virgin in this world too. This is just sad.* I cursed God.

Every Sunday, I attended church and sang the background vocals for the church choir while I denounced God with every breath I took. I wanted to round third base and make it home, sexually speaking. *Should I just accept Duke Astarte's proposal?* Perhaps it just wasn't meant to be, because as soon as they turned to that solution, my thoughts were cut short.

"Astarte! What are you doing?!" Princess Anastasia demanded.

I frantically tried to calm my boner as I wondered when I'd be able to make it back and relieve myself of this agony. All the while, I bowed toward the royal and displayed my respect, but a large sigh escaped from my lips.

Chapter 4:
Crown Princess Anastasia

MY FATHER WAS AS DAZZLING AS THE SUN. I loved nothing more than when he used his rugged hand to tousle my hair. I was the crown princess of Anhalt Kingdom, but my father hailed from House Astarte. At a glance, he came from an honorable lineage, and one would envision a man with a delicate frame who was short and beautiful. My father was by no means ugly, but he wasn't conventionally attractive in our kingdom. No ladies would fawn over him.

First, he was quite tall. He was also very muscular, perhaps because he spent much of his time engaged in farming within the vast estate of the duke's house. His hobby was gardening. I didn't judge; noblemen could pick up any hobby they desired, and it wasn't as though gardening was problematic in any way.

His hands were covered with blisters from swinging his hoe around, and they rubbed against my head when he petted me. My mother—Queen Liesenlotte—had dozens of potential candidates to choose from when she was ready to marry. She could've had several husbands if she so desired, but for some inexplicable reason, she chose to marry only my father. The house of the duke had submitted several potential candidates and thrown in my father as well, providing only his picture and a document that briefly listed his history. That was all. I couldn't understand what had gone through my mother's head. I was told that when she initially made this choice, there was quite an uproar among the Nobles of the Robe. But I didn't care about any of that. I had to concern myself with the scene that unfolded in front of my eyes. I stood in the walkway as I called out to Faust and Astarte, standing next to each other.

"Astarte," I inquired, "what have you been discussing with Sir Polidoro?"

"A paramour contract," she replied.

"A paramour contract?" I parroted.

Anger flashed across my face as Sir Polidoro silently averted his gaze from me. *Are you so afraid of my appearance?* I wondered. I closed my eyes in hopes of calming his fears. When I was a child, I'd loved to feel my father's hand against my head. He cared for me just as any father would. The Nobles of the Robe could fuss as much as they liked; I truly believed that my mother had made the right choice in husbands. He was an excellent man—a little short-tempered but exceedingly kind. He never mixed his public and private affairs.

The house of the duke used all the connections they had to file requests with my father, but he declined each and every one. Time and again, incompetent officials implored my father to ask my mother for assistance, and he personally lent a hand in dire situations. However, he declined all direct requests to my mother. He did his best to protect my mother and me—he was a family man. On sunny days, he wielded his hoe, and on rainy days, he read books. Every now and then, he would play with me and tousle my hair with that rugged hand of his, covered with blisters from all that manual labor. Oh, how I loved that hand.

He had a penchant for farming, and his hands smelled like the sun. No doubt my mother loved my father very dearly, just like I did. And my younger sister loved him too. I couldn't allow that. I wanted to monopolize my father's love; I truly felt like a maiden who had experienced her first romance. I shook my head to rid myself of these thoughts and snapped back to reality.

"The royal family has no intention of allowing the house of a duke to have relations with Sir Polidoro," I said.

"And may I ask why?" Astarte replied. She looked at me playfully—I was annoyed by that face of hers.

"How could the advisors of the two princesses become romantically involved? That's no laughing matter."

"It's all just appearances. Princess Valiele's faction is practically nonexistent."

"But appearances are important. And I question your sensitivity for saying such callous words in front of Sir Polidoro. You aren't a good fit for him."

I closed my mouth as my mind once again wandered to the past. My father had suddenly died one day. He was poisoned. My mother went wild with rage, and she used every possible method she had at her disposal to find the perpetrator of such a heinous crime. Her efforts were all in vain, and the criminal was never caught. My father wasn't one to earn another's ire. To this day, my mother continued her search for the culprit. Should this person be found, I was certain they would be subjected to her hellish fury. I had a sneaking suspicion that the criminal would never be found.

And just like that, all the love in my life was gone in a flash. My mother still loved me, of course, but she gazed at me as a public official would—as the eventual successor to the throne. She loved me for my talents, but I couldn't sense any familial love from her. Before I knew it, when I turned fourteen and scoured the city streets to display my authority, I had devolved into the crown princess and nothing more.

My mother, my corps, and even my advisor, Duke Astarte, all viewed me with the same gaze. They saw me as Crown Princess Anastasia, the future queen. Only my father had viewed me as his daughter. When the realization hit me at the age of fourteen, the sense of loss that I'd felt was indescribable. The sheer shock had caused me to blot it out of my memory, and to this day, I still couldn't recall my exact feelings. Not that I wanted to. I refused to dredge up memories of my past, where I curled up crying in bed, trembling in fear as though I were hiding from a specter.

Time passed, and the day of my first battle arrived when I was tasked with invading Villendorf. And it was then that I first met Faust. My mind rushed to the day I initially spoke with him.

"My name is Faust von Polidoro, and I serve as Princess Valiele's advisor. I'm most pleased to make your acquaintance."

He was burlier than my father, and his dark hair was trimmed short. His piercing blue eyes were clear and beautiful. He boasted a height of over two meters, and his muscles rippled as he swung around a greatsword with one hand. Both of his hands were covered in blisters as he trained daily with both the sword and the spear. He had a handsome face, but his large frame made him a hideous sight for the citizens of Anhalt.

A man like him became an advisor to Valiele, of all people, and appeared now in front of me with his head bowed to listen to my command. *Ah, Valiele. So you found a replacement for my father, did you? This isn't funny. Not one bit. I can't laugh at all. My*—our—*father can't be so easily replaced, can he? You know that, don't you, my sister?*

"I understand that we're in a state of emergency," Faust said. "I shall follow your command, Princess Anastasia. Your orders, please!"

I admit that I had lost my cool back then. It was foolish, but I decided to test him. "Go to the front line with Duke Astarte," I ordered.

I hoped that he'd die on the battlefield.

"Your wish is my command," Faust replied.

He stepped into the war zone and brought back victory for us. He engaged in a duel with Knight Captain Reckenbell, a central figure for the barbarians, and won. I hadn't smiled since my father passed, but for the first time in a few years, I managed a silent grin. *Could you perhaps replace my father, Faust?* For a split moment, that shred of hope filled my mind, and I began to communicate with Faust more and more as we fought against Villendorf.

"Why do you avert your gaze from me?" I inquired.

"I find myself unworthy to lock eyes with a lady of your caliber, Crown Princess Anastasia," Faust replied. He scratched his cheek and flashed a troubled expression.

"I believe it's rather rude to turn away from me."

I was aware that my gaze struck terror in people. Even my fiercely loyal corps had asked me to hold myself back. How exactly was I supposed to hold my gaze back? Still, I was dismayed to see that even a famous warrior like Faust was afraid of me.

"Ah, well, yes. You've got a point there," he said.

He gave an awkward smile and implied that he understood where I was coming from. He didn't dislike me, but he was just a touch afraid of my gaze; that was all. Faust was honest, just like my father. On the battlefield, he was known as the Knight of Wrath for running wildly toward the enemies and swinging his blade around as he wished. Outside the war zone, his true nature showed—he was more of a family man. He placed a hand over his head and bowed apologetically. The Knight of Wrath resembled my father when he was scolded by my mother for doing things on his own. *No, Faust isn't my father. He can't be. I mustn't delude myself into thinking so.* Yet I couldn't help but see my father in Faust.

Whenever I spotted the man, my eyes would chase after him. Faust was kind to the citizens of his land, and he treated his knightly compatriots as equals. He was so splendid that even Duke Astarte would publicly refer to the man as her comrade in arms. *Faust, can you replace my father?* His heart resembled my father's so much. Only then did I fully understand my feelings.

I hadn't experienced my first love with my father. The feelings that I held for Faust—my gaze would follow him, my mind was filled with him—became my first love. Once I understood my feelings, I began to yearn for him. I wanted desperately for the Knight of Wrath to be mine.

I once again snapped back to reality and turned to him. "Sir Polidoro."

"Yes, Your Highness?" he replied. He bent his knees and maintained his etiquette, but not once did he meet my gaze. I didn't mind.

"Why don't you quit being my sister's advisor?" I asked. "Work under me."

My heartfelt words tumbled out of my mouth so naturally. Become mine. That was all I wished.

"I decline," Faust answered.

He hesitated for a full three seconds before he replied with his decision. Did he feign hesitation on purpose to be thoughtful toward me?

"Why do you decline?" I questioned. "I don't mean to repeat Astarte's words, but Valiele's faction is nonexistent. You have no future there."

"Well…" Faust faltered for a moment, but he finally locked eyes with me. "I'm not a heartless man. I should like to remain Princess Valiele's advisor."

It was a perfect response, and my groin almost grew wet with adoration. *Ah, I knew you'd answer as such if you were like my father. Faust. Oh, Faust von Polidoro. You're most fitting to become my husband. I want no one else but you. I* must *have you.* I was determined to use whatever means I had to make him my husband, or at the very least, my paramour. I simply needed no other husband—he would be mine, and mine alone. I wouldn't let Astarte get in my way, much less Valiele. Even my mother atop the throne wouldn't prevent me from pursuing my desires. *I've made my decision. You'll be mine, and no one else's.*

"Very well," I relented. "You may do as you like, for now. Serve Valiele well, and help her defeat the bandits for her first battle."

"Your wish is my command," Faust replied.

He bent his knees and bowed. Our relationship was still distant, but I was determined to one day have him meet my gaze

while he whispered sweet words into my ears. *I shall make you my paramour, Faust. I find you so dear to me. So endlessly dear. You're my beloved.* I called for Astarte and left the scene with her in tow.

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As I bowed my head, my mind frantically raced to find an answer. *Why is Her Highness Anastasia glaring at me so?* I wondered. I didn't want to meet her gaze. Even Demon God Astarte didn't look half as terrifying as the princess. Her aura was odd and frightening.

Was it because she was the heir to the throne? The atmosphere she exuded was overwhelming. She was an incredibly attractive girl, but I just couldn't get past her reptilian eyes. She was a great master, in stark contrast to Princess Valiele, who possessed talent that was nothing out of the ordinary. All the while, the crown princess continued to speak.

"The royal family has no intention of allowing the house of a duke to have relations with Sir Polidoro," she said.

"And may I ask why?" Astarte taunted.

I mean, the answer's obvious.

"How could the advisors to the two princesses become romantically involved?" Princess Anastasia said. "It's no laughing matter."

"It's all just appearances," Astarte countered. "Princess Valiele's faction is practically nonexistent.

"But appearances are important. And I question your sensitivity for saying such callous words in front of Sir Polidoro. You aren't a good fit for him."

The princess has got a point there. Duke Astarte cared very little about outward appearances, when she very well should. She was too much of a free spirit. Above all, despite her full bosom, she preferred butts. I preferred titties. We'd never see eye to eye. It was

no wonder that she was despised by the Nobles of the Robe. *They're probably on Team Boobs, just like me.* Though the Nobles of the Robe abhorred the duke, the upper nobility desperately tried to weasel their way into the prestigious house and offered their sons as her potential marriage candidates. Who didn't want blood ties to the duke?

I couldn't blame them for being blinded by power. I expelled another sigh and waited for this whirlwind of an event to pass by me. It was then that I noticed Princess Anastasia deep in pensive thought. After a short while, she turned to me.

"Sir Polidoro," she said.

"Yes, Your Highness?" I replied. I placed one knee onto the ground in a display of utmost respect.

"Why don't you quit being my sister's advisor? Work under me."

Hell to the no, you moron. You're freaking terrifying. You're so scary that I don't even know how Duke Astarte can work so calmly with you. I knew that Her Highness was a good person, but she always looked like she ate a couple of humans for breakfast. My tongue turned stiff with fear as I frantically tried to form my words.

"I decline," I said.

"Why do you decline?" she questioned. "I don't mean to repeat Astarte's words, but Valiele's faction is nonexistent. You have no future there."

"Well…"

I trailed off, desperate to find an answer. *Come on, think! I'd get killed if I honestly said, "Because I'm not interested in the royal palace's power struggle, you peabrain." Come on, I've gotta find another reason! Ah, I know!*

"I'm not a heartless man. I should like to remain Princess Valiele's advisor," I said.

It was the perfect response. No notes. There was no way she could push her wishes onto me much further. Plus, I wasn't totally lying—I *did* feel a bit of loyalty toward Princess Valiele. I spoke with the utmost confidence and locked eyes with Princess Anastasia. She glared at me until her lips finally curled up to form a smile, like a snake having spotted its prey. *Why do you smile like that? You scared me so much that I just got a confused boner.* My survival instincts kicked in. As the tip of my penis brushed against my metallic chastity belt, I managed to crack an awkward smile at her. *If anyone has any other solution, I'd love to hear it.*

"Very well," Her Highness said. "You may do as you like, for now. Serve Valiele well, and help her defeat the bandits for her first battle."

"Your wish is my command," I replied.

Uh, "for now"? So, what does that mean? Am I screwed in the future? She had her eye on me; that much was clear. What did I do to deserve this? Was it because I achieved glory against Villendorf? Or was it because I expressed my qualms about Princess Valiele's first battle? Or was I in trouble for being so friendly with Duke Astarte? I truly didn't have a clue, and that only made me more terrified. *Can't you just leave me alone? Why won't you do that?*

As Princess Anastasia left with Duke Astarte, I kept my knees bent while I agonized over my situation.

Chapter 5:
Duke Astarte and Crown Princess Anastasia

EVER SINCE I WAS A YOUNG CHILD, I GREW UP compared to Anastasia. Our parents were related to each other, after all. When my mother taught me imperial studies, she stated that I was a slow learner. When my strategist mentor educated me, I was told that I was the best student she had ever taught. My sword and spear instructor assured me that I could become one of the top ten fighters within the royal capital. That was how I was raised.

I was third in line for the throne—the backup's backup, should calamity befall Anhalt Kingdom. My mother and father raised me while they compared me incessantly to Anastasia to serve as a reminder that I should never be inferior to the crown princess.

Princess Anastasia walked in front of me, her footsteps echoing throughout the area. I turned around and saw that Faust still kept his head bowed, and he displayed his show of utmost respect. I waved him farewell. Once we were a good distance away from him and had turned the corner of the walkway, I broke the silence.

"Anastasia," I started.

"What's wrong?" Her Highness replied.

"It's about what you just said." I recalled the recent conversation between Anastasia and Faust as I slowly continued to voice my thoughts. "You mentioned that the advisors to the two princesses being romantically involved was no laughing matter."

"I did. Am I wrong?"

Even though I felt her claims there were justified, I obviously didn't agree.

"But right after, you asked him to quit being Princess Valiele's advisor and to work under you," I said. "What does that mean?"

"Exactly as my words imply," she answered.

I'll beat the living daylights outta you, I thought. Anastasia was strong, but in a one-on-one duel, I would win. Anastasia had the upper hand when it came to strategizing, but I was better in a battle of brute strength. Minstrels of the city often sang as much, and my elder knight captains agreed. These were our respective roles during the battle against Villendorf as well. The Knight of Wrath, Faust, had been the commander on the front line. He was our strongest knight.

He no longer had that position. It felt like a waste of such a valuable man to see him become an advisor to the younger princess. His talents could be utilized elsewhere.

"I know that you like Faust," I said. "He looks just like my uncle, doesn't he?"

Anastasia froze dead in her tracks. We were relatives, and I had spent the past two years with her as her advisor. *Did you think I wouldn't notice your feelings?* My uncle had been brilliant like the sun. He was kind to me, his niece, and he had a fine ass. His butt was firm and toned thanks to the gardening he did as his hobby. He had probably triggered my sexual lust for the first time in my life.

"I remember very well that you pointed a lecherous gaze at my father," Anastasia replied. "In fact, I considered killing you several times."

"I'd just entered adolescence," I replied, "Give me a break."

I was unable to avert my gaze from my primal desires, and I was often scolded for it. Apparently, I lacked elegance and grace as a noblewoman—I was called a free spirit. Nobles of the Robe and other nobles of high rank frequently furrowed their brows at me with disdain. They nagged all day long about how my behavior was unbefitting of a duke. Quite frankly, it was annoying. Yet, laughably, they tried to push their sons upon me in hopes that I'd take one of them as my husband. I'd received countless documents that tried to promote each man, but I ignored them all. I'd already chosen the man who would give me his seed.

"I'll be frank," I said. "Give Faust to me. Your social standing prevents you from being with him, don't you think?"

"Huh?" Anastasia growled. At once, she changed her tone; when we were alone together, she never hid her emotions. "I'll kill ya."

"Think about Faust and the Polidoro fief. It's far too heavy of a burden for you to bear, considering your position."

"How so?"

I know you know. But I decided to explain anyway. "Even if you managed to skillfully make Faust your paramour, what would happen to his land? Do you think one of your daughters with him could take over his fief?"

I had no idea about the number of children she had planned with him, but my point still stood. Their children would be of noble birth—with relations to the royal family, no less—and it was absurd to have any of them manage a measly frontier that had less than three hundred citizens.

"I can just bring the Polidoro fief under the direct control of the Anhalt Kingdom," she said.

"You nitwit," I retorted. Anastasia was drunk with her own desires. She had forgotten the nature of lord knights. "Surely you're aware just how preciously Faust treats his land and the citizens who reside within it. All lord knights are the same. They wouldn't want even a single insect taken away from their space. Perhaps it's their work ethic. No matter the case, you can't possibly make him happy after stealing away his entire life."

She fell silent for several moments before she opened her mouth. "The same could be said for you. You're third in line for the throne. Your daughters would also have a potential claim to the crown."

"That may be so, but my kids won't be as close to the throne as yours. If I give birth to several children, I can select my youngest

one and raise them as the future successor to Faust's fief. That child won't have any sort of chance to become the next monarch and would instead become the next lord of House Polidoro. They'd surely be pleased to know that they can still manage some land."

Faust would surely shower even our youngest child with love, and so my voice was firm when I concluded, "I can make Faust happy."

Anastasia fell silent once more, in pensive thought. But of course…

"Screw that. He's mine," she replied.

I didn't expect a few choice words to deter the princess from claiming Faust for herself. What I wanted to convey was that there was a method to settle this matter.

"We can have a match if you like," I said.

I didn't unsheathe the dagger that I kept hidden underneath my clothes. We were both aware that I wasn't referring to a physical battle.

"Whoever receives Faust's love first will win," I said. "The outcome of this match will depend solely on him."

"Such nonsense. Once I receive the crown from my mother, I shall forcibly make him mine. He'll belong to me, and only me."

"And how many years will that plan of yours take? Do you really want him to the point where you're willing to crush his empyrean spirit, the very factor that makes him so similar to my uncle? The fief that had been passed down through his generations would be stripped from him, and he'd be nothing more than an emotionless puppet. If you truly believe that Faust will love you to the point where he's willing to toss his land away, I won't stop you. But I do have my doubts."

Anastasia went quiet and began to bite her fingernails. This was a bad habit of hers, known only by Queen Liesenlotte, Princess Valiele, and myself. When she struggled to think of a response to her

family, she would often show this flaw. Even if Faust still managed to love her after all that she'd done to him, it was extremely unlikely that he'd remain as he was. There would be some sort of shift in his mind. It seemed she had finally realized this harsh reality, right in front of my eyes.

I decided to give her an out. "Do you have any plans on sharing Faust?" I asked.

"What did you just say?" Anastasia replied.

"It's normal to engage in polygamy, and not at all unusual for even nobles to share the same husband."

I wanted a child with Faust. I was desperate to fondle his buttocks while I had sex with him. He might no longer be a virgin by the time it was my turn in bed with him, but that was fine; I wasn't asking for much, was I?

"He'll be *our* paramour, I take it?" Anastasia asked.

"Right," I replied with a smile. "He'll be with both of us."

Faust would be shared between Princess Anastasia and Duke Astarte.

"One of my children will take over the Polidoro fief," I said. "I'm sure Faust will be more willing to agree to our terms then."

The princess gritted her teeth and silently struggled over her decision in agony.

"I want Faust to be mine, and mine alone," she finally said.

She put on a tough front, but her eyes had clearly wavered with uncertainty. This was the very moment when a tiny crack ran through her stubborn heart.

"That's an impossible desire," I said. I smiled like a devil that whispered on her shoulder.

"You're saying that he—Faust—should open himself up to us, to both of us," Anastasia said.

Her words were as scatterbrained as she currently was, an obvious sign that a myriad of emotions ran through her mind. It seemed she wanted to know if a man as dazzling as Faust was willing to be with two women at once. The Knight of Wrath was embarrassed with his own rugged, muscular body, and there were no rumors whatsoever about him sleeping with women. He dedicated his life on the battlefield to his own land and citizens and thus maintained his virginity. The man was chaste, innocent, and painfully pure—he was modest and solemn almost to a fault. Should Anastasia and I strike a deal here, we'd pass Faust around.

"That's right," I said. "He'd be like a prostitute. We'd ask him to use his lower half for both of us."

I know you haven't said a word, but I can tell that your resolve is cracking, Anastasia. You've maintained your virginity, just like me, and refuse to lose it to any old page boy precisely because you want your first time—filled with pain and pleasure—to be with Faust, don't you? You want to enjoy losing your virginity to your heart's content by violating his body. That's nothing to be embarrassed about. Just because we have claims to the throne, it doesn't mean that our hearts are filled with purity. We're only human, and we've got sexual desires.

"You can have Faust's first time," I assured. "I'll have my own fun right after."

"I can…take his virginity?" she asked.

"Sure. He's been fiercely protecting it for the sake of his land."

We could use that against him. *Heh, I know what his weakness is.*

The man was a lord knight—to protect his ancestors, citizens, and land, he'd willingly stick his tongue between the legs of a woman he hated. And he would spread his legs as well.

"I don't want to defile Faust!" Anastasia cried.

"Don't you lie to me!" I replied. "I *know* that you want to humiliate and violate him!"

Our obscene conversation echoed throughout the walkway. Normally, I would be outraged to have Faust defiled by another woman, but I was willing to make an exception for Anastasia. She was my relative and the future queen; I didn't mind a bit of compromise. I knew that I could still have some fun in my own right. When I was all alone in bed, I would grow wet simply by imagining Anastasia being held by Faust. As the eldest daughter of the duke, I'd been taught a few tricks in the bedroom, but my instructors had never spoken of the ways to have fun all by myself.



"I can have an embarrassed Faust move his hips like a dog for me!" I said. "The mere thought drives me crazy!"

"Vulgar wench!" Anastasia shouted.

Her face was red, but not from anger. She felt shame—shame that her innermost desires were vocalized. *Come on, Anastasia. You want him to use his hips in bed, don't you? Imagine him unable to suppress his greed as he thrusts, all red-faced. Ah, he drives me crazy!*

"Simply imagining it is enticing, isn't it?" I asked. "If you agree to my suggestion, you'll get your hands on him in a flash. Don't worry, I'll be the one to convince Faust. How about it? This way, he won't hate you."

Anastasia opened and closed her mouth like a fish, unable to find her words. Her face was the brightest shade of scarlet.

"Fine," she said.

"What?" I replied. "I can't hear you. Speak louder, please."

"I said, 'fine'! Faust will be *our* paramour!"

The heir to the throne never ceased to impress me. Her decision-making skills were insanely quick, an indispensable talent when strategizing. I let out a cackle and patted Her Highness's shoulders.

"Now then, it's no fun to pry his legs open using our authority, is it?" I said. "Well, that'll be fun in its own right, but still."

"You're the worst. I've never seen a woman shittier than you."

It was rare to see her insult me so boorishly, but I was lost in my thoughts. For the past two years, I'd enjoyed the sight of a pure and serious Faust turning red every time I got into some raunchy discussions. But my time of playful teasing was over. I had to give birth to a child.

"I suppose we can commence with our plan when he returns from his military service with Princess Valiele," I said.

I wasn’t keen on psychologically tormenting him before battle. At the very least, I’d successfully convinced Anastasia, and that was good enough for now. I stretched out my back and thrust out my boobs, which were only a nuisance when we were at war.

Chapter 6:
Ingrid Company and the Chastity Belt

I WAS IN THE RESIDENTIAL AREA OF THE ROYAL capital in Anhalt Kingdom. When I left my land, I took twenty residents along with me as bodyguards and always kept them around. I spent much of my time in a cheap inn on the outskirts of the city. I wasn't particularly wealthy, and we didn't have any local specialties to offer, and so funds weren't exactly plentiful. Budgeting was a bit of an issue.

I had taken over the land two years ago, and I had the duty to report to the queen. I'd been forced to wait for three months because I was granted an audience with Her Majesty, and I wasn't eager to relive those days.

Including myself, I was responsible for the expenses of twenty-one people, and I'd struggled to stay within my allotted budget. Fortunately, things were different now. As I was the advisor to Princess Valiele, the royal family had prepared a spectacular lodging for me that could easily house more than twenty people. This was one of the perks of being an advisor, and I enjoyed the luxuries that came with the title. It was now where I stayed.

"Should be here soon…" I mumbled.

I sat in the lodging and awaited my guest—a merchant from Ingrid Company. The firm was an official purveyor of the Polidoro fief. To be honest, they were the only ones willing to make the journey to our tiny, faraway frontier, so we didn't have much choice. House Polidoro had known Ingrid Company since my mother's generation, and I trusted them to handle all items that came to and from my land. This included procuring any new items I might need, as well as polishing my greatsword—an item that had been passed down through the generations, its glory unsuitable for a frontier lord.

The company was even in charge of repairing the chain mail that was draped over my two-meter-tall body. They were also responsible for the most important and personal item of all.

One of the citizens of the land served as my squire. They knocked on the door and called for me. "Lord Faust, Ingrid Company has arrived."

"Have them enter," I ordered.

"Pardon me, Sir Polidoro, advisor to Princess Valiele," Ingrid said. The owner of the company teased me as she let herself in. Ever since I'd become Her Highness's advisor, she made sure to make mention of it.

"Stop taunting me, Ingrid," I replied. "I may be a royal advisor, but I'm just a small cog in the grand scheme of things—I don't even belong to a faction of any sort."

"Oh, how funny to hear you say that when you're staying in such an opulent lodging."

She glanced around the room cheerfully. I couldn't deny her claims. This place *was* lavish, enough for my manor to pale in comparison. In fact, I might even say that this lodging was far better than my home.

"I would love to use this opportunity to expand the reach of my company as well," Ingrid said.

"Neither Princess Valiele nor I have any connections that can help you," I replied. "Give it up."

Ingrid was a merchant through and through. She was astute when it came to making a profit, but she would have no luck with Princess Valiele. The younger royal was merely a backup for Princess Anastasia and thus had a much smaller budget. Princess Valiele had no extra money to throw at Ingrid, and the fact that royals had their own personal merchants didn't help either. The cunning merchant had no room to squeeze in, and I was certain that Ingrid herself was acutely aware of this.

"Don't you see?" Ingrid said, her eyes glittering with greed. "I firmly believe that *you* will be involved in greater things within this nation, Sir Polidoro."

I fell silent. *What exactly does she see in me?* I wondered. I couldn't understand. The Ingrid Company was by no means small; it didn't serve the royal family, but it held connections to various smiths and artisans. It boasted a vast trading network within the nation, and I was baffled as to why the company president seemed so fixated on me. *Well, whatever. No skin off my back.* My mind was filled with an issue that was of greater importance. It was a personal item, more vital to me than anything else in the world.

"Ingrid, could you draw closer?" I requested. "There's been something on my mind."

"Of course," she consented.

She approached me, and I lowered my voice to a hushed whisper. I didn't want my squire on guard outside to hear my words.

"It's about the chastity belt," I muttered. "Can it be improved somewhere? My dick hurts every time I get hard."

"This again?" Ingrid replied. Her face turned pink as she answered in a low whisper. "I've told you before. The item is custom-made to fit your, um, size. There really is no other adjustment to be made."

"When I was fifteen, you managed to sneak in a blacksmith… I know that they're hard to come by. That was psychological torture for me."

A chastity belt was rather self-explanatory—it was an adult toy. Back on Earth, and even in this crazy world that I was reincarnated to, a chastity belt held the same role. It was an item meant to preserve the wearer's chastity, but I used it for a different reason. I had to prevent erections—or to be more precise, the belt was used to hide my boners. When I was at the frontier to manage my land, I wore baggy pants, but I couldn't get away with such casual attire at the royal palace or on the battlefield.

"It hurts when I get erect. It hurts so much," I said.

"Why do you get so many erections in the first place?" Ingrid asked.

What was I supposed to say? I struggled to provide an answer, but after several moments of thought, I finally came up with an excuse.

"Whenever I feel heightened emotions, I get erect," I confessed. "It happens in any situation that I come across. Please keep this a secret."

It was embarrassing to say such a thing, but in this world, I would be considered a deviant if I got a boner from a woman's nude body. Worst case, people would assume that I had some sort of sick fetish.

"I suppose you're quite fitting for your nickname, Knight of Wrath," she said. Her face was red, and she likely didn't know what else to say.

But this chastity belt really hurts.

"Ingrid, I ask that you use your utmost confidence on this matter," I pleaded. "Don't tell anyone that I bought a chastity belt for myself. I'm fully aware that my appearance isn't attractive to most women, and yet here I am, purchasing a chastity belt as though I'm afraid that women will attack me. I wouldn't want to cause any needless misunderstandings and receive silly insults from nobles."

"I wouldn't dare leak a customer's private information, much less a noble's," she replied. "I'm terrified of the consequences. Please be at ease. I also had your chastity belt fashioned in utmost secrecy."

She's right. I should trust her here.

"In any case, it hurts when I get a boner," I complained.

"Then shall we create a larger belt for you, instead of one that perfectly frames your…unmentionables?"

"No, it'd be bad if people could clearly see that I'm wearing a belt underneath my formal attire."

If I were a married man, this wouldn't be an issue, for it was rather normal for a wife to control her husband's chastity. As stated, it was a problem for a *single* man to be wearing a chastity belt. I would be thought of as conceited for purchasing a belt for personal wear and earn the ire of nobles. Had I been born as a beautiful, rosy-cheeked man, I might have had an excuse for wearing a belt to preserve my chastity, but that, sadly, wasn't the case. A noble had to protect their dignity, and humiliation wasn't an option.

"Then you have no choice but to keep wearing your current belt, I'm afraid," Ingrid whispered.

"That so…?" I mumbled. I hung my head with resignation.

The view of a woman's body assaulted me wherever I looked; it wasn't a rare sight in this world. Everyone wore clothes to get about their daily lives, of course, but being nude wasn't an immodest concept. Still, nobles generally chose to wear veils over their naked bodies as Queen Liesenlotte had done yesterday at the royal palace. She was dressed in nothing more than a thin silk cloak. This world was built upon such absurdly idiotic logic—I mean, craziness. In any case, though Her Majesty was dressed in attire straight out of an illustration from an erotic novel, she meant no ill will. She simply wanted to show off her body, and there was nothing wrong with that. Only my dick was hurt in the process, and I'd gotten so unreasonably angry at her yesterday that I regretted my actions later. In short, there was no path to salvation for me.

"Sir Polidoro, advisor to Princess Valiele, I would suggest that you marry someone," Ingrid advised. "No one would question you wearing a chastity belt then."

"If it was that easy, I would've done so already," I countered.

I wasn't popular with the ladies. My body was rugged and muscular, much to the distaste of women. The fact that I was a puny frontier lord didn't exactly help my situation either. There were

several high-ranking nobles who lived in the royal capital and had several daughters who possibly couldn't succeed to head of house. But no one was keen on letting their children spend the rest of their lives on the frontier, called for only when conscripted.

No noble in the royal capital had to stoop that low to live the rest of their life in luxury. As Princess Valiele's advisor, I had asked her to set up a marriage meeting with another noble, but she looked incredibly displeased by the request. She claimed that no one would want to marry me and declined to offer her assistance. *A useless princess she is.*

"Can't you become Duke Astarte's paramour?" Ingrid suggested out of left field.

"What in the world are you on about?" I asked.

"Her Grace has publicly announced you to be her comrade in arms, ever since the Villendorf invasion. The minstrels have been singing about how she's trying to woo you."

"She's just joking around. Even if she *was* serious about it, she'll probably marry a Noble of the Robe who's fitting for her status, or some kind of powerful lord. The difference in our ranks is too great, and I don't want to become a paramour."

I held no animosity toward Astarte. Quite the opposite, really. She had big melons and was just my type, but I didn't want to become a paramour. It implied that she had a different husband elsewhere. Even if she were good on her word and allowed her youngest child to be in charge of the Polidoro fief, if that kid had no blood ties to me, all of my land might be stolen away. The fief was everything to me, and it could only be pried from my cold, dead hands. If it were stolen away, I'd never forgive myself for having dishonored my ancestors and mother.

"Sir Polidoro, I find that you might be misunderstanding your situation," Ingrid said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

The merchant hesitated for a moment as she deliberated on whether to speak, but she ultimately chose to shut her mouth and keep it that way.

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Ingrid left the expensive lodge. She stepped into her carriage as she muttered to herself, "Sir Polidoro misunderstands hugely. Should Duke Astarte make him her paramour, she has no intention of taking on a husband."

That's the information that I've gathered, anyway, she thought. The duke truly seemed to be in love with Polidoro, but the merchant hesitated to voice her thoughts. She couldn't guarantee how factual her source was, but another factor had stopped her from speaking.

"If word gets out that I let Her Grace's thoughts slip, I shudder to even consider the consequences," Ingrid mumbled. "Even if it ultimately works out in her favor, I couldn't possibly be the one to reveal her feelings."

Demon God Astarte was a capable soldier in her own right. She was a free spirit, but incredibly bad-tempered. Villendorf dubbed her "Astarte the Annihilator" because of her ruthless nature. She managed to not only chase away the army of a thousand troops from Villendorf, but even swiftly arrange the royal army in the north —the force had been delayed because they were busy keeping their northern enemies in check. The duke then launched a counter-invasion on the barbarians, her demonic side on full display as she stole everything from them like a merciless bandit. She killed all the women, crucified them, and then took all the surviving boys back to Anhalt as slaves.

Astarte left nary a blade of grass in the villages she pillaged. It was most unwise to be targeted by this duke, regardless of whether the reasons were negative or even positive. She was only kind to those she truly viewed as her allies. It wouldn't be a stretch to

assume that only Princess Anastasia and Sir Polidoro fit that criterion.

A cold shiver ran down Ingrid's back. She wondered if Princess Anastasia's advisor had already exercised her influence at the lodge where Sir Polidoro stayed. *She probably has.* Duke Astarte had a vast reach thanks to her large network, and Faust's expensive inn began to resemble a prison that the royal family utilized to trap the frontier lord within.

"Princess Anastasia," Ingrid murmured. Even the heir to the throne expressed interest in Sir Polidoro, or so one of the highly ranked Nobles of the Robe claimed. If these words proved factual… "Then this is an excellent business opportunity for me. I'd be the merchant of the future queen's paramour."

Why can't Sir Polidoro get married? There is an abundance of women, and his skills are praised highly by military households. Why isn't there a single rumor around him regarding women? Could Duke Astarte and Princess Anastasia, along with her faction, be making sure of that? Are they harassing Princess Valiele's advisor? The lower-ranking nobles assumed as much, but Ingrid and the higher echelons didn't agree.

Yet Ingrid was unable to utter a single word of her thoughts to the frontier lord. She prayed that she would escape Duke Astarte's notice and left the luxurious inn behind her.

Chapter 7:
Chief Squire Helga's Recollections

I WAS ONLY A CHILD BACK THEN, BUT I'D NEVER experienced such a grand celebration in the village. The joyful shouting that filled the air when Lord Faust was born was incomparable. The Polidoro fief had just shy of three hundred residents, and everyone knew each other in such a small village. Every resident visited the lord's manor to catch a glimpse of Lord Faust's newborn face. Naturally, I joined this procession, as a member of the family that had provided House Polidoro's chief squire for generations.

Lord Faust was a rather unusual baby—he didn't cry very much. Lady Marianne, Lord Faust's predecessor and mother, gave birth to a son as her first child. I recalled my mother drunkenly claiming that he would turn into a beautiful man that would allure all. We were by no means a wealthy village, but this special celebration called for extraordinary measures. The village chief happily opened our food reserves, and each and every one of us were fed well that day. Even us kids went to bed on full stomachs.

Our jubilation didn't last long. Soon after, Lady Marianne's husband passed away due to lung disease.

"Lady Marianne, every citizen of your land begs of you," my mother implored. She was the chief squire at the time and voiced our heartfelt concerns. "Please find another husband."

We were all aware of just how deeply Lady Marianne loved her late husband. But what choice did she have? Without an eldest daughter to take over the Polidoro fief, this village would cease to exist. I stood beside my mother, who bowed deeply and peered into Lady Marianne's face. To this day, I still hold a vivid memory of her look of agony as she struggled between her lingering love for her late husband and her duties as a noble and lord of the land.

Ever since, I could only say that Lady Marianne had gone a bit mad. Perhaps the agony of her decision had driven her insane. No matter the cause, she began teaching Lord Faust the ways of the spear and sword, despite his being a boy. People rushed to stop her, of course. The village chief, my mother, and the relatives of Lady Marianne's late husband advised against this education; they begged her to reconsider her actions. But my lord ignored it all and continued to teach Lord Faust combat techniques.

One by one, we gave up on our advice and told ourselves that our lord had turned crazy. We told Lady Marianne that her child would cry out that no other boy was forced to undergo such rigorous training. We warned her that he would scold his own mother and demand to cease this harsh regimen. Eventually we all gave up on our lord—she was a lost cause. Our only hope now was to have Lord Faust marry an excellent lady.

However, our warnings failed to ring true. Lord Faust was simple and honest, and he obediently followed his mother's teachings. He was not only taught how to manage and control the land, but trained to force his body past its physical limits. Nobles were expected to receive strict educations, but I still couldn't hide how impressed I was at his endurance. My family had served as chief squires for generations, and even I struggled with sword and spear training.

After rigorous training with a wooden sword, there were times when he took a real blade and wore armor to experience realistic combat. Not once did Lord Faust cry out in exhaustion as he diligently continued his training. Truly, he didn't cry very much at all.

"Apple…" I mumbled, before rejoining the present.

Lord Faust and Ingrid Company were engaged in a discussion within the meeting room. I stood tall in front of the door to ensure that no one else could approach them. All the while, my mind wandered to reminisce on my childhood days. *Apples.* After sword and spear training, apples were always served as dessert following a hearty lunch. Lord Faust had shared some of his with me. There was

only one apple, and he used his knife to slice it evenly in half. Surely he would've loved to devour the entire fruit by himself, but ever since he was a child, he was always kind to his citizens. I politely refused his offer, but he pushed half the apple toward me as he claimed that I must be hungry. Whenever I spotted my gentle master, the same question flashed across my mind.

Is it not tough for you? I didn't dare to utter such words to a nobleman like Lord Faust, but his childlike hands were covered in blisters from gripping his sword day in and day out. Time passed, and we both grew up. I became a fully fledged chief squire, and Lord Faust underwent a transformation of his own. He wasn't ugly by any stretch of the imagination; he was handsome, and as chief squire, I personally felt that he was noble and beautiful. However, the women of Anhalt likely wouldn't agree—he was far too tall for their taste. At the young age of fifteen, my master was already six feet tall. His hands were covered in the blisters that had formed when he wielded his weapons, and one could hardly believe that he was a noble.

Still, he was extremely kind to his citizens. It was rather unusual for a nobleman to have such little desire for wealth and extravagance—at most, he would receive a hair ornament or a ring or two from Lady Marianne when she returned from her military service. They were used for daily needs, or to host weddings for those in his fief. He also gave anything he had left to men who married into neighboring lands or to men who came to his fief. The men jumped with joy as they were showered with gifts, but I became sorrowful. It felt like Lord Faust was losing touch with his masculinity, and so I asked him about it once.

"Do you not want to keep any hair rings or trinkets?" I inquired.

"Hair ornaments won't suit tall men like me," Lord Faust replied. "And rings, well…"

He showed me his rugged, blister-covered fingers, and I immediately regretted asking. My master couldn't possibly wear any

old ring that could be bought in a market due to his large hands—they would need to be custom-made for him. Over time, I began to feel contempt for Lady Marianne. Did she not treasure her own son? This was no way to treat her beloved child.

It wasn't long before she fell ill; she had a frail body. At the young age of fifteen, Lord Faust decided to accept conscription in her stead. When he prepared to head out, he turned to ask me a peculiar question.

"Am I the only male knight?"

I didn't quite know how to respond. Men didn't go out to fight; this was common sense for me, but I had to answer somehow.

"The barbarians—ahem, I mean, Villendorf is rumored to have a few, but none exist in Anhalt Kingdom," I said.

I'd practically implied that he was a barbarian himself, and I feared that I'd humiliated him. I awaited his answer anxiously.

"I see. I guess that's how it is," he answered simply.

He looked oddly refreshed. At no point did he express rage at my words, or at Lady Marianne, who had raised him to become a knight.

"Can I ask one more thing?" he said. "If I were to excel in my role as knight…"

He wondered if his mother would be elated by the news. I was unable to answer my master's question simply because I couldn't understand it. Was he yearning for affection from his insane mother? Did he hope for common sense from a lady who had lost her mind? I simply couldn't tell.

And so, five years passed. I shared a single husband among my sisters, and Lord Faust turned into a young man over two meters tall. And Lady Marianne began to cough up blood where she lay in bed. Slowly but surely, the time to forever part ways with her drew near.

"I suppose I must bid her an eternal farewell," Lord Faust muttered. His voice quivered slightly as he opened the door to his mother's bedroom.

The room was deathly quiet. Lady Marianne took her final breath surrounded by the village chief; my mother, the retired chief squire; Lord Faust; and myself.

"Faust," Lady Marianne called.

He approached his mother's bedside and gently stroked her face. She had become so frail and slender that she could barely swallow a spoonful of soup.

"Faust, your hand," Lady Marianne whispered feebly.

He obediently stuck out his rugged hand that was covered in blisters, and his mother used her trembling hands to envelop his. Lady Marianne's final words were so soft and so quiet.

"I'm sorry, Faust."

She gripped his hands and spoke as though she wanted to atone for her sins. And at that very moment, there was a soft gasp, in a strained voice that sounded like a baby's—a tone that conveyed heartrending sorrow to anyone who heard it. My master wept. He sobbed loudly, unable to contain his voice or control his emotions.

"No. No, Mother. You've got it all wrong. All of it," Faust said. He managed to eke out words in between his sobs. He, in turn, sounded as though he were atoning for his own crimes as he gripped his mother's hands. "At no point did I feel any hardship. Not at all. Not once have I felt even an ounce of hatred toward you. It's just that I haven't been able to do anything at all. I've done so, *so* little for you. I haven't been able to repay you. I should've spoken to you more. I should've done so much more for you. I should've…"

Lord Faust trailed off. Tears streamed down his cheeks as he spoke. He was desperate to deny the cruel reality in front of him. "I haven't been able to do a single thing for you as your son. Your time

has come far too soon. I finally, *finally* understood your intentions, and as your son, I haven't been able to express my love for—"

"Lord Faust," my mother said.

She clutched Lord Faust and Lady Marianne's hands. *Is she trying to pry him away from her? No, she's gripping them tightly in hopes they'll never separate.*

"Lord Faust," my mother said once more.

She couldn't find it in herself to say the rest. Her lips trembled with grief, and she could only call out our master's name. Lady Marianne was already gone. My mother struggled with her words, and she wept as she called Lord Faust's name again and again. My lord didn't need it spelled out for him—he must've been more aware of his mother's passing than anyone else in this room. Still, he clutched his mother's hands and spoke to her corpse.

"Nothing… I've done nothing for you…" he sobbed.

He was in a fugue state as tears rolled down his cheeks. It was the first time in my life that I'd ever seen him cry. On that day, I learned that there was a form of love that was shared between a parent and child, and that some forms of love only surfaced during one's final moments.

As I was lost in my memories, I heard my master call out my name.

"Helga," he said. As Polidoro Fief's chief squire, I was his loyal retainer.

"Yes, Lord Faust?" I replied.

"Lady Ingrid will leave. Would you open the door?" he requested.

I quietly did so and bowed my head as I watched Lady Ingrid leave. A different squire would guide her to her carriage.

"Helga, can you come inside?" Lord Faust called.

"Yes, my lord," I said. I stepped into the meeting room and spotted him in his seat, deep in thought.

"What did Ingrid want to say?"

Is he wondering aloud to himself, or is he asking me? His voice echoed in the room as I stood there in confusion.

"Ah, um, why don't you have a seat?" my lord offered.

"Thank you," I said.

I did as I was told and took the chair directly in front of him. After he watched me sit, he grumbled aloud.

"When will I ever be able to marry?" he wondered.

"I assure you that one day, a lady who truly sees your splendor will appear," I replied.

These words came from the bottom of my heart. People these days had no taste. The Nobles of the Robe relentlessly mocked male knights, and the royal family sent Lord Faust and his citizens to the jaws of death on the battlefield. Duke Astarte abused her power to fondle my lord's buttocks. I was tired of all of them. To me, Lord Faust was the only noble with dignity.

"Lord Faust, let's make haste back to the Polidoro fief," I said. "Please, just find any wife who may suit you. I suppose you have no other choice."

"You learned to talk back, huh?" Lord Faust replied.

He chuckled as he remarked on how I used to tremble every time I spoke to a noble like him. I had only begun to voice my opinions more often because I felt that my advice would help him, even if it meant that I'd be beheaded for my insolence.

"Perhaps one of Princess Valiele's corps would be a match for you," I suggested.

"Well, they *are* conveniently close by," my lord agreed. "But I won't gain any connections to the royal family or the Nobles of the Robe. Princess Valiele's corps are all younger daughters of their

households who became knights in their own right. They hail from the houses of low-ranking nobles."

"Are these connections a necessity?" I asked frankly. "Must we be connected to the royal family or the Nobles of the Robe?"

"Nah." Lord Faust maintained his composure, and my bluntness proved effective. "Then I guess I'll find a decent beauty for myself as I head off to help Her Highness's first battle."

"I wish you luck."

I hoped that he would find a powerful wife who could take on the Polidoro name so that he would no longer need to go to the battlefield. A strong-minded woman would be perfect. As that wish filled my heart, I asked for permission to stand from my seat.

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I felt endless regret. I lamented inexhaustibly over my late mother. Her body had been frail from sickness, and yet she managed to carry out her military service every year and bring me back a souvenir from a different city each time. She forced her bedridden body to get up and taught me land management and governing while hammering swordplay and spear wielding into my body. She taught me everything she knew to make me into a lord knight.

Why did a foolish man like me not realize my mother's love until her final breaths? Was it due to my past life? *So what? Damn it,* I thought. The mere thought that my mother died with regrets about teaching her son, convinced that she had given me an abusive childhood, made me feel repulsed by myself. It made me want to drop dead. But I couldn't die just yet; I'd been given precious life by my mother. I had an obligation to protect the citizens, the land, and the name of Polidoro that she had left for me. And for that, I needed a wife.

"Her Highness's corps, huh?" I muttered. "I would've wanted ties with a military lady from a higher-ranking family—one who was more accepting of the frontier."

Helga had a point. I truly had no intention of getting involved with faction battles between royals, and I rued my decision to become Princess Valiele's advisor.

"And her corps are…"

I trailed off for a moment. I had no kinder way to describe them. *In short, they're…*

"Useless. Her corps are a graveyard for nobles since Queen Liesenlotte treats her second daughter as a backup."

I could only spout insults about them. I fell silent and was annoyed with myself—I was only able to seek a possible wife in this trash heap. *Can such a lady actually manage my land properly?* A cloud of doubt loomed over me as I quietly headed for my bedroom to rest.

Chapter 8:
Zabine, Captain of Princess Valiele's Corps

"PLEASE, I BEG OF YOU TO PROVIDE US WITH SOME money to visit a brothel, Princess Valiele," the captain of the corps said.

"You monkeys," Valiele spat. "No, it would be rude to the monkeys to refer to you as such. You should apologize to them for encouraging the comparison."

In the royal palace of Anhalt Kingdom, Princess Valiele insulted the captain of her corps from within the comfort of her personal living room. These knights were responsible for protecting Her Highness, and the princess had dared to mock the captain. The captain had implored the princess to provide some money so that the corps could visit a brothel.

"This is a necessary business expense!" the captain cried. "Princess Valiele, you must understand that this is absolutely vital, and we require the money!"

"What train of thought leads you to the delusion that visiting a brothel is a necessary business expense?!" Valiele yelled. "And you want it from my annual budget, no less! Pray tell me what reasoning I can present to the financial minister, you godforsaken ape!"

The corps never changed. When the princess had turned ten, she received a set of corps from her mother, Queen Liesenlotte. Ever since, she had been plagued with stomachaches. Her corps were humanoid mammals—primates—that were lower even than chimps. No doubt Faust would have said as much if he were present, but unfortunately for Valiele, he was nowhere to be seen. Or perhaps the captain had aimed for precisely the moment he was gone—she couldn't make such a silly request in the presence of a man. *Or maybe she would've. I mean, my corps are all just dumb animals,*

Valiele thought. The princess caught her breath as she shot the captain a look of exasperation.

"Go on, tell me!" Valiele shrieked. Her shrill voice filled the room. "What reasoning do you have? I haven't got all day!"

"Princess Valiele, I would like to apologize for my display of impertinence. I can only feel embarrassed by my incompetence, but…" Zabine, the captain of the corps, started.

Her household name was stripped from her, barely eighteen years old. To Valiele, this lady was a chimpanzee. Zabine's full chest was on proud display, and her glittering blonde locks flowed down her body. They were awfully long for a knight like her, and the loose strands hung in front of her impressive rack. She was a real beauty, enough to leave one captivated by her appearance. No one thought otherwise, and her exterior posed no problem.

Her issues lay in her loyalty. Her eyes glimmered with radiance, but Zabine wasn't loyal to the royal family. She expressed devotion to Princess Valiele, her boss, but the problem was that the captain cared very little about the rest of the royals. Her eyes emitted a deviant glow, and she devoted all her ardor and logic to violence—nothing else. She was akin to a berserker.

If she could freely do as she pleased under the command of Princess Valiele, then that was good enough. Zabine had no concerns about the world and its issues. A devout believer that violence ruled supreme, she was convinced that if her grip strength was powerful enough, she could squeeze the entire world as she saw fit.

Does an ape with her kind of logic even need a name? I doubt it. Annoyed that she had no power to strip Zabine of her title, Princess Valiele chose to quietly listen to the captain's words. For some inexplicable reason, Zabine had misunderstood Valiele's response as a chance for her wishes to be heard, and she spoke loudly with bright eyes.

"Your Highness!" Zabine yelled, "I have just realized that all fifteen of us, your entire corps, are virgins!"

"So what?!" Valiele shouted back.

The royal gritted her teeth as her stomach began to ache. How was any of this her problem? She truly couldn't have cared less.

Ugh, I envy my sister.

Princess Anastasia had received a set of corps of her own, most of them younger siblings from military households of the Nobles of the Robe as well. But she didn't receive anyone as brainless as Zabine and the rest of the knights who worked under Valiele—no, Anastasia's corps were all talented women with bright futures, the cream of the crop. When she became queen, her force would receive hereditary knighthoods and would each be allowed to build a house of their own.

The crown princess had a troop of thirty knights, but Valiele only had a measly fifteen. There was a clear divide between the two princesses, with the younger given worse treatment. *Not like I want more apes to take care of. But why did Mother give me a group of chimps? Do I evoke such deep hatred in her?* No one could blame Valiele for her train of thought.

"Your Highness, your first battle will be soon!" Zabine appealed.

"What does that have anything to do with your virginities, you peabrains?!" Valiele shouted back, her shoulders trembling with rage as she jumped out of her chair.

"How pitiful is it to stake our lives on your first battlefield as virgins? And where do these negative feelings lie? In our virginity! Then all we can do is throw it away! We knights have decided to go to a brothel and lose our virginities to some random men! We discussed it during yesterday's party in honor of your first battle, and now here I am, requesting funds!"

Valiele couldn't find it in her to refute the captain. She was too exhausted from yelling, and she sat back down. *Ugh. Damn it. They're all idiots. I knew that. I'm just my sister's backup, so I guess it's obvious that I'd only be given these genuine morons who've been cast aside by their households too.* Valiele gave a faint smile while self-deprecating thoughts filled her mind.

"I'm a virgin too," she said quietly.

"Oh, is that so?" Zabine replied. Her eyes grew wide and glittered like the starry sky. She shouted, "Then let's all go to a brothel together, Your Highness!"

"Like hell, you numbskull!"

Unable to hold back any longer, the princess stood back up from her seat and grabbed Zabine's collar. The royal shook the captain around by the neck.

"Go to a brothel on your own dime," Valiele said firmly. "Use your own money. Do I make myself clear?"

"W-we're your corps, Your Highness," Zabine replied. "All of us, myself included, are the lowest-ranking knights among the nobles. With our salaries, we must maintain a lifestyle befitting our status and make preparations for military campaigns. After all's said and done, we barely have enough money left to eat. We can't possibly afford a luxurious brothel that protects us from venereal diseases…"

"I'm well aware that you all don't have enough money to afford a good brothel. But you're all still knights, aren't you? Aren't you all nobles? I'm not telling you to seduce a page boy sent to the royal palace from some random land, but can't you woo a commoner boy or something?!"

Valiele felt like she was about to lose her voice. Her stomach pangs intensified, and she was now worried about her throat as well.

"We're knights—and nobles, no less!" Zabine declared. "As nobles, we mustn't stoop to involving ourselves with commoners!"



"Oh, but prostitutes are fine?!" Valiele refuted.

"It's their job, so rank doesn't matter there!"

Does she need to make such a distinction? I really don't think it matters.

Princess Valiele released Zabine from her grip and covered her face with her hands. The royal was tempted to wail like a child.

"All right, uh, okay. Then, um…" Valiele started.

What can I say? They're idiots, but they've got this troublesome pride as knights. These animals! She continued to insult her knights as she peeked through her fingers to gaze at a puzzled Zabine.

"Die on the battlefield as virgins," Valiele declared. These words came from the bottom of her heart. She wished for nothing more and hoped that they would perish.

"How can you be so heartless?!" Zabine cried in astonishment.

She looked as though she had never heard such cruelty in her life. *Jeez, really? I feel like I've said stuff in a similar vein in the four years you've been my personal guard. Just die already. Die on the battlefield. I'll just have Faust by my side. No one else matters.*

Valiele had made her decision. She had suffered from stomach pain for the past four years, and each stomachache was a horrible experience. She was convinced that Faust's chief squire, Helga, was far more competent than these foolish knights. *Did they really receive an education as knights? I'm starting to doubt it. Even if they did, did they forget their teachings? Yeah, probably.*

It was probably troublesome for her corps—they had tossed aside everything they'd learned thus far into the garbage can called "Princess Valiele's corps." *Listen, are we actually sure that the army didn't just round up a few monkeys from the mountains or something?* At this point, Valiele doubted that her knights were human, much less nobility, but she paused to consider that judgment.

"No, I'd imagine that chimps are much smarter," she muttered.

She trusted that primates were more intelligent than the knights she had under her. The royal would've much rather had fifteen apes crying and shouting in front of her than her useless knights. *Ugh, my stomach hurts.*

"Princess Valiele, please, I beg of you," Zabine beseeched. "Please don't abandon us. We were deserted by our parents and chased out of our houses only to become your corps. Please!"

The captain kowtowed and gripped the royal's ankles. Zabine and the rest of the corps hadn't bonded with Valiele out of loyalty to the royal family she came from. Both parties knew the feeling of being unwanted and unnecessary. They were cast aside by their families. So the younger princess couldn't abandon these chimps in knight's clothing, but even she had her limits.

Besides, aren't they exaggerating a bit? It's my first battle, sure, but we're just gonna fight a few bandits.

"You don't need to fear losing your life in my first battle," Valiele reassured her. "You'll be supported by my advisor, Faust, the very man who killed over a hundred bandits. He engaged in a duel against Knight Captain Reckenbell of the Villendorf savages and won. You'll be alongside the Knight of Wrath, rumored to be the strongest knight in our nation."

As long as Faust von Polidoro remained Valiele's advisor, the royal didn't even consider losing her life as a possibility. Queen Liesenlotte and Princess Anastasia likely shared the same thoughts.

"If you've got time to worry about dying, practice your swordplay skills!" Valiele ordered.

"Ah, yes! Sir Polidoro!" Zabine said. She clapped her hands together as though she had just recalled his existence.

Aw, crap. This chimp's thinking of something dumb, I just know it. And I should—I've been with her for four years.

“The fifteen of us can lose our virginity to him!” Zabine cried. “Princess Valiele, would you like to—”

But Zabine never got to finish her sentence. Valiele had quietly grabbed a nearby vase and smashed it over the captain’s head.

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“Huh? Captain Zabine is injured?” I asked. I scratched my head quizzically.

“It’s quite a serious injury,” Princess Valiele replied. “She got hit on the head.”

We were in the royal palace of Anhalt Kingdom, in Her Highness’s personal room.

“I would’ve liked to discuss a few plans for your first battle, but if she hit her head, I suppose it can’t be helped,” I said. “Will she be able to join in the fight?”

“I’ll make sure,” Princess Valiele replied. “But don’t expect her to be coherent right now. I think it’s best if we plan out my first battle between the two of us.”

“Very well.”

I bowed my head and sat in the chair that Helga had pulled out for me. My gaze was focused on the map of Anhalt that had been laid out on the table.

“Here’s the location,” Her Highness said. “It’s all a small village under our control. The population is around a hundred people. According to the report from the magistrate we dispatched, there are around thirty bandits.”

“If there are only thirty, I think my twenty citizens and your fifteen corps can handle it,” I said. “To be honest, I would’ve liked at least double the number of our enemies—so sixty allies—to ensure safety.”

"You may have been under my sister's orders, but you managed to fend off Villendorf, and they had twice your numbers in that battle, Faust. I think we'll be fine."

I scratched my head again as I recalled the grisly war. I'd been practically sent to my death, and had I not beat Knight Captain Reckenbell in that duel, our kingdom would've likely lost. Never again did I want to experience such a gruesome nightmare. I shook my head to snap back to the present and return to the matter at hand.

"There's no such thing as a certain victory," I said. "If possible, I'd like to call for a few more of my citizens from my land as backup."

"I've been told that the bandits are attacking itinerant entertainers and traveling merchants wandering about the area," Princess Valiele said. "I'm afraid we don't have much time to spare."

"In that case, time is certainly of the essence."

I abandoned the idea; clearly, I couldn't call for more help. Oftentimes things didn't go my way. Quite frankly, I was fairly confident that I could single-handedly take care of thirty bandits. I wasn't keen to divulge the truth behind my nickname; I was called the "Knight of Wrath" because my face turned red, which people presumed was due to my anger, but I was actually just gritting my teeth against the pain from my erection.

Generally, my duel opponents were insanely strong, and I forgot the pain from my crotch as I fought with everything I had. I had to channel my all into my matches so that I could stay alive. The sobriquet I'd gained was embarrassing, to say the least, but even I was aware that my combat prowess was extraordinary.

"We'll leave in three days' time," I said.

"Indeed," Her Highness agreed. "Provisions have already been prepared. If we walk along the route indicated on this map, water shouldn't be an issue either."

"My citizens are all experienced in combat, but we'll be traveling on foot," I said. "We may have some slight delays, but I hope for your lenience."

"It's embarrassing to admit, but my corps shall all be traveling on foot as well. We don't have any funds to purchase horses. Only you and I shall be on horseback."

Her face turned scarlet from shame, but I flashed her a wry smile. Princess Valiele's corps were all the lowest of the low in terms of rank, and the nobility on the bottom rungs of the ladder lived in relative poverty. It was nothing for her to be ashamed about; in fact, Princess Anastasia was the outlier, for every single member of her forces had a horse. And it wasn't all bad.

"It's been a while since I've met your corps, Your Highness," I said. "I'm quite looking forward to it."

I'd met the ladies once, two years ago. They were filled with childish vitality, but now they were eighteen and old enough to marry. My heart filled with hope—they were the precious few candidates that I could take for a bride.

"A-ah, right. Yes, of course," Princess Valiele said. For some inexplicable reason, she pressed against her stomach as though she was in pain. "I shall see to it that they remain prim and proper in front of you."

Chapter 9:
Resolve for the First Battle

"DAMN, NO LUCK!" CAPTAIN ZABINE SHOUTED, lamenting the unfortunate outcome of her request.

"Yeah, I expected as much," Vice-Captain Hannah replied. She frowned and scrunched her plain, freckled face.

Hannah patted her short, trimmed hair with her right hand, exasperated by the stupidity of the headache-inducing Zabine. Hannah sided with Princess Valiele; the royal's logic was sound, and her response made sense. Even *if* Princess Valiele decided to grant Zabine's wishes, no financial minister worth their salt would allow brothel expenses to be included in a royal's annual budget. There was no chance that such a foolish request would fly, but Hannah allowed her captain to do as she pleased because there was still a sliver of hope. The fifteen virgins of Princess Valiele's corps had come of age, and they clung to a pipe dream. Was it a crime to live with hope in one's heart?

"But in exchange, I was told good news," Zabine said. "Or rather, I remembered something. We've got Sir Polidoro!"

"Sir Polidoro?" Hannah repeated.

The man was the princess's advisor and had achieved the greatest feat a knight ever could during the Campaign of Villendorf. It was a battle where even Duke Astarte had thrown in the towel, but the Knight of Wrath had managed to single-handedly turn the tides of the war. Polidoro was the kingdom's only male knight.

"And what about him?" Hannah asked.

"Don't you get it?" Zabine replied. "Hello? Sir Polidoro? A sacred virgin? A lord knight?"

"Yeah…"

The vice-captain couldn't understand her captain's words. All fifteen of Princess Valiele's corps were seated at their favorite cheap saloon. They wanted to at least chug a pint before they went off to battle, and they'd scraped together some bronze coins to exchange for silver. They bought an entire barrel of liquor, and the fifteen ladies practically had the place to themselves. Hannah glanced at her comrades and saw that they all looked gloomy and dreary; she was acutely aware of the reason behind their dark expressions.

"He might be the strongest knight in Anhalt Kingdom!" Zabine continued.

"I know," Hannah replied.

The minstrels sang so much about the heroic tales of the male knight that she'd gotten tired of them. In the Campaign of Villendorf, young Duke Astarte had made one crucial mistake against her enemies. Her strategies were quashed, and the regions in the rear had collapsed for a moment. To be more specific, a scout from those savages had spotted Princess Anastasia's base, the source of Anhalt's strategies. Thirty elite soldiers had managed to sneak inside and attack the princess's base. The communication device—a magic crystal ball—had been temporarily interrupted. Clangs of cold steel and cries from the fallen soldiers echoed from the crystal ball.

For a moment, Duke Astarte thought that all was lost—that Princess Anastasia had been killed. The duke's moment of panic rippled through her troops and caused a shockwave throughout the Anhalt army. Morale plummeted, and confusion spread among the soldiers. The Villendorf forces had patiently waited for this moment and utilized the opening to send in twice as many soldiers as Duke Astarte had. The Anhalt army was completely surrounded, staring into the eyes of certain defeat.

Just then, Sir Polidoro emerged. He was the only one who completely understood the situation, and he brought his paltry force of twenty to shine a ray of hope through the pall of imminent death. He bored a hole in the enemy force of fifty knights and cut down the soldiers who barred his path. After taking the heads of nine knights,

he challenged Knight Captain Reckenbell to a duel and won. In a display of grace and generosity, he even returned the knight captain's head to the Villendorf barbarians on the spot.

"She was a powerful opponent. I shall never forget my duel with her," he had said.

His face exuded wrath, and his chain mail was soaked in blood; the enemy soldiers were petrified with fear, but he paid them no heed and returned to his allies. With their front-line commander gone, the savages froze in confusion, and the war was at an impasse.

Princess Anastasia used that time to fend off her enemies and regain communication with her troops, which raised the morale of Duke Astarte's army. Valiant Polidoro had stared into the face of death and turned the disadvantageous situation around. It was no wonder that songs of his bravery flooded the streets. The fact that he was a man was the cherry on top; it made him the perfect fodder for minstrels.

"But Sir Polidoro's two meters tall, isn't he? He's muscular and burly," one of the corps said. Her words implied that she wasn't fond of his appearance. Hannah found it unwise to speak ill of those in the same faction, but this sort of indecent conversation interested her very much.

"But Duke Astarte publicly announced that his ass is the best there ever was," another knight chimed in. She vocalized her passion for buttocks. "You just don't get it, do you? If you're gonna go for a guy, go for his ass. That's what really matters."

Surprising essentially nobody, Her Grace had claimed that she couldn't resist the urge and had actually fondled Sir Polidoro's butt once.

"Yeah, I groped his ass once. It was great! I'm crazy about fondling butts, and maybe I'll get another chance to get a piece of his ass in hell!" the duke had shouted. She spoke those words while surrounded by Sir Polidoro's citizens. Everyone had assumed that it

was a touch of absurd comedy that minstrels added to their songs, but in fact, these claims were all true. The duke had to pay compensation for her sexual harassment and managed to escape the hell that retribution would have made her life.

Hannah snapped back to the conversation that continued in front of her.

"Nah, a guy's worth is in his dick. As long as he's got one of those, I'm all good. I'd sleep with anything with a cock," another knight piped up. She was equally passionate about a man's schlong.

This conversation evolved—no, devolved into raunchy locker-room talk. These corps spoke only about sex whenever they opened their mouths, and any free moment they had was spent on training with the sword and spear. They were quite literally muscleheads—chimps that only knew how to fight. *No, that's probably rude to chimps,* Hannah thought.

However, Zabine cared very little about how the public viewed her. She wasn't proud or above it all; she was simply unabashedly shameless. Only Hannah felt ashamed of the corps' behavior.

"Stop it, you guys," the vice-captain said. "You mustn't include the lord knight in such debauched conversation when he belongs to our own faction."

Pain shot through her head. Having Zabine involved always brought a touch of craziness to the proceedings. Indeed, the problem was that even the composed Hannah felt occasionally compelled to join in on these discussions. As a member of Princess Valiele's tiny squad, she was quite fond of silly, meaningless talk.

"I'll say it again, ladies," Zabine said. "I'm talking about Sir Polidoro, a sacred virgin and a lord knight."

"So what?" Hannah asked. No longer could she bear to hold her question back.

They may have been the lowest-ranking Nobles of the Robe, but they were still nobles nonetheless. It was inappropriate to

discuss comrades in a raunchy manner, and Hannah meant to bring attention to that.

"If we marry Sir Polidoro, we can escape our life of poverty," Zabine declared.

Silence settled in the dive bar as all fifteen members of the corps snapped their mouths shut. Each of them jumped to her own conclusion and fantasized about her future. They were in the lowest ranks of nobility, but they could become lord knights and marry a chaste husband! It sounded like an unattainable dream to them—pure fantasy and nothing more.

"There are only fifteen of us. We're self-made knights of the lowest rank!" Zabine exclaimed. The captain loudly banged her fist on the table, spilling ale everywhere. "However! I can tell, ladies! We're all burning with lust! I know that we're all battle virgins who fantasize about being peerless warriors!"

Zabine didn't want to let any drops of ale go to waste and leaned to lick the spilled alcohol off the table. She managed to stop herself just in the nick of time and kept her pride as a noble. She also learned from her mistake and took a sip of her drink to prevent any more spills. After a loud gulp, the captain let out a large belch—the price to pay after chugging carbonated drinks. Hannah gazed at her captain with disgust, but Zabine only continued her spiel.

"Then we fifteen are henceforth enemies!" she declared. "We must fight against each other!"

Sir Polidoro could only take one woman to be his wife, and that naturally meant that the fifteen ladies would need to fight amongst themselves for the spot. The corps, excluding Hannah, all glared at each other and wished death on the women they'd considered "friends" mere moments ago.

"Listen, listen! There may be another option, ladies!" Zabine shouted. She tried to calm her comrades and offered a suggestion. "We can go to Sir Polidoro right now and beg him to allow us to lose

our virginities to him. If all goes well, we can at least experience sex before our first battle!"

"Yeah, I don't want that," one of the corps said.

This was the consensus among everyone save for Zabine. Despite her harsh words, Princess Valiele was benevolent and generous. But laying a hand on her advisor would be the nail in the ladies' coffins. They *knew* that the royal would take their heads.

This would be their first battle. It was an excellent opportunity to prove their worth to the princess and—if their delusions were to be entertained—their future husband, Sir Polidoro. The wisest choice for now was to feign innocence. None of the knights were sure if they could do it, and they had zero confidence in their acting, but they had little choice. Maybe the Polidoro lord preferred women who were more honest with their desires. More delusions filled the women's minds, and the fifteen members of the younger princess's corps decided to end their little soiree. Each had her own fantasy as they left the saloon behind.

"Are there only fools in this corps?" Hannah muttered sadly.

What else could the vice-captain say?

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I disliked my older sister very much. In stark contrast to her beautiful appearance, her piercing reptilian eyes always left me petrified. I didn't think that I was alone in this—even Faust seemed to avoid my sister when he could.

"Valiele," my older sister Anastasia called.

"Yes? What is it?" I replied, making sure not to meet her gaze.

For some reason, I'd been called into my sister's personal room and was quietly seated on her sofa. *She's not planning on killing me, is she?* I wondered. She would've done it ages ago if she wanted to. Still, I was unable to suppress the terror that filled my mind as I answered my sister's call.

"I shall teach you how to steel your resolve for your first battle," Anastasia said. "Heed my words well."

"I shall," I replied.

Resolve? I didn't expect my sister to display kindness to me. *It can't be, right?* Ever since I was a child, I'd trembled under my sister's gaze and hidden behind my father. In retrospect, my actions had probably only angered her more, but I only noticed it when my father died and our conversations ceased altogether.

"You cannot predict what'll occur on the battlefield," Anastasia said. "There are times when there are discrepancies between reality and the information that you received hours beforehand. You may think that your rear forces are protected a safe distance away, but elite soldiers can sneak in and attack you from behind. And…" My sister paused and closed her eyes as she recalled something before continuing, "The life of your beloved can be snuffed out in the blink of an eye. Death is but a normal occurrence during battle."

I had no words in response. *Did she lose someone she loved? I thought the only one who was near and dear to her was our father.*

"Valiele, do you take me for a wooden puppet or a stone statue?" Anastasia inquired. "I have people I love aside from our father, I'll have you know."

She read my mind like an open book. *And this is why I don't like speaking with you.*

"Um, have you ever lost a beloved during battle?" I asked gingerly.

"Indeed, during the Campaign of Villendorf," my sister replied. "Thirty elite soldiers raided our base, and among my thirty skilled corps, ten lost their lives. They were precious subordinates, and all swore their loyalty to me. Every single one of them had their use."

Would you call those "beloveds"? I couldn't grasp a hint of emotion from her words. *Were they truly so dear to you?* Questions filled my mind, but this was a precious moment—I got to hear the

experience of someone who had already finished her first battle. I had Faust by my side, but he would claim that he'd killed twenty out of the thirty bandits and paved a path ahead. These stories of excessive valiance were of no use to me. He'd described how he'd tortured a suspicious village chief who was likely connected with the bandits and forced the chief to speak. *Wait, that might be useful this time around, though it's information that I honestly* didn't *want to hear.* Faust was a diligent and simple guy, but he had his odd moments.

"I managed to replenish my lost forces in the two years since that campaign," Anastasia said. "I suppose that's good enough."

She was completely oblivious to my thoughts, and I still couldn't sense any sort of emotion from her tone. *Has she truly loved anyone other than our father?* I had no way of knowing the truth. It seemed she was currently interested in Faust, my advisor, but her motives seemed different from mine. Faust resembled our father. But did she truly yearn for a man similar to our late father? It couldn't be. I was convinced that she simply wanted our nation's strongest warrior, the Knight of Wrath, under her control in order to attain greater power.

"Valiele," she called. "Do you think that you can calmly assess your situation, even if your beloved dies in front of your eyes?"

Her piercing gaze was pointed right at me; I felt like I was in an interrogation. *Who is my beloved? The animals that comprise my corps? Faust von Polidoro?* I hadn't the faintest idea, and it was difficult to comprehend my sister's implications.

"My training to steel your resolve is over," Anastasia said.

"Huh?" I asked.

Done already? The entire conversation lasted only a few minutes, and I peered into my sister's face with astonishment. Her eyes were terrifying as usual.

"Valiele, leave," Anastasia ordered. "Return to your room."

I’d locked eyes with her—I couldn’t refuse. I simply nodded obediently.

“Very well,” I replied.

Chapter 10:
Ceremony for the First Battle

I TOOK A SIP OF MY TEA BEFORE I SPOKE TO MY daughter Anastasia.

"I heard that you taught *her* how to steel her resolve for her first battle," I said.

We were seated at a table in the royal palace's garden. My daughter sat in front of me, sipping her tea as I gazed into her snakelike eyes.

"Where did you hear that from, Mother?" Anastasia inquired.

"From Valiele herself," I answered. "I spoke with her the other day, just before she went off to her first battle, and she told me about her conversation with you."

I brought my lips close to my tea, sipped, and swallowed.

"Our conversation was overheard by some page boys, and the story has caused quite a bit of surprise among the Nobles of the Robe," I remarked. "They were astonished to hear that Crown Princess Anastasia showed her younger sister some sympathy."

"How rude," my daughter spat. She was as brazen as ever. "I've got emotions too. But frankly, I'm not quite sure myself why I decided to give her some advice. I don't like her very much."

"Oh my."

It was incredibly rare for Anastasia to divulge her thoughts and her feelings toward others. *Is she becoming a touch emotional?* I wondered.

"Ever since she was a child, she would cower in my presence and hide behind Father," Anastasia said. "And after he passed, she

began constantly trying to gauge my emotions; she always looks so frightened. I can't be clearer about my feelings. I dislike her."

My younger daughter, Valiele, was average in every sense of the word. Although my firstborn Anastasia collected every talent she could hone, Valiele had grown up to be thoroughly mediocre. From an objective standpoint, I knew that she couldn't even serve as the backup to the queen—I gave up on her when she was ten. Should the worst happen and Anastasia meet her untimely death, I'd planned for Duke Astarte, who was third in line for the crown, to take the throne. The duke was better suited to rule over Anhalt Kingdom.

However, Anastasia grew up to be strong and healthy. She was already sixteen, and it seemed my worries had been for naught.

"When she was a young child, she often used to snuggle into my bed at night," I said. "It really takes me back. She would fall asleep clinging onto my husband."

Because of Valiele's antics, the nighttime fun I'd had with my husband became less frequent. I resented my daughter just a bit for that, but I never would've had to if he hadn't been fatally poisoned. The culprit still hadn't been found. I clung onto hope and tried to continue the search, but investigations cost time and human resources. *Maybe it's time I admit defeat.* A melancholy sigh escaped from my lips before I turned back to my daughter.

"I can see that you truly dislike Valiele," I said.

"I don't want her to die, of course," Anastasia added. "She *is* my father's daughter, after all."

It seemed she had various thoughts fighting inside her head. Did she show benevolence out of respect for her father, who'd doted on Valiele? Or did Anastasia truly feel familial love toward her younger sister? I hadn't a clue. I wasn't ashamed of my ignorance of my daughter's thoughts either.

I was the elected Queen Liesenlotte of Anhalt Kingdom first, and a mother second. As a monarch, I had no need for emotions;

they proved more of a burden than anything else. Valiele was a mediocre child, but above all, she was compassionate to a fault. I felt no guilt in deeming her unsuitable as even a backup queen. A mistake in my judgment would constitute a betrayal of my subjects. It was imperative for a sovereign to be endlessly powerful and wiser than anyone else. *But no matter. I should change topics and discuss the future of our nation.*

"Those minstrels did well," I said. "I'm glad I had the Minstrel Guild sing about your mind as well as Astarte's muscles. A hierarchy has been created."

"Ah, so that was *your* doing," Anastasia remarked.

I had paid the Minstrel Guild to sing what I wanted. Anastasia was lauded as the backbone of the nation while Duke Astarte worked as the princess's right-hand woman. Each lady had their strong points, and they dazzled in their respective roles. I sowed this information into society.

Though the younger princess's faction was practically nonexistent in Anhalt, there instead used to be the faction of the duke. Her duchy had wanted her to claim the throne, and regional lords who were indebted to her personal army also supported her. Before the Campaign of Villendorf, the duke had her own faction, but it was now gone. Following the war, the duke's faction had been absorbed by Anastasia's; I couldn't deny that Duke Astarte's disinterest in the throne played a large part in this shift. *But even so, despite it all, if Valiele becomes queen…*

"Anastasia, hypothetically speaking, if Valiele became queen in your stead, do you think Astarte would follow your sister's orders?" I asked.

"Nope, not at all," Anastasia replied. "I'd imagine that Astarte would mention how the interests of the duchy and the nation don't align. She'd likely try to usurp the queen, although reluctantly. And Valiele won't stand a chance against Astarte."

I agree. As I heard Anastasia's words, which only reinforced my mindset, I was convinced that I'd made the right choice. Duke Astarte saw Valiele as beneath her. The duke despised mediocrity. On the other hand, she favored Faust von Polidoro very much, for he shimmered like a star with talent. I couldn't sense a shred of jealousy from her as she gazed upon him, and that train of thought baffled me. She had always taken a liking to Anastasia as well, ever since they were kids, though they were technically opponents fighting for the crown. In fact, it was Duke Astarte who volunteered to become Anastasia's advisor. Anyone would agree that the duke was a free spirit.

Apart from her rank and the constraints that came with it, she lived freely as she liked. I was a bit envious of that. There were times when I yearned to freely do as I pleased. *Faust von Polidoro.* Every now and then, my eyes would play tricks on me, and I would see him as the reincarnation of my late husband. That was my initial impression of Faust when Valiele brought him into the royal castle as her new advisor. He couldn't possibly be my husband reborn—the ages didn't add up. But I wanted him. I wanted Faust. I felt compelled to claim him for myself.

I drank the last drop of my now-cold tea as I thought about the Knight of Wrath, and it helped cool my head. I couldn't possibly claim him for myself. Anastasia clearly liked him very much—did she also spot a resemblance to my late husband in Faust? Or did she truly love the man for who he was? Once again, I had no means of knowing the truth.

"Anastasia," I said.

"Yes?" she replied. Her reptilian eyes met mine.

"When Valiele returns from her first battle, we should decide on the time for my abdication and your succession. It's very likely that you must marry a man the moment you become queen. Do you wish to be with Faust von Polidoro? He can't become your official husband."

"I know. I've given up on that endeavor. It seems that I may share him with Astarte in the future."

My daughter maintained her composure and continued to speak as though nothing was amiss.

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"Not a single send-off, huh," I muttered.

When Anastasia, my older sister, went off to battle, citizens of the royal capital flooded the streets to wish her and her corps the best of luck. Yet I wasn't shown the same favor. It was like I'd just snuck out of the palace—it was a quiet affair, and not a single person came to offer even a kind word or two. I was officially off to my first battle.

I wasn't doing anything grand like fighting the Villendorf savages. *I suppose no one feels compelled to wish me luck when I'm only going to fight a few bandits,* I thought. And the fifteen knights who formed my corps had also been forsaken by their households. It was no wonder that there wasn't any fanfare for my departure.

"You spoke with Queen Liesenlotte before you departed, didn't you?" Faust said. He sat beside me and offered words of consolation. "And I've heard that Princess Anastasia has taught you about steeling your resolve before battle."

I did have a conversation with my mother, but it was about daily affairs. I hadn't received a word of encouragement as I went off to my first battle. As for my sister, I honestly didn't know what to say. Our exchange was so short, and she abruptly ended it like she was tired of speaking with me. Still, I faked a smile at my advisor and buried my feelings; I didn't want to disappoint him.

"You're right," I said. And there was one more issue that caught my eye as I glared at my corps. "Zabine! How in the world are you guys slower than Sir Polidoro's citizens?!"

"This gear's too heavy!" she complained. "Chain mail especially. It weighs a ton!"

"Sir Polidoro's squires are also wearing chain mail, you dolt!"

I couldn't permit the captain of my corps to weasel out with her excuses. They were all incredibly slow. We were currently on an unscheduled break, and Zabine and the rest of my corps fell to the ground in exhaustion. *Aren't you guys all beefcakes? Where did your usual energy go? If you can't even match the stamina of real chimps, you literally have no redeeming features. Like, nothing. You'll have nothing at all.*

"Marching is all about experience," Chief Squire Helga said. She kindly gave us words of comfort. "I think it's only natural for Lady Zabine and the corps to be tired on their first march. I'm sure that they'll get used to it very soon."

I felt pathetic—utterly pathetic. My cheeks almost turned red with humiliation.

"Everyone struggles their first time," Faust added.

His words sounded hollow to my ears. A man who'd killed twenty soldiers in his first battle lacked any leg to stand on when he tried to comfort me. *Good grief…* But I was a touch tired too, and I was on horseback. I'd stepped away from the royal capital for the first time in my life, but I didn't expect to be so on edge. Anxiety flooded my mind—a bandit could jump out from the shrubs and attack us at any moment, or a wandering bear could pounce in hopes of an easy snack. Only the worst-case scenarios filled my head. I'd been a timid child since birth—so much so that I was never able to face my terrifying older sister.

I always hid behind my father and clutched the edges of his pants for comfort as I shielded myself from Anastasia's gaze. I loved my father very much. Those memories rushed back to me as I gazed at Faust's face.

"Princess Valiele?" he asked quizzically.

I ignored his query and continued to stare. The sight of him calmed me down. He reminded me of my father, and that gave me a sense of safety. I was reminded of those childhood days that I had lost forever—my childhood had ended the day my father was poisoned. *Yeah. Why* did *Father die? Why? He was killed by someone, but he was the type of person who was loved by all. A few Nobles of the Robe ridiculed him for his appearance, but beneath that snide veneer, they were all fond of him. So, why?*

My mother had gone a little crazy when she found out that her husband had been killed; she spared no expense or womanpower to find the culprit, but to no avail. If the queen had failed in her attempt, there was no chance that I could find the answer after all these years. It was truly unfortunate. If it was to avenge my father, I felt that even I could become the devil. Perhaps I could've broken out of my timid shell—this useless, frightened exterior that enclosed me ever since I was a child.

"Princess Valiele, is anything the matter?" Faust asked.

I suddenly rejoined reality. I'd already given up on my late father—there was no bringing him back anyway. My mother would likely soon throw in the towel and end her investigation to find his killer. Once she regained her composure, she would surely know to allocate resources where they mattered. It was clear to a mediocre person like me; no doubt it was painfully obvious to her as well.

"Nothing. Nothing at all, Faust," I replied.

Nothing ever went my way in life. Ever since I was born, I had been acutely aware of that. Indeed, I'd been reminded of it almost every day as the Nobles of the Robe derided my average self and claimed that Anastasia had been born with all possible talents. It was a fact that haunted me ever since I emerged from my mother's womb.

If I were to accomplish anything at all before my death, I wished to at least break out of my timid shell. *If my first battle goes*

well, will I become bolder? I closed my eyes and quietly rested before continuing my journey.

Chapter 11:
Failure in the First Battle?!

THEY'RE ALL IDIOTS, FAUST VON POLIDORO thought. He gazed at Princess Valiele's corps scornfully. Her Highness was treated as Anastasia's backup and thus received the soldiers who had nowhere else to go. Valiele's force was a graveyard for useless knights. Faust had set his expectations low, but he didn't expect them to go even lower than that.

"You know what I heard? That Villendorf men have big cocks!" the corps cried. "Huge cocks, hard as rocks, we can ride 'em like we're jocks!"

They cheered energetically and broke out into an indecent song. The fifteen corps members had no trace of the exhaustion that they'd showed on their first day on the mission. Now they sang playfully as they marched along.

They got used to marching in three days. Even I felt mentally exhausted during my first march as I left my comfort zone for the first time. My movement was sluggish. And yet, these boneheads adapted in a mere three days of marching.

Were they just slow to get started? Or had they lost some of their marbles? No matter the case, they adapted swiftly. During the Campaign of Villendorf, Faust had charged into a group of fifty knights; his citizens, the twenty seasoned fighters who he'd brought with him, all followed him without delay. There were no issues on that end. The problem was…

"Looks great, licks great, love to get a taste! One for you, one for me, even more, if we're lucky!" the corps sang.

Faust remained silent. He didn't mind songs and chants during marches. *But why the hell is it a song about dicks?*

"Zabine, stop singing at once…" Princess Valiele said. She seemed genuinely fatigued by the lyrics.

Captain Zabine stood at the front and whirled around to face the royal. "Princess Valiele, please forgive my impudence, but since ancient times, it's been our right to sing while marching!"

She spoke with such appalling confidence. *She's a moron,* Faust thought. *You guys aren't even regular soldiers. You may be the lowest ranks, but you guys are knights and still part of the nobility, aren't you?*

"You may be soldiers, but you're first and foremost knights," the princess said. She sounded extra cautious of my mood and added, "Plus, you should at least refrain from such talk in front of Faust."

The singing stopped in an instant. *Did you all* just *remember that I'm a guy or something?*

"Huh, but you don't seem embarrassed or anything," the royal remarked. She peered into her advisor's face. "I heard that you didn't take sexual harassment too kindly."

She's right. Society probably views me as a pure guy who turns red when Duke Astarte sexually harasses me. But actually, she's just too close to me. When she pushes her big titties against my body, I get hard and my dick presses against the chastity belt. The pain makes my face red is all, really. Faust had no reason to blush upon hearing the horrific song from Princess Valiele's corps.

The advisor decided to voice his honest thoughts. "I suppose it's sexual harassment, but I'm just at a loss for words because of how…unfortunate the lyrics are."

"I'm sorry. I really, truly am," the princess said.

She bowed her head to her advisor and paid no heed to their difference in ranks.

No, you're not at fault. It's the idiots who work under you. Faust sighed in response.

"Do forgive us, Sir Polidoro," Zabine said. "How about a different song? Perhaps one about heroism and valiance."

Faust stopped the captain. "No, I don't think we should do that right now. We're almost at our destination."

The village drew nearer and nearer with every step they took.

"Our enemies—the bandits—have apparently been wandering around the village," Faust said. He heightened his vigilance. "There have been reports of them attacking merchants and entertainers. It'd come as no surprise if they launched a sneak attack on us, and I suggest that we all be on high alert from here on out."

The group would reach the village in less than two hours, and Faust called for his chief squire. He ordered Helga and four other squires to prepare the crossbows; they had to be ready to attack at a moment's notice. Faust's five crossbows operated on pulleys and required one to pull the string back to operate. He had been able to claim all five from his military campaigns between the ages of fifteen and twenty.

These weapons were frightful to fight against, but extremely convenient to use. Should one land a perfect shot, they could kill a knight in one blow. The bows couldn't penetrate plate armor, but they could easily pierce through chain mail. Crossbows were the perfect ranged weapon, so long as the opponent didn't possess the extraordinary skill to parry an arrow with their blade or something similar. Princess Anastasia, Duke Astarte, and the late Captain Reckenbell were three such people who had such quick reflexes. And of course, Faust as well.

"Once the crossbows are prepared, we shall once again march toward the village," Faust declared.

The report stated that there were thirty bandits. This wasn't so different from the military campaigns that Faust had done for years. It would be a bit of a hassle to chase around the fleeing bandits, but the task itself was easy—he simply needed to kill them all. *I'll fire the bows to knock them down a peg and then slaughter them. I*

probably should let Princess Valiele and her corps take all the glory since it's their first battle. That's a bit troublesome, but whatever. Judging from their march, I can tell that they've all got the skills. I'm sure they can rack up some kills against mere bandits. Her Highness can take the head of one of the bandits that we restrain. It shouldn't be too hard.

Admittedly, Faust had been careless because he expected it to be a simple mission. When the crossbows were prepared, Princess Valiele and her troops commenced their march once more. Helga used magic bifocals—functionally binoculars—that Faust had borrowed from the royal family for Valiele's first battle. Every now and then, she reported what she saw to her master.

"The village is in ruins," she observed. "I can also see some corpses scattered across the land."

Faust clicked his tongue in annoyance. The bandits may have been rowdy, but there were only thirty of them. How did they secure a victory over the hundred villagers under the command of a magistrate who'd been dispatched by the kingdom? The advisor racked his brain. *In any case, we should hurry.* He made sure to be alert as he relayed Helga's report to all the troops and called for extra vigilance.

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Within the small village was a modest residence for the magistrate. Princess Valiele couldn't help but raise her voice as she stood inside the room.

"You're telling me that there are over a hundred bandits?! And they aren't even technically bandits?!" she yelled. Desperation filled her tone. "That's completely different from the report that you've given!"

"I'm truly, truly sorry," the magistrate said. The official had already been told about the royal's identity and could only bow her

head in apology while maintaining etiquette. The magistrate had sustained a grave injury on her arm.

Why's she alive, anyway? I wondered.

"Are your words true?" I asked. "Was the village attacked, leaving many dead? Were the men and boys of the village all kidnapped? In such a dire situation, I imagine that you were standing at the helm to give your commands. I can hardly believe you're still here and alive to tell the tale."

"And who might you be?" the magistrate inquired.

"I'm Faust von Polidoro."

"Ah, the rumored Knight of Wrath."

After this short introduction, I went right back to my interrogation.

"I'll ask again," I said. "Why are you still alive?"

"It pains me to admit, but I shall be honest," the magistrate said, her face turning red as she confessed the truth. "The enemy used a crossbow to pierce through my arm, and I fell off my horse. I hit my head quite hard and was unconscious throughout the entire battle."

Looks like it's not a lie. I nodded toward Princess Valiele and encouraged this conversation to continue.

"Why is your initial report different from the current situation?" Her Highness asked, "You reported that there were only thirty bandits, and asked for help because they were wandering around, attacking nearby entertainers and merchants."

"When the situation shifted, I immediately sent a villager to provide an amended report," the magistrate replied. "But it sounds like…"

"Indeed, we've received no such report. I'd imagine that the palace just received the news and is in an uproar, but we've got no information. Would you care to fill us in?"

The royal remained firm, but it was clear that she wanted to bury her head in her hands with exasperation. *To be honest, I do too, and I'm just listening on the sidelines.*

"My initial report is accurate," the magistrate explained. "We initially fought against thirty bandits—that much is true. But they soon got absorbed by a different military force."

"What do you mean?" Princess Valiele asked.

"In the vicinity of this village is a small city of around a thousand people. It's owned by a regional lord, and she's currently engaged in a battle over inheritance. Squires, subjects, and citizens are all involved in this atrocious fight; it's so horrid that blood coats their streets."

I've got a bad feeling about this… I don't want to hear the rest. I noticed Her Highness grimace just as I did.

"The elder daughter was victorious and stood as the head, as is the proper order," she went on. "The second daughter—the younger sister—lost and was injured in the chaos, but the confusion of the situation prevented the elder from taking her younger sister's life. And so, the squires and citizens under the command of the younger sister took all the money that they could from the main manor and fled the city with their gear."

Called it. This is gonna get awful.

Princess Valiele frowned as she heard more details.

"The younger sister and her subjects then bumped into the bandits," the magistrate continued. "I don't know what happened then or what deal they struck, but what I *do* know for sure is that the bandits joined her group. Now a force of roughly a hundred, they attacked this village and took everything they could."

"And why do you know about this in such great detail?" the royal inquired.

"The regional lord—the elder daughter who won the battle—ordered one of her citizens to rush to our village. I was told of the

situation and encouraged to flee the area at once."

"Flee" my ass. If that lord had finished the job and killed the younger sister, none of this would've happened. That elder daughter should've just given chase, captured her sister, and killed her off. What a moron. Besides, some of these villagers likely would've lived their entire lives in the area. You can't just tell people to drop their houses, fields, and lifetime assets to flee. No one can do that so easily. A slew of insults filled my mind.

"Before we could react, the troops attacked the village," the magistrate said. "I tried to fight back and gathered the villagers, hid the men and boys in the manor, and prepared for battle, but…"

"In the end, you lost," Princess Valiele finished.

The gruesome state of the village spoke of the enemy's heinous crimes. The corpses of the women were so fresh that they hadn't yet started to rot, and several heads rolled around like a child had strewn their toys on the ground. The magistrate stopped the deep bows and kowtowed as she rubbed her head on the floor. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she apologized.

"I'm truly, truly sorry."

But what could this magistrate do? She was up against it all. The second daughter was a noble—or perhaps a former noble now—who had been trained all her life to become a backup lord knight. Her squires were probably skilled in combat, and the citizens who followed her were likely war veterans. Now they were joined by bandits who made a living by terrorizing others, and they outnumbered the village.

No one could blame the magistrate for the landslide defeat. *Only one should bear the burden of this mistake, and that's the elder daughter, the lord of this land. Had she not let her sister escape, none of this would've happened, and this horrific scenario could've been avoided.* It was practically guaranteed that she'd be called into the royal palace and harshly reprimanded by Her Majesty. This was a small village, but it was nonetheless under her rule. It was

absolutely possible for the elder daughter to be stripped of her feudal rank and title. *But that aside…*

"What shall we do?" Princess Valiele asked. She turned to me for advice. "How shall we act now? Please tell me, Faust."

As the advisor, it was my duty to offer her support and aid in times of need. *I'll just tell her the conclusions that I've reached.*

"I'd like to view this from the lens of the enemy," I started. "This area is very close to the border with Villendorf."

"Explain," Her Highness said.

"We're up against a force of at least a hundred. That's a sizeable army. I'd imagine that they would try to flee the kingdom before Anhalt can cast any sort of judgment."

"And they'll run to that nation of savages." Her Highness gritted her teeth. "What do we do now? We don't have enough people. Do you think we'll be given reinforcements?"

"Oh, without a doubt. I'm positive that we will."

Duke Astarte had two hundred soldiers from her duchy staying within the royal capital; she would absolutely bring them along. Even the downfallen noble wouldn't stand a chance against the duke and her army. However, it took time to mobilize a force of that size. Her Grace was probably in a flurry in hopes of making preparations as fast as she possibly could.

"But I doubt that the reinforcements will come in time," I admitted. "That fallen noble will flee to Villendorf before an army arrives."

Our enemies had men, boys, and any valuables that they'd stolen from the fief lord's manor. They couldn't move quickly, but they were still faster than our reinforcements. *I'm sure that the noble will—ugh, what a pain! I need a name!*

"Magistrate, may I ask what the second daughter's name is?" I asked.

"Caroline, if memory serves," she replied.

I see…

"Caroline and her forces could flee to Villendorf before our reinforcements can do a thing," I said. "That's the reality of our situation."

"So, what am I supposed to do?" Her Highness asked.

She stared right at me. *It really pains me to tell her the truth, but…*

"Your first battle is a failure," I said. "My twenty citizens and your fifteen knights will make a party of just thirty-seven, including us. We have no means of defeating Caroline, a displaced noble with an army of over a hundred. I ask that you forfeit your pursuit of her."

If I'd been alone, I might have had a small chance of eking out a victory. However, I wasn't keen to risk the lives of my precious citizens in such a disadvantageous situation. Princess Valiele likely didn't want to lose her corps in an unfair battle either. The way things had played out was truly a pity, but I maintained a cool head and told Her Highness my thoughts.

Chapter 12:
Zabine's Instigation

MY THOUGHTS FIRST WENT TO MY SISTER'S words.

"You cannot predict what'll occur on the battlefield. There are times where there are discrepancies between reality and the information that you received hours beforehand."

She had told me to steel my resolve on the battlefield. Her words came true, and I became painfully aware of that. I gritted my teeth in frustration as I faced reality. I turned to Faust, my advisor, and listened to his words.

"Your first battle is a failure," he said. "My twenty citizens and your fifteen knights will make a party of just thirty-seven, including us. We have no means of defeating Caroline, a displaced noble with an army of over a hundred. I ask that you forfeit your pursuit of her."

Failed my first battle? This is bad. You may not be aware of it, Faust, but this is terrible news, I thought. *My sister will steal you away from me.* If I reported back on this failure, Faust would be relieved of his post as my advisor and put under Anastasia. My mother's orders rang through my head; my heart pounded louder than ever before.

Is this the end for me? Yeah, I'm sure it is. Maybe it's a fitting end for a mediocre woman like me. A small voice in my head told me that I deserved all this. Faust was my advisor, and he was against engaging in battle. His judgment was undoubtedly correct. The small voice in my head again filled the space between my ears with despair. *This is it for you.*

My advisor would be stripped from me. The populace and the Nobles of the Robe would lack the full context and mock me for accepting defeat against mere bandits. I envisioned myself walking back to the royal palace, my head hanging as I bit down on my lip.

But what else can I do? I've got no other choice. Is it worth going against Faust's words and letting my knights die in vain? I couldn't make such a heartless decision. This was it. This was my limit.

I flashed a self-deprecating smile and made my choice. "I understand, Faust."

I'd retreat here. I felt tempted to leave this small village and this small manor—I'd tuck my tail between my legs and run back to the royal capital. My role as the useless princess of Anhalt would be set. *When Anastasia claims the crown, maybe I'll shut myself in a monastery or something.* Resignation swirled in my heart as I left the manor. A worried Zabine followed close behind me. When I stepped out of the residence, I was faced with the survivors who lived in this tiny village as they crowded around me with hopeful gazes. One by one, they pleaded for assistance.

"Dear soldiers, please! I beg of you! Please bring back my husband from that demon, Caroline, and her evil army!"

"No, please bring my son back first! He's only ten, and he's so innocent! Please!"

"Move! I need to make my request! Out of my way!"

The citizens of this tiny village had their little shred of happiness stolen away from them. They implored that we aid them; women of all ages went down on their knees and begged for the return of their men. And yet, I couldn't answer their prayers. There was nothing I could do. My timid self that cowered in fear and couldn't break out of her shell almost rose to the surface. I was always afraid.

I can't help you. I can't. Please don't put your faith in me. I felt tempted to curl up into a ball and visibly shrink. *Someone, please. Stop this.*

The magistrate and Faust stepped out of the manor as well and tried to calm the crowd.

"Stop this, everyone! Cease your begging!" the magistrate shouted. Desperation filled her voice.

Faust said not a word and only gazed at these women with sympathy. What could we possibly do? Just then, Captain Zabine, who stood behind me, stepped out in front and shouted at the top of her lungs.

"Shut the hell up, you corpses!"

Her voice reverberated loudly, enough to pierce through one's soul—her words reached my heart. *Corpse, huh? That's a fitting name for me, really.* I continued to silently berate myself.

"Corpses? What do you mean by that?" one of the women inquired. Mere moments ago, the same lady had wept and clung onto me for help.

"You guys are corpses. Isn't that pretty self-explanatory?" Zabine replied, seeming puzzled by the question.

What is she on about? Even I didn't have a clue.

"Why do you guys pretend to be alive?" the captain inquired. She pointed to one of the dead bodies that were scattered across the grounds of the village. "Why aren't you guys dead, just like those bodies over there?"

The corpse had been brutally beaten. She had been decapitated and turned into a wretched cadaver.

"She fought until the very end," the woman replied. "She struggled and struggled until her last breath, desperate to protect her son."

"Then why haven't you guys done the same?" Zabine roared furiously. "How dare you remain alive in such disgrace!"

Never had I seen the captain of my corps exhibit such rage.

"Quit your begging! Cease your clinging!" Zabine shouted. "You corpses didn't do a single damn thing! Don't you dare rely on my princess and bow at her feet!"

She sounded as though she was crying; her voice reached the very depths of my heart.

"You guys are all corpses! The lot of you!" Zabine yelled. "You guys turned tail and ran; you've got no right to beg my princess for help!"

"What crime have we committed?!" the woman cried. "Will you knights abandon us? Will you not protect us?"

She's right. We're here to protect her.

"We will! We *will* protect you! I swear that Her Highness will save the men and boys that were taken away!" the captain declared. "We *want* to free them!"

Zabine?! I almost turned to her in astonishment, but I managed to feign composure and tugged Faust's hand. *Please stop her.* But my advisor completely ignored my request and silently lent an ear to the captain's words.

"But we're not enough!" Zabine continued. "It's humiliating to admit, but our forces aren't nearly enough! We don't have the power to save them!"

What's she getting at? What's she trying to say? I had zero clue.

"Ugh, if only there were a militia to aid us! If only there were women who possessed the valiance to try to rescue their husbands and sons! If only we had such support, perhaps we could save them," Zabine said. She pointed to the tattered, decapitated corpses that were strewn across the ground—a horrible sight. "I can't make use of living corpses like you. If only I had these courageous women who fought until their dying breath!"

Zabine took a breath, satisfied that she had finished her speech. She had said everything she wanted, and in return, the women expressed their ire.

"We aren't corpses!" they screamed. "But how in the world were we supposed to fight back?! We've got no weapons, no gear,

no nothing!”

Nothing but excuses, and it was clear that Zabine thought as much. She huffed through her nose before she refuted the women’s claims. “You’ve got farming tools. If you swing a hoe at someone’s head, they’ll die. You can stab someone in the stomach with a pitchfork and they’ll bleed out. In fact, that’s exactly what you guys attempted to do at first, didn’t you?”

She pointed to the headless corpse that gripped onto a pitchfork. The tips of the prongs were caked with dried blood. These bodies had fought; they battled until the very end, and used every last ounce of their strength.

“You’re all corpses!” Zabine shouted. “You guys can just lose your husbands and sons for all I care! Just wilt and rot in this tiny place! It’s not like you corpses can make a difference anyway! You won’t even feel it as you decay!”

Her cutting remarks angered the women even more.

“Screw you! What the hell are you on about?!” a woman shouted. “Why didn’t you guys save us?! Why didn’t you come sooner?! None of this would’ve happened!”

“Aw, damn, you know what? I just can’t hear the voices of the dead,” Zabine goaded. “I can only hear the words of the living. You know, the cries of women who *want* their sons and husbands back.”

Stop it already, I thought. *Just stop it already.* The word “corpse” echoed in my head. I had already given up on this endeavor, and I felt like I was one of these women who had clung to me, pleading for help. I couldn’t utter a single word.

This tiny village had been destroyed. But one of the women who had begged for help just moments ago seemed to have found her resolve.

“Fine, I’ll do it,” she said. Her eyes glimmered with determination. “Fine! If you guys are of no help, and we have to get our loved ones back with our own hands, I’ll do it! You don’t have to

tell *me* twice!" She screamed at the top of her lungs as tears spilled from her eyes. "I'll go right this instant to that woman, Caroline, and her demonic underlings! I'll chase after her, kill those bitches, and get my son back!"



"Very good," Zabine said. "Very, *very* good. I'm delighted to hear that at least *one* survivor remains in this village, it seems. Are there any others?"

Another voice chimed in, then another. In this tiny village, these citizens had their scraps of happiness stolen away from them —these women weren't going down without a fight.

"I'll join too!"

"You think a downfallen noble scares me?! I'll kill her!"

"Take me with you, soldiers! Please take me to Caroline so that I can end her!"

Faust quietly watched this scene unfold in front of him. Zabine turned to my advisor and spoke once more.

"Sir Polidoro, I beg of you to reconsider your strategy," she said. "If it's a militia you need, I've gathered them."

"Lady Zabine, I was wondering what your goals were, but… you're like the devil," Faust replied. "These residents were living in peace. They're just civilians. Are you planning on leading them all to their deaths?"

"This village has no future if we don't take back their husbands and sons," Zabine said coldly.

"All right," he said, scratching his head thoughtfully. "But we can't actually take every woman here. They may all be ready to die in action, but I'd imagine that only about forty of them could come along with us and march toward Caroline."

"Perhaps so, but we've now got an additional forty soldiers who don't fear death," Zabine replied. "With this addition, I'd say that our odds aren't so bad now. And above all, we've got you, Sir Polidoro."

"You seem to overestimate the skills of the Knight of Wrath," Faust said. He gave an awkward chuckle before he voiced another

concern. “But now we’re short of a commander. We need someone to take charge of these forty soldiers.”

“I can!” the magistrate piped up, seemingly moved by Zabine’s passionate words. “My dominant arm is still fine! Please allow me to redeem myself!”

Faust’s eyes went wide with shock, but he swiftly moved on to the next issue. “Very well. This battle in question was primarily caused by the regional lord—the elder daughter, who won her claim to succeed. She’ll probably be forced to pay an exorbitant amount of money as consolation for our war efforts. So much so that it’ll probably cost her *more* than an arm and a leg. I *detest* lord knights who can’t clean up after themselves. I won’t go easy on her.”

“I’ll handle her,” I said.

The words tumbled out of my mouth as I took my position as a royal who stood above others. Faust once again looked shocked when he gazed at me. Perhaps Zabine’s passion moved me as well; I couldn’t stop my words.

“Then I’ve got no other issues,” Faust said. “We don’t have much time to spare either. Gather all the rations and resources that remain in this village and give the militia any weapons we’ve got. Agricultural tools will do. We’ll start marching toward our enemy once we’ve made our preparations.”

Faust gave a strained smile, but he abandoned the idea of retreat. We chose to advance—to proceed with my first battle. Our destination was Caroline, who was surely fleeing to Villendorf.

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“Defect to Villendorf.”

I’d gathered the men and boys that I’d offer to Villendorf. I’d grabbed enough money from my house—the lord’s manor—when I escaped from my older sister. I had plenty of financial resources, and there were no other issues.

"Defect to Villendorf," I whispered once more.

It all went smoothly. I was free to flee to Villendorf with my force of a hundred soldiers. I was clever and had survived many battles. I'd gone in lieu of my sister and followed the royal capital's orders during my conscription—I was a seasoned veteran. Surely, Villendorf would accept me. Strength trumped all in that nation.

There were no issues. The only problem I could think of was that I'd lost the battle to inherit my house. I pounded the floor of the carriage in a rage. The vehicle clattered wildly, and if losing my temper shook the wood, no one would notice. No one would know if I'd lost my composure.

"I thought I'd win," I muttered. "Was I wrong?"

I'd participated in many battles with my squires in lieu of my older sister. I was kind to the citizens and governed over the land in lieu of my older sister. Hence, the soldiers had supported me. They wanted *me* to become the lord instead of my incompetent older sister who couldn't even govern or enter military service.

And yet, I'd lost. The wall between the oldest sister and the second-oldest sister was far too high—I couldn't inherit my house. Most of our subjects sided with my sister, despite her being utterly useless. She'd be a useful puppet to carry out their desires. And they didn't want to create a precedent where a younger sister inherited the house.

Ultimately, I'd cornered my sister, but she managed to escape and turned the tables. I had nowhere to go and fled the land. It was then that I ran into the bandits.

"Why don't you join us?" the bandit chief offered. "If you follow my orders, I'll let you have the time of your life. In fact, I just found a nearby village that's worth raiding. If you're with me, then we can easily take it over."

"Don't get cocky, you sellsword," I replied. "You guys will listen to *my* orders."

With a swing of my halberd, I lopped the head off of the bandit chief and took the rest of the gang under my control.

"Defect to Villendorf," I muttered. I struggled to get the words out.

I'd attacked a small village directly under the royal family's rule and had prepared men and boys to offer to Villendorf. I was on the path of no return. If we were caught, we would all be hanged for our crimes. We had enough food to last awhile, and I still had quite a bit of money that I'd stolen from the manor. It was enough to get me back on my feet.

I couldn't die here. Not here. That wasn't an option. I had my duty toward my squires and citizens who continued to follow someone like me—a fallen noblewoman like me—without voicing a single complaint. I was responsible for their well-being.

"Defect to Villendorf," I mumbled. "I will once again rise from the ashes and become a noble. I'll become a knight there and claw my way up. If I don't…"

Martina, I thought. The name of my only daughter flashed across my mind. *My adorable, darling little girl.* She'd been only nine. I was ready to offer her everything I had; I wanted to give her the world.

"Who else could avenge her?" I whispered.

I'd failed in my endeavor. I'd failed in everything. My rebellion ended in failure, and I failed to kill my sister. I'd made the wrong decision and couldn't control a strategic point. My daughter, Martina, had been sheltered by the church, but she was probably killed. My sister's retainers had likely hanged my little girl with their filthy hands.

"I know that I'll die soon," I said. "I'll die after losing everything I have. But I don't care about that."

I had no future in Villendorf, even if I succeeded in my escape. Power might reign supreme there, but I was still in enemy territory.

I'd be seen as a traitor for the rest of my life, and there was no chance that the most precious thing in the world to me, my beloved daughter, would return to my arms. I'd lost her because of my foolishness, and no offering would ever bring her back. Still, if I stopped here, I'd lose everything that I currently had. I wouldn't be able to face my squires and citizens who faithfully followed me. Even a loser had the right to choose how they'd lose. *I'll go out on my own terms.*

"They killed my daughter," I spat. "If I'll die anyway, might as well die face down in the pools of my sister's and her retainers' blood."

Anger filled my mind. My name was Caroline, and I was going to choose my end. Little did I know that there were people currently in pursuit of me.

Chapter 13:
The Melancholy of Queen Liesenlotte

ZABINE'S A DEVIL. TRULY, SHE IS, I THOUGHT. After a speech that lasted only minutes, the survivors of the tiny village that had their scraps of happiness stolen away from them had banded together to head to their deaths. We began our march, and I, Faust von Polidoro, stood at the helm. Princess Valiele's corps marched in the middle, and in the rear were the forty suicide soldiers led by the magistrate.

"Lord Faust, Lord Faust," my chief squire called beside me.

"What is it, Helga?" I asked.

Do you have any complaints about this march? We're outta luck, buddy. Princess Valiele gave us the green light. This battle had its upsides—Her Highness had guaranteed that she'd pry quite a bit of compensation money from the regional lord. *I'll have her pay through the nose. If not for that, I wouldn't be marching on like this.*

"Why don't you take Lady Zabine as your bride?" Helga suggested.

"You're kidding, right?" I replied bitterly. "Tell me that you're joking."

"Not at all. Certainly, I can sort of understand what you're trying to say, but personally, I don't think she's all that bad."

If you sort of understand what I'm trying to say, then don't mention her. And you're pushing for Zabine?! She's a devil. You've gotta be kidding me. The other citizens better not agree with your views. Don't tell me that her passion has affected you.

Zabine was a devil. As a soldier who was paid out of the people's taxes, she'd casually spouted words that she never had any right to say. She practically denied the principle of noblesse oblige.

When I said, "These residents were living in peace. They're just civilians. Are you planning on leading them all to their deaths?" I was trying to remind her that she was part of the nobility, but my bitter remarks were lost on her. *She's a chimp. Ugh, my head hurts.*

"A lord like me and a Noble of the Robe—a military officer of the kingdom—may differ in rank, but we share some similar points," I explained. "We receive taxes from our citizens, and the nobles receive money from tax collectors, officers of arms, or other bureaucrats. Perhaps they may be soldiers and receive taxes from their citizens. That's how we make a living."

"Yes, I know," Helga nodded.

"In exchange, we've got a duty—a promise to protect the lives of our residents and citizens living on the land. *We* fight on the front line instead so that their safety is assured. Do you understand?"

"I do." Helga nodded once more.

And if you can follow me so far… "Why must we send our citizens to their deaths?" I asked. "Is that what a knight does? She practically denied her role as knight—her raison d'être. Does she not understand how her words contradict her very existence? The captain's speech was completely unbefitting a noble, and she had no right to say what she did. If she casts aside her dignity, she's no longer a noble or a knight."

"But desperate times call for desperate measures. Should our husbands and sons be kidnapped, even we citizens will take up arms to fight back; I especially wouldn't hesitate if such an atrocity occurred on our land. Is that not a normal reaction to the situation? I don't think Lady Zabine has said anything incorrect."

I stared back blankly at Helga's nonchalant tone. *I get it now. My citizens have received protection from Queen Liesenlotte in exchange for their military service.* Though they received a contract of her protection, their initial plan wasn't to rely on this agreement. They all had the resolve to protect themselves without the assistance of others.

However, there was a dichotomy between frontier citizens who lived near the Villendorf border and had enlisted in the military before, and inexperienced residents of a small village controlled by the royal family. Simply put, there were cultural differences. Hence, Helga couldn't possibly understand Zabine's brutality. *And honestly, I don't even want to explain why Zabine's words are cruel.* Even if I did, I would likely receive a response along the lines of "Perhaps, then, the citizens of the kingdom are too naïve. I truly don't see how Lady Zabine's in the wrong here."

In fact, I'm pretty sure that all of my land's residents would be of the same opinion. Ugh, what a pain. Fine, I'll just speak my mind.

"I'm not very fond of Lady Zabine," I said. "Perhaps her public speaking skills are worthy of praise, but I don't like her. And Her Highness Princess Valiele hasn't quite realized what Lady Zabine has done. The princess may be able to blame it on her young age of fourteen, but if she's so easily influenced by her captain's passion, I fear for her future. Is that answer good enough for you?"

"Yes, I suppose," Helga replied.

You do understand where I'm coming from, right? You really do, right? You're not having any weird ideas of your own? My land hasn't also been influenced by the horrible agitator's passion, has it? I began the march ahead as worries plagued my mind.

"Forward!" I shouted.

I gave the signal, and we all took a step. *This'll be fine.* I was satisfied with how our conversation ended, but Helga still had some thoughts that she wanted to say.

"But Lord Faust—" she started.

"Yeah? Still got something to say?" I asked. I flashed her a bitter expression.

"Had we abandoned the begging residents of the small village back there, perhaps it would've led to a riot. Our alternative was to desert them and head back home, after all."

She's got a point there. These citizens are so fired up that they decided to follow us, knowing full well that this could be a suicide mission.

"And had we not drafted these citizens, we would've had no way to rescue the kidnapped men and boys," Helga added. "Having these furious citizens channel their rage toward the enemies and join our cause has benefits for both of us. I find that Lady Zabine's plan was a rather clever one."

"And you think that *ape* went on her spiel fully comprehending all the factors that you just mentioned?" I asked.

Helga and I turned back toward Zabine. The captain was busily engaged in another raunchy conversation with one of the corps members.

"No, I don't believe so," Helga answered.

"Yeah, I agree. Without a shred of doubt. Her skull's absolutely empty," I said.

In fact, I'd argue that she didn't initially even plan to draft these citizens and form a militia. I bet that she just kind of rolled with it. She probably didn't like that these villagers clung to Princess Valiele, and she wanted to insult them for doing so. She only thought of her solution while she was making fun of them. I'd wager good money that mid-speech, she thought, "Wait, maybe if I provoke them more, I can draft them into the army!"

I had a very good understanding of Zabine's personality, and I could read her mind like an open book. *That brutal demon. That chimp. Or maybe chimps are known for their brutality… Stop, I'm going on a tangent.* Perhaps Zabine wasn't abandoned by her family and shoved into Princess Valiele's corps solely because of her stupidity. Zabine held this innate sense of cruelty and savagery. Maybe statesmen needed some people to do the dirty work for them.

There was a chance that Zabine's solution would result in the best of both worlds—the princess no longer had to admit defeat, and

the villagers might be able to rescue the men and boys who had been kidnapped. However, I was confident that this wasn't calculated on the captain's end. There was no rhyme or reason in her actions; she had maybe one brain cell floating through her empty mind. She'd simply ranted away and, by pure luck, come upon a solution.

Quite frankly, she was dangerous. Precisely because she was so vocally convincing, it was best to keep her isolated and locked away. *Maybe put her in a cage and have a name tag hung around her neck. She can be known as the mysterious monkey who can talk and give speeches. Argh, enough! I don't have the time to think about silly ideas right now!*

Our goal was simple: We had to pursue Caroline, reach her before she reached the Villendorf border, and kill her. My current orders were as simple as that; it was better to not overcomplicate matters. I had no room for unnecessary thoughts.

"All right, let's sing!" Zabine shouted. "We've got a long way to go until we reach Caroline. Citizens, magistrate, join us in our song and show some energy!"

I was genuinely terrified of her voice now as I marched ahead. *This is probably how she maintains morale throughout the march. She's only become scarier to me.* I managed to keep my mouth shut and made a vehement prayer. *Please don't break out into a raunchy song. God, I'm begging you.*

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"Have you still not made preparations, Duke Astarte?!" Queen Liesenlotte shouted impatiently.

"I'm sure that you're well aware of our process, Your Majesty," I replied. "It takes time to mobilize two hundred soldiers. We'll likely be able to depart tomorrow."

I may have had a standing army that could react at a moment's notice, but that didn't mean that I could just march on the

spot. Weaponry aside, I needed to ensure that there were enough provisions and carriages. I also had to draft a route while predicting the movements of my enemies. My soldiers would march to a point where I predicted a clash with my foes would occur. These preparations were the bare minimum, with the route being the most vital aspect.

One wrong move, and we might enter Villendorf territory—that would spark a second Campaign of Villendorf. Tensions were high, and the situation was dire. The queen was aware of that; she surely was, and she still couldn't hide her impatience. I sighed.

"Can you cut off the enemy's route?" Her Majesty asked.

"I've already talked it over with Anastasia," I replied.

As Princess Anastasia's advisor, I consulted her bright strategic mind to formulate a plan for this mission. It may have been a bit backward for an advisor to ask for advice, but that didn't worry me. Anastasia and I agreed that Caroline would likely flee to the indicated point on the map. That location was some distance away, and my reinforcements likely wouldn't make it in time.

But perhaps there was hope. Maybe Faust would cook up a plan to delay Caroline. If Caroline got greedy, she might try to conquer other areas of land and delay her progress. There were other possible factors that could delay her march: Her carriage could break down, or her troops could be exhausted and walk more sluggishly than normal. There was still hope, and it was too soon to give up here. To preserve my dignity, the only logical conclusion was to mobilize my army. I sighed again.

"Why do you keep sighing?" Her Majesty demanded. "Valiele must be at a loss by now, scrambling to find a solution."

"Isn't she just a backup anyway?" I replied. "She's a decoration, nothing more. It's a bit sudden for you to express your parental love, Your Majesty."

I spoke my mind as relatives did. I was a free spirit and feared nothing at all. The only time I'd ever felt an ounce of fear was the

time I fondled Faust's buttocks—his residents flashed a demonic expression toward me. *Yeah, that was terrifying,* I thought. I truly thought that I was going to be thrown into Hell.

"Even if she is just a decoration, it doesn't mean that I wish for my daughter's death!" Queen Liesenlotte shouted.

"Anastasia said the same thing," I remarked. "She didn't wish for her sister's death either."

Is Valiele loved or not? I can't even tell. What I do *know is that I don't like her.* She was the pinnacle of mediocrity. Commoners could get away with that, but no noble was allowed to be simply average. This was a belief I held firmly.

"She's probably just frozen in fear at the small village that Caroline destroyed," I said. "I doubt Her Highness would try to pursue the enemy."

"But she might! That's exactly why I'm fretting!" Her Majesty replied. "I gave her an ultimatum! Should she fail her first battle, Faust will no longer be her advisor!"

I see. So Her Highness has cause for concern, I guess. But even so, I didn't bat an eye.

"Your Majesty, Valiele is a mediocre child with mediocre skills," I said.

Faust was a lord knight; above all else, he refused to put his residents' lives at stake. Unlike the Campaign of Villendorf—where he'd had no other choice—even if he had a chance of winning, he wouldn't risk the lives of his citizens, especially if there was the possibility of his soldiers incurring massive damage. And Valiele was an average person. She would obediently follow the words of her advisor. *Which only leaves one more concern…*

"I hope those apes—ahem, pardon me, I mean, Princess Valiele's corps—don't try anything funny," I said. "It's those idiots' first battle too. Hopefully they don't try too hard and force Valiele to do something else."

"Don't say something so terrifying!" the queen said. She hugged herself in terror.

"I didn't think that they were so foolish—they're practically a troop of chimps," the queen said. Anxiety filled her voice. "I gave Valiele knights who'd been abandoned by their households, but they're still nobles—the second or third daughters of their houses."

"But these noblewomen who you speak of are the kind of people who can casually engage in obscene discussion within the palace, and they peek when the page boys get dressed," I said. "They're just a pack of horny kids."

I flashed a look of vexation. I didn't like mediocrity. Not one bit. That was precisely why I didn't like Valiele's band of chimps either. I had no idea what went through their minds, and they couldn't be controlled. I found death to be the kindest possible end for these unskilled workers. *I guess they might have their use on the battlefield. But since none of them have experienced a real battle, I can't be certain. And this is Valiele's first one too.*



After her first battle, would her mediocrity change at all? I knew it would be best to keep my expectations low, but it wouldn't hurt to reassess her potential after she returned. She might have failed her first battle, but if she could use that as a springboard to launch herself forward, she might change in some way.

"In any case, you must make haste!" Her Majesty ordered. "Valiele aside, Caroline has attacked a land under our jurisdiction and must've kidnapped some of our people! We must kill her as soon as we can. The reputation of the royal family is also at stake here."

"Needless to say, she can't be allowed to flee to the savages of Villendorf either," I added. "All right, then."

I replied rather nonchalantly, like I was being forced to do some kind of menial errand. My gaze was fixed on the point indicated on the map—it was just shy of the Villendorf border. That was where I'd clash with Caroline.

Chapter 14:
Dispersing the Small Fry

"WE MADE IT," I MUTTERED. THE WORDS TUMBLED out of my mouth.

I stood at the helm, and the Villendorf border was in front of us, but we had finally caught up to Caroline. Her army of around a hundred troops came into view. We still weren't at fighting distance, but we were close enough that I could confirm her location with my own eyes. She was surrounded by her soldiers. Zabine and the other corps stopped singing at once, and their eyes flickered with fiery rage; they were ready to jump into the fight.

"Faust, what now?" Her Highness asked.

You're asking me*? You're the chief commander here, you know.* I knew I should cut her some slack since this was her first battle, and as her advisor, it was my role to support her. *But Princess Anastasia or Duke Astarte would first give me their own opinion and ask if their take was correct or if I had anything to add. They would at least provide their thoughts. In this situation, they might actually give me free rein and allow me to decide it all for myself. We might be up against bandits, but I'm experienced in combat, and they'd want to respect my opinions.*

As I thought back, Princess Anastasia's first battle was truly absurd and totally outside of the range of normalcy. It wasn't that Princess Valiele was lacking in some way; Crown Princess Anastasia was simply way beyond her peers. I used my experience to assess the situation and gazed at Caroline and her army before us.

"I'm guessing that they've noticed our presence as well," I said.

"Do you think that they have magic bifocals, just like we do?" Valiele asked.

"It's a very useful item. It's safe to assume that Caroline has a pair of her own, and on these flatlands, even just a person with good eyesight could spot us from a good distance away."

I spoke confidently. Caroline must've noticed by now that she was being pursued, and I had to wait and see how she'd act. *Hopefully she won't go all out and use her forces here. The damages we'd incur are unimaginable.* No way would I permit innocent residents or my own people to die in vain.

"The enemy has split into two groups," Helga reported. She peered through the bifocals and observed the enemy.

She chose to flee. Caroline's plan became clear. She would head for the Villendorf border, and the bandits would be used as her disposable pawns. I was a little grateful for her decision; I wasn't keen on engaging in a full-blown battle with multiple formations here. This was a far preferable situation, conveniently in our favor.

"Helga, prepare our citizens for combat," I ordered.

"Yes, my lord," she replied.

I turned to the princess. "Your Highness, let us disperse the small fry here."

"What do you mean?" Princess Valiele asked.

"Your corps and the militia don't need to raise a finger just yet. It's not their time to shine. It'll be a massacre, plain and simple."

This would be nothing more than a one-sided slaughter. It was hardly out of the ordinary. I'd done it countless times during my conscription. I was going to hunt down these bandits and settle this with pure carnage. My lips curled up as I bid my princess farewell and prepared to charge in.

I gave my signal and shouted, "Crossbows!"

The crossbows had already been prepared by my five squires and were ready to fire—all that was left was to pull the triggers.

"Helga, before you put away the bifocals, I want you to confirm our enemies one last time," I said. "Can you see the enemy commander?"

"I can," my chief squire reported. "The commander is likely not a bandit—she's wearing chain mail and a helmet. My guess is that she's an enemy squire."

The bandits wouldn't obediently become pawns. There was always a commander taking charge of the situation. *Must be Caroline's squire. I bet Caroline killed the chief bandit and took over. Did the squire volunteer herself, knowing that they were headed for their deaths? Did she* want *to lead the bandits? I guess Caroline's a person worthy of* some *respect and dignity then, if she commands such loyalty.* I assessed the situation and finished my analysis.

"No need to fire our crossbows at the squire," I said. "Aim our bows at the five archers and make sure to finish them off."

"Your wish is my command, Lord Faust," Helga replied.

I didn't like archers. Parrying their arrows wasn't an issue, but they broke my concentration and annoyed me to no end. That was the sole reason I wanted archers to be taken care of first. *They aren't worth more thought, anyway. Bandits don't deserve to be thoroughly analyzed. All right, we're getting close.* I placed Princess Valiele, her corps, and the citizens commanded by the magistrate to my rear and charged ahead with my twenty residents.

"My name is Faust von Polidoro! Step forth if you wish to die!"

The enemies trembled in fear at a man's voice. They knew that only Faust von Polidoro was a male knight who dared to stand at the helm in battle. The Knight of Wrath, Anhalt's strongest knight, was known far and wide—they had no reason to doubt my identity. I didn't like my nickname, but it had its uses in times like these.

"Remain calm!" the enemy's leader yelled. Caroline's squire tried to quiet the bandits, but to no avail. "We only know rumors about him! He's only a male knight! We've got nothing to fear!"

I couldn't allow them to flee here—I'd kill them all to raise our morale. Not a single life would be spared.

"Sing," I said. My words were pointed not at my beloved citizens, but at the bandits who dared to face me.

Sing a symphony of blood. The shots were fired and landed on the five archers. My squires had experience with the weapons. This translated into expert skill—all five shots landed splendidly. In the blink of an eye, five of the thirty bandits lost their lives.

"Scream," I growled.

Scream for your lives. My steed rushed ahead, and I was the first to reach the enemy. This was just a typical day for me. I swung the magic greatsword that was my inheritance. In a flash, I decapitated the heads of five stunned bandits. And now, our numbers were evenly matched.

"And die," I ordered.

I created a pool of blood seeping into the ground as I killed one bandit after another. They had no archers to launch ranged attacks, and that worked just fine for me. I spurred my horse onward and galloped straight for the squire who commanded the bandits. My trusty steed, Flugel, jumped into the air, and we landed in front of Caroline's lead squire, dressed in chain mail. I gave her no time to process the sudden change of events.

My blade went down and sliced her from the top of the head to her stomach. My weapon didn't go all the way through, but the squire was cut in two; her helmet split down the middle and rolled onto the floor.

"I've killed your leader!" I roared.

My voice echoed throughout the battlefield, and the bandits cowered in fear. They'd just lost their commander, and they had no idea what to do or how to act. The pitiful enemies were now in a state of chaos, with no one to order them around. Some begged for their lives to be spared, while others turned their backs to flee. But

my citizens showed no mercy. One by one, the bandits were cut down by spears and swords—my subordinates were well accustomed to battle.

Between the ages of fifteen and twenty, I'd carried out military service with my residents, and we were all seasoned veterans. They made short work of the bandits and slaughtered them all, practically doing my job for me. Meanwhile, I also cut down a few bandits who stood near the slain squire. I didn't keep count—it was a pain to keep score of the number of people we killed. The battle was over in minutes. Not a single one of my residents was injured, and we all worked quickly and efficiently, like an assembly line. The massacre was over.

"For your next life, reincarnate into a flower or something," I spat.

I sat atop my Flugel and gazed at the corpses of the bandits strewn across the ground. My final line marked the end of an extermination that had lasted mere minutes. My squires didn't need my command as they swiftly pulled the strings of the crossbows back to ready them for another round of attacks. Princess Valiele's corps and the forty villagers in the rear finally caught up to me.

"Faust, um, the bandits?" Her Highness asked dully.

Can't you tell by looking?

"They're all dead," I replied. "You can see the corpses, can't you?"

"Right. And, well…is anyone injured on your end?" she inquired.

"Nope. Not a one."

And none of them ever will be. No way I'm letting my precious residents die to mere bandits. The only time I'd ever been prepared for death was during the Campaign of Villendorf. I could slaughter bandits while casually humming a tune. These small fry were of little importance—we had a more vital matter at hand.

"This is where things get rocky, Your Highness," I said. "We'll prepare to fire another round from our crossbows while pursuing Caroline. I'd like to consult you on strategies until we catch up to her."

"V-very well," the princess replied.

"Caroline has decided that fleeing is her best tactic. I presume that she's planning on heading straight for the Villendorf border to enter their land. During the battle against her seventy experienced soldiers, I may have to leave in the midst of the fight to give chase after Caroline. Our goal is to keep her in our territory. Should I leave, Helga will take my place and take command. You may use her as much as you like."

You can use her, but don't let her die in vain. And Helga wasn't willing to obediently listen to every single one of the princess's orders. My chief squire wasn't raised to become too acquiescent. I refrained from telling the princess this and instead focused on Caroline's forces. Two carriages clattered at the front of her army. One probably had the men and boys who'd been kidnapped from the village, while the other contained Caroline. *Which is the prize that I'm looking for? The smaller basket or the bigger basket? I've got a suspicion that the smaller basket has more valuables—the smaller carriage probably contains Caroline.* As I mulled this over, I waited for the crossbows to be loaded up once more.

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"There's no need for you to die," I said. "The bandits are nothing more than pawns. We can leave them for dead."

"But if we are going to use them, they require a commander," one of my squires said. "Surely you know that best, Lady Caroline."

She volunteered to be the commander of the bandits—to die for me. I bit my lip with hesitation. *We've come so far. We've fled this far,* I thought desperately. Villendorf's border was right in front of us—we'd reach it within an hour. I peered through my bifocals to

confirm the border's location. The watchtower of the fort must've noticed our presence. I saw several Villendorf knights stand on guard with quite a few soldiers in an attempt to defend the border. That was our goal. I was sure that my pleas would be accepted; I'd successfully defect to their nation. I'd be able to leave this kingdom.

"Lady Caroline, in the worst case, you must be prepared to flee all by yourself," the squire said.

"Don't be a fool," I replied. "What value is there in abandoning all of you so that I can escape by myself?"

"There *is* value. We supported you until the very end. As long as you remain alive, I'm certain that our deaths won't be meaningless."

You idiot. Do you really think that it's you guys' fault that I lost the battle for inheritance? The one who lost and failed to clinch a victory was none other than…

"It was my fault. *I'm* the one who lost in the battle for inheritance," I said. "It's all because of my own folly. I should've never attempted it. I should've just allowed my sister to claim the title."

Regret. Only now was I finally able to verbalize my remorse. I'd failed my own rebels due to my sheer incompetence. I was able to admit that now. I should've worked in secret and secured support from other subjects first. I should've formed closer ties with the royal family—Queen Liesenlotte and Crown Princess Anastasia—during my military service so that I could have them support me to take over my household. I should've done more. I should've acted more. I should've strategized more. Should've. Should've. Should've. I had no shortage of regrets that continued to fill my mind.

"We squires and the citizens all ate from the same pot as you during our military service, did we not? We all risked our lives in battle with you," the squire said. "We pushed you to take action, Lady Caroline. And for that, we must take responsibility. Ah, I'm afraid we're out of time. This is where I must part ways with you."

"Wait! Please!" I begged her.

My pleas were ignored as the squire rushed to the bandits' side. I was about to lose another life just so that I could escape to Villendorf and ensure my safety. *How many lives of my squires and citizens have I lost from the battle to inherit my household? How many gravely injured people have died during our march to the border, just for their corpses to be left behind and abandoned? I deserted them. If I'd known that I'd feel this way, I would've never fought to inherit the house to begin with.* Every time one of my citizens died, I became painfully aware of my foolishness.

"Martina," I mumbled.

I called out to my only daughter, my beloved. Because I'd misread my situation, I'd lost her forever. No doubt she was already hanged, and her tiny body was rotting as I inched closer to Villendorf. *That's right. I have to be alive for her. I must at least avenge her death.*

"Defect to Villendorf," I muttered to myself.

My unsteady footsteps made me stagger as I repeated the phrase like a mantra. It was my final goal. I was the woman who'd lost her husband to an illness, lost her daughter due to her foolishness, and forced her excellent squires to become expendable pawns for her escape. I had to offer the kidnapped men and boys to Villendorf. I had to use the money filling the carriage to rebuild my life as a knight. I didn't mind blabbing about any information I had about Anhalt to Villendorf for money.

I might be called a traitor, and I might go to Hell for my sins. But I didn't care. I had nothing left, other than seventy excellent soldiers. These citizens had braved military service alongside me. Just then, I heard the words of a report that signaled the end of my world.

"Lady Caroline! Lady Caroline!" a squire shouted. "I've been able to confirm the enemy commander through my bifocals!"

"Who is it?!" I called. "Is it a familiar face?! Is it Duke Astarte? Or…"

"He looks like a male knight. I believe he's Faust von Polidoro, the Knight of Wrath!"

I practically leaped out of my carriage to turn to the bandits and my precious squire, who'd become mere pawns. I was certain that they'd all be massacred mercilessly. The time of arbitration had arrived. I had devolved into a demon, and the Knight of Wrath was right on my tail, ready to cast judgment for my sins.

Chapter 15:
A Beautiful Beast

PRINCESS VALIELE'S ARMY CONSISTED OF FORTY soldiers, fifteen knights of the corps, and twenty residents from the Polidoro fief. Caroline had an army of seventy refined soldiers. The two armies were about to clash just shy of the Villendorf border. A mere thirty minutes on foot would allow Caroline to cross that line and defect.

"Crossbows!" Faust von Polidoro shouted.

His orders were short. The crossbows were fired and struck five members of Caroline's vanguard, killing them almost instantly and leaving her with sixty-five soldiers remaining. Valiele's army outnumbered the rebel's, but Caroline's soldiers had far more skill and combat experience. Each of them had been in military service, and they were well equipped. Valiele, on the other hand, was out on her first battle with her corps, and the militia of forty had inadequate gear—only her fifteen corps had proper armor and weapons. Polidoro Fief's twenty residents had a chance of fighting back; they were more experienced than Caroline's soldiers. But most unfortunate was a certain man's attitude.

"You guys stand behind me!" the Knight of Wrath ordered.

This ball of murderous intent protected the militia and jumped ahead. Although he wanted to preserve the lives of his own people as much as possible, he treated the lives of his enemies like dirty rags—completely unworthy of even a second thought.

Faust freely traversed the small battlefield atop his trusty steed and emerged out of nowhere. He didn't leap into the middle of Caroline's army—no, he treated the militia like his meat shields as he went around slaughtering Caroline's soldiers. He'd suddenly appear and physically get in between the clashes to deliver the decisive

blow, methodically ending the lives of his enemies. A trail of death was left in his wake. There was no other way to describe it.

Caroline peeked through the hole in the hood of her carriage as the pandemonium unfolded. Naturally, her army grew smaller and smaller as her troops fell. There wasn't a single person in Anhalt who could win against Faust in a one-on-one duel. Yet her soldiers' morale didn't decline. They all put their lives on the line to protect her.

Caroline was on the verge of tears, but she couldn't cry here. She wasn't allowed to shed any tears. Her troops were dying for her sake, and she knew that she had to flee, even if it meant that she would be the only one spared. It was the only way she could repay them; she had to live so that their deaths wouldn't be in vain. Yet Caroline faltered. She couldn't make the decision to forsake the soldiers who offered their lives for her.

Time cruelly continued passing on the battlefield—it didn't wait for her. Her army continued to clash against Princess Valiele's forces while they tried to retreat. They hadn't battled for long, but Faust had already killed over thirty soldiers. The man wasn't keeping track of his kills, and though some members of the militia had also died, he'd created an overwhelming advantage. It was only a matter of time before Caroline's army was annihilated.

"I'll leave the rest to you, Helga!" Faust shouted.

He didn't mention the name of the princess—she was the highest order of command, and he didn't want her to be targeted. Every single one of his moves was calculated as he rushed forward, all by himself. Caroline's army no longer had the power to stop him; they could barely handle the enemies that were in front of them.

The knight was coming. He was coming to cast judgment on the demon that had committed grave sins. Faust von Polidoro emanated pure wrath as he charged to take the head of the one in command. There were two carriages, and he selected the smaller one. He swung his greatsword down and created a narrow slit in the

hood of the carriage to peer inside. The men and boys cowered in fear as they heard the clangs of cold steel and the screams of the dying.

"Damn, got the wrong one," Faust grumbled.

Caroline, who'd been in the larger carriage, had abandoned her vehicle filled with riches to flee by herself. With only her horse and the clothes on her back, she ran for the Villendorf border. She had to escape—escape from the hands of judgment. She needed to run from Faust von Polidoro, the Knight of Wrath.

Desperation filled her face. She could still make it; surely, she could. If she asked for assistance from the Villendorf knights and soldiers who stood at attention by the border, even the Knight of Wrath would fall. Caroline despondently clung on to a sliver of impossibly fragile hope as she urged her horse to gallop faster. Faust told the men and boys inside to stay in the carriage as he took off in hot pursuit.

He and Caroline had left behind the cacophonous screams of death, the roars of victory, and the clangs of steel that reverberated throughout the battlefield. It was now a game of tag between the two of them. Gradually, the gap began to widen, and Faust started to lag behind. Flugel was exhausted. It had entered the battle against bandits and taken Faust around the battlefield against Caroline's army. Even an excellent horse had a limit to its stamina, and Flugel was no exception. Faust was keenly aware of this; he had no plans of destroying his trusty steed.

He'd recovered the abducted men and boys, which would allow him to preserve the bare minimum of dignity. And he predicted that Caroline's end wasn't set in stone quite yet. Flugel had worked hard enough for now. He stopped his horse and patted its back as though to praise it for its hard work. Right in front of him stood the border between Anhalt and Villendorf, but the Knight of Wrath ceased his chase. Caroline paid no attention to her rear and crossed the border. Faust could only watch—he'd stay on the sidelines and see how

Caroline would end in the hands of the Villendorf savages' values and virtues.

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"My name is Caroline. I wish to defect to your land and ask for your support. The knight in front of us is Faust von Polidoro."

The Villendorf knight nodded. "I've confirmed the battlefield with my own eyes using my bifocals. That appearance, that swordplay… Indeed, I've no doubt that he's Faust von Polidoro."

"Then please help!"

Caroline pleaded for one of them to kill the Knight of Wrath—for the demon called Faust von Polidoro to be erased from existence.

"But that man, that beautiful beast, hasn't crossed our border," the Villendorf knight said. Her name was unknown, but she was surely the commander here. "He stands right over there."

The knight pointed toward Faust, who indeed simply stood there and gazed at Caroline.

"Don't you wish to kill Faust?" she shouted.

But the Villendorf knight was unfazed. "I just told you. That beautiful beast hasn't crossed our border. He's waiting for you. That's all."

Waiting? For what? Caroline wondered. The answer soon became clear.

"He's waiting for you to challenge him after being thrown out of Villendorf," the knight said.

The message was clear—Caroline would be pushed out of Villendorf. She couldn't accept that.

"What in the world are you saying?!" she cried. "Sheltering me has value! I have so much information about the Anhalt Kingdom! I'll surely be of use to you."

"I know not how much information you have on Anhalt," the knight replied. "Perhaps you may have intel of interest. Perhaps your knowledge may be of great value." Yet the Villendorf savage shook her head. "That knight, who we call a 'beautiful beast,' is simply waiting for you. Caroline, was it? He awaits his duel with you. And we have no intention of getting in his way."

"Why not?! Don't you want to kill Faust von Polidoro?!"

"One who hasn't crossed our border isn't an enemy. And above all…" The knight paused for a moment as her eyes filled with admiration for Faust. "That man challenged our knight captain, Reckenbell, to a ferocious duel to the death, and won. He's truly a handsome devil. And yet, you ask us knights and our soldiers to surround him by the dozens and kill him? Do you mean to offend us?"

This was precisely how these savages viewed the world. The powerful were seen as beautiful. Faust appeared as the most attractive knight of all to the Villendorf barbarians. They valued powerful men and favored those who were muscular and brawny. No doubt Faust seemed like the most beautiful knight in the world to them. To surround him and kill him went against their values.

You savages! Caroline thought. She managed to keep her mouth shut and instead pounded the ground with her fist.

"What do you ask from me?" she inquired.

"Defeat Faust von Polidoro," the knight said. "Win against that 'beautiful beast,' and we'll happily accept you into Villendorf."

The barbarians didn't expect Caroline to win against Faust—they knew that she'd lose. They simply wanted to sit back and watch. They wished to see the handsome monster that they respected use his skills to defeat Caroline right in front of their eyes.

"Fine," Caroline said.

This is the end of the road for me. I guess it's a fitting end. She smiled and turned back toward the border and Anhalt Kingdom.

Ah… I've lost everything. Every single thing I had has slipped between my fingers. And now, I'll lose even my life. This is where it ends. She smiled cruelly to herself as she walked toward her demise. She climbed atop her horse and headed back to Faust.

The Knight of Wrath looked at Caroline with rugged honesty; he couldn't hide the confusion in his voice. "Did you really think that you could flee? You have no men or boys to offer, no money to pay, and none of your faithful elite soldiers. Did you believe that they'd accept you, and only you?"

Caroline offered not a word in response. She gripped her halberd and racked her brain in hopes of gaining even the slightest bit of advantage.

"Jump off your steed, Faust von Polidoro," she said. "And I shall do the same."

"Very well," Faust relented.

The two dismounted. Caroline wasn't confident in her horseback skills, but she held no hope of claiming a victory against the Knight of Wrath who stood in front of her. However, she knew that she couldn't afford to lose—not without a fight, at least. She was determined to at least scratch the man who was called a "beautiful beast" by the Villendorf barbarians. Caroline fully knew that she'd lose to Faust.

"Are you fine with that halberd of yours?" he asked.

"I'd like to ask you the same question," Caroline replied. "Are you all right with your greatsword? The lengths of our weapons… aren't actually that different. What the hell."

She chuckled. Faust's weapon was quite long, perhaps as much as a halberd. His greatsword seemed more fitting to be on display in a parade and should've been unsuitable for combat. The Knight of Wrath swung it around easily with one arm even though it was clearly meant to be wielded with two, but even the two-meter-tall Faust couldn't make the sword look small in his hands. The blade was engraved with a unique etching of a magic seal.

This is the strongest knight of the kingdom, after all. Caroline had completely given up. Why did she still choose to resist? What propelled her to go to such great lengths? She'd earnestly wished to become the lord and failed. Her greatest treasure in the world, her only daughter, had been lost, and her faithful troops had stuck by her side until their final breaths. Caroline truly had nothing left.

"Don't laugh," Faust said. "This blade's been passed down through my family for generations."

"Ah, apologies. Pardon my rudeness," Caroline said.

Their conversation was short. The moment it was over, Caroline used her halberd and swung it straight at Faust. Her strike was meant to land a fatal blow. She was by no means weak—in fact, she had proved her combat prowess numerous times. The power she held was abnormal, but even so, the difference between her and Faust was crystal clear.

Before she knew it, her stomach was sliced up by Faust's blade, armor and all. She quietly stood there. She knew that she'd die on the spot. Her thoughts had simply turned into reality.

"Any last words? Any lingering regrets, Caroline?" Faust asked, offering words of sympathy to the woman he had just defeated.

With her dying breath, Caroline managed to eke out her final word. "Martina."



She was certain that her only daughter had been hanged and killed. Faust heard her last word and committed it to memory as her organs spilled out of her wound and she fell face-first onto the ground.

"I shouldn't have asked for your final words," Faust said. He gazed at her with pity.

He inferred from Caroline's tone of voice that she had called out to a young girl. Caroline sounded as though all was lost, as though she was powerless in her situation. It was painful to hear. He knew that he had to take her head home; he chopped it off, wrapped it in some cloth that he had, and carefully carried it in his left hand. When he looked up, he saw that the Villendorf knights lined up on the border.

"It was a breathtaking duel, Beautiful Beast!" one called. "May we meet again on the battlefield!"

The Villendorf knights turned on their heels and returned to their fort.

Faust muttered under his breath, his voice so quiet that no one else could hear him. "I never want to face you barbarians again."

It wasn't about winning or losing. The Campaign of Villendorf had traumatized the Knight of Wrath in a way; each knight of Villendorf was stronger than anything that Anhalt Kingdom could produce. Knight Captain Reckenbell had been an especially mighty foe. Faust had won in the duel against her when he was twenty, but had he been nineteen, he surely would've lost. The outcome of the match had only gone in his favor thanks to the extra year of military service and training he himself had devised.

The reality was that he came out victorious, and no one debated that. Faust bowed his head toward the backs of the Villendorf knights—he found it important to thank them for preventing Caroline's escape. He then turned away from the border and headed back to the eye of the storm, where clangs and shrieks rang through the air.

"I've accomplished my goal, but…" Faust trailed off.

He was curious about the damage that his side had incurred. Surely his experienced residents were safe, but what of the militia? Had the corps also fallen in battle? He wouldn't be able to fully comprehend the casualties until he returned, and he clicked his tongue. This was where the kind Princess Valiele would be given a splash of cruel reality—she'd face the consequences of war. The mere thought pained Faust's heart.

Chapter 16:
Dreams Are Beautiful

FAUST AND CAROLINE, THE MAJOR PLAYERS OF the war, had stepped away from the battlefield. My corps had started to rack up a few kills of their own. The militia that Faust had kept behind him were sent to the rear to catch their breaths. Helga and her twenty Polidoro residents stepped out along with the fifteen corps onto the front line to face the remaining twenty soldiers of Caroline's army. Helga's soldiers were refined and experienced, but they were each forced to handle at least two people at once—this wouldn't be an easy battle. Under Helga's orders, the Polidoro residents supported the corps and skillfully fought on the field. This would be a landslide victory in my favor, and the skirmish had drawn to a close, but the soldiers who were out fighting for their lives desperately wielded their weapons.

"We got her! Next!" one shouted.

"Support our allies from the flank!" Captain Zabine roared. "Not a single one of our corps is allowed to die here!"

Zabine had managed to kill an enemy herself, and she swiftly moved to the rear to take command of the corps. A corps member killed an enemy and then remained at my side; her role was to protect me at all costs.

"Your Highness, you look pale," Hannah said. She peered into my face with worry as she stood near me.

"A lot of the militia have fallen," I observed. "I think more than ten of them have been killed. Faust worked so hard, and yet…"

"It is what it is." Hannah's words came off as cruel and cold. "This is the battlefield."

"A battlefield… Right."

She's absolutely right. This is a battlefield, I thought. I knew that, of course, ever since I'd seen the decapitated corpses that had been relentlessly beaten in that tiny village. I had understood that battles were grisly, but there were two things that I'd learned today. First, the Knight of Wrath possessed exceptional power unlike anything that I'd ever seen before. Second, I would never get used to the screams of death, the roars of victory, and the clangs of metal that filled the battlefield.

Quite frankly, I was afraid. I still couldn't break out of my timid shell despite this battle that occurred in front of my eyes. *Will someone come for my life? Will someone try to take my head?* I was a good distance away from the front line, but terror still gripped my body.

"The corps—*my* corps won't die, will they?" I asked.

"We aren't that weak," Hannah assured. "We're still of noble blood, and we've got more technique and gear than the militia."

She tried to quell my fears, and her words rang true—indeed, not a single one of my knights had fallen yet. They were far stronger than I'd expected. Naturally, they'd had a rocky start because it was their first actual battle, but once they killed a few enemies, they regained their confidence and cut people down as though going through a training exercise. *I hope it ends like this.* Just then, a woman from the enemy side leaped out from between the corps and the Polidoro citizens. In her hand was a crossbow—a weapon with an unparalleled strength that Faust had continued to use, undeterred by the protests of the church.

"Found you! You must be the commander in chief!" she shouted.

Blood trickled from her head; no doubt she'd sustained quite the blow. I could read her state of mind from her frenzied eyes, and I could only stand there, petrified with fright. My sister's words about resolve echoed in my head.

"You may think that your rear forces are protected a safe distance away, but elite soldiers can sneak in and attack you from behind."

"I'll take you down with me!" the woman shouted.

I was in the trajectory of the crossbow. *I'm gonna die here.* I was so terrified that I froze completely.

"Princess Valiele!" Hannah shouted.

She rushed in front and shielded me from the weapon that was aimed directly at my body. The unmistakable twang of the bow reached my ears, and I heard the arrow piercing through the front of her chain mail and exit from the back. Hannah's wounded body fell to the ground instantly.

"Hannah!" I cried.

I rushed to her side, but she lay there motionless, totally lifeless.

"You wench!" I roared.

I glared at the woman who'd just fired her crossbow, but she only replied with a nasty grin. She proudly threw out her arms.

"This is it, I guess," she said. "Kill me!"

"You don't have to tell *me* twice!" I shouted.

I unsheathed my blade and rushed to do just that. Rage filled my head at the loss of Hannah, and I furiously swung my weapon. I paid no heed to my surroundings.

"You! You dare strike Hannah!" I howled.

For the first time in my life, intense wrath coursed through my body. I peeled away my timid exterior and forgot about fear as I unleashed my fury. I first gouged out her eyes. Then I sliced off her ear. The woman fell to the ground, and I stomped on her face to break her teeth in. As she became motionless, I plunged my sword into her chest and finished her off.

"You… Because of you, Hannah's…" I rumbled.

Slowly, my senses came back to me, and I regained my cool. *I just killed someone.* Reality began to set in—I didn't care that I had made my first kill.

"Hannah!" I screamed.

Blood dripped from my sword as I turned back and rushed to a fallen Hannah's side. My legs started to tremble. I'd calmed down, and only now did my body register that I'd ended a life.

***

Hannah dreamed. She dreamed of her childhood days.

"I'd wanted a boy," she'd been told countless times.

Her father, mother, and sister all said the same words. It wasn't easy to birth a boy—only one in ten babies were boys. She was of noble blood and born into a house of a hereditary peer, but she was the fourth child. In short, she was unneeded, a backup of a backup of a backup. No one held any sort of expectations for her; she was completely redundant.

Thus, her family treated her rather poorly. She managed to receive knight training but was forced to adhere to horribly strict standards. One simple mistake earned her a reprimand for being such a foolish, idiotic child. She soon quit midway and didn't finish her education. However, curiously, she was absurdly skilled with the sword and spear. She could defeat her older sisters in combat and best those who were much older than her. This earned her a good amount of jealousy.

At the dinner table, she always received smaller portions than her sisters. *But who cares?* she thought. Indeed, she had no good memories of her childhood. When she turned fourteen, she was thrown out of her house like she'd been banished from the family.

"You will now become a member of Princess Valiele's corps," she was told.

She was grateful to receive the position. No longer would she need to see the blood family that she abhorred. She didn't hold a shred of love for her family anymore and instead saw them as enemies to be detested. She headed for the royal palace and underwent the ceremony to become an official knight. It was then that she met ten-year-old Valiele for the first time.

The princess was four years younger than her, but Hannah was a knight who'd quit her education midway. *Can I make it through my inauguration into knighthood?* She was anxious about the entire ordeal.

"Become a protector and guardian to the church, widowers, and those who serve God as they stand against the atrocities of heathens," Princess Valiele said. She gave Hannah her blessing.

The princess tapped the knight's shoulder with the blade, and Hannah couldn't find a response. She'd completely forgotten what she was supposed to say here. *What was the script again?* Her mental capacity was close to a chimpanzee's, and she remained quiet as she desperately tried to recall the right words.

Princess Valiele chuckled. "Don't worry about it. Just stay quiet. I'm a backup, and so are you. Let's work together and do our best."

She smiled serenely at Hannah, who couldn't even remember the knight's oath. Hannah's years since she joined the corps were fun—there was no other word for it. The fourteen nightmarish years that she'd lived until now faded in comparison to the enjoyment that she felt in the corps. Every single member was a fool, almost refreshingly so. All of them were idiots. For the first time in her life, she had made comrades and even friends in the corps. She was also a bit shocked to learn that there were so many fools like her in the world.

Captain Zabine was the worst of them all, and it wasn't even close. Just like them, she had become a knight and received the lowest rank of nobility, but she insisted on being the captain, simply

because she claimed to be great at speeches. *What kind of logic is that?* Hannah had thought at the time. Zabine refused to listen to any other suggestions and went on a rampage when she was denied the role. And so, Her Highness begrudgingly made Zabine the captain of the corps.

"You know, I actually wanted to make *you* captain, Hannah," Princess Valiele said.

Hannah was ecstatic to hear the princess's words. The knight had never been praised back at home. In any case, Zabine was beyond awful. One day, she devised a plan to peek at the page boys changing clothes and asked Hannah to join in. She considered voicing her dissent, but she was a young girl of sixteen; she'd be lying if she said that she *wasn't* interested in men.

She had a bit of knowledge. Captain Zabine would speak about indecent topics, and Hannah would listen with excitement. She had no idea where the captain got her information, but the vice-captain set her concerns aside. In fact, Hannah had never seen a nude guy before.

"You're curious too, aren't you, Hannah?" Zabine asked.

Of course Hannah was. And so, the fifteen knights of Princess Valiele's corps all snuck out and tried to catch a peek at the boys. They were caught almost immediately. *I mean, how could all fifteen of us sneak around and catch a glimpse?* It was only natural that her large, conspicuous group stood out, and Hannah was astonished that none of them had tried to stop this mission. *Are we all dumber than apes?* she thought. She almost doubted reality. Yet, though they caused trouble, Princess Valiele didn't fire them from their posts.

"I apologized to Mother in your stead," she said. "And that's that. That's how I'd like to end this, but…"

"But you won't, I take it?" Zabine asked.

"Of course not! You numbskulls! You chimps! Sit down right there, right in front of me! And you better look sharp!"

All fifteen knights obediently sat in front of the princess and received a harsh scolding. Hannah looked back on it fondly—the princess's reprimands were different from the ones that the knight had experienced during her childhood days. To be reproached by Princess Valiele, who she loved and respected so much, felt almost like a reward, and it turned into a wonderful memory. Hannah's days in the corps were filled with such fun. She dreamed on.



She knew that Princess Valiele wouldn't become a queen. First and foremost, she wasn't suited for the role; she was far too kind, and that was just fine. Her Highness could simply be the corps' master, and that was good enough. Hannah needed no one else—the princess would be her commander, and only hers. The corps were currently mere knights—the lowest-ranking nobles who were short on money. But one day, they'd climb their way up and be granted hereditary knighthoods.

They would all scrape together some cash so that they could buy a barrel of liquor at their usual saloon. They'd manage to find a noble husband and share him around. Hannah would give birth to a child. *And then… And then…* Hannah dreamed.

All too soon, the time came for her to awaken. A man's voice woke her up from her lovely dream.

"There are others who're gravely wounded," he said. "I shall begin to command my citizens to treat the injured. Your Highness, please stay by the lady who's at your knees. I shall take over from here."

"But what about Hannah?!" Her Highness cried. "She's the most gravely injured! Faust, please! I beg of you, please save her!"

"Princess Valiele."

I can see that she's crying. Why's she crying? Hannah wondered. Sir Polidoro looked at her with a pained expression, like he was holding something back.

"This is the role that I cannot take from you," Sir Polidoro said. "It's both the duty and the obligation of a master to witness the end of their subjects—to be with them until their dying breaths."

Still atop his steed, he turned and stepped away. *Oh. I'm dying. My dreams are gonna end here.* Hannah managed to understand her situation from their conversation.

"Are you awake?! You are, aren't you?!" Her Highness said. "You can still live, can't you, Hannah?"

"It's… It's only natural for the corps to protect you, Your Highness," Hannah said.

Her mouth didn't move as she would've liked. For some reason, she felt so incredibly sleepy. She felt tempted to close her eyes once more and fall fast asleep, but her mind compelled her to stay awake. She couldn't sleep now, not until she stopped Princess Valiele's tears.

"Princess Valiele," Hannah croaked.

"What is it?" she asked. "You're such a fool. How could you become my shield? Nothing good will come from protecting me."

I'm so sleepy. Why won't Princess Valiele stop crying?

"No, but this will be a part of your honor," Her Highness prattled on. "This will be a scar of honor for you. I'll beg my mother and see to it that your rank is raised. And then you can live a better life! And then… And then you'll…"

I don't think I can keep my eyes open anymore. I'm sorry, Princess Valiele. I'm sorry to always frustrate you. If I fall asleep here, I think you'll be mad at me again. So, before I go, I want to at least tell you one last thing.

"Princess Valiele, you know, I loved you very much," Hannah said.

At the very least, she wanted to tell her heartfelt thoughts to the princess. Hannah felt no loyalty to the royal family. She was ashamed to admit it as a noble, but she felt not an ounce of faith in them. She swore loyalty to Princess Valiele because the knight loved her as a person. That was all. *Ah, I'm so sleepy.* Hannah closed her eyes.

"Hannah! Please, wake up!" Princess Valiele screamed. She was on her knees and begging for her wish to be granted.

Hannah never awoke again. She took one final breath and fell into an eternal slumber. No longer would she dream. Only the

furious pleas of Princess Valiele, who yelled for her loyal subordinate to open her eyes, echoed throughout the battlefield.

Chapter 17:
Nonnegotiable

A NIGHT HAD PASSED SINCE THAT BATTLE. THE men and boys wept as they clutched onto their fallen wives and mothers of the militia. Faust did his best to prevent any further casualties as he ordered his residents to treat the wounded.

"Don't cry," Zabine mumbled to herself. "Hannah fulfilled her duties, that's all. Don't cry."

She clutched the cold hand of her closest friend in the corps and spent every moment by her fallen comrade's side. The captain had even fallen asleep the night prior as she held Hannah's hand. Faust told me to get some rest, but I was still rattled by Hannah's death. Combined with the shock that I'd taken the life of another for the first time on my own, I had become oblivious to my surroundings. I took Faust's suggestion and took some time to myself.

Needless to say, the corps was shocked by the loss of Hannah, but they worked their hardest to protect me. They knew that any free time would cause them to dwell upon the loss of their fallen comrade, and so they busied themselves with work, vigilantly standing guard. My legs crumpled beneath me and the strength left my body.

"Don't cry. Please don't. I'm begging you," Zabine told herself. Just as she'd done last night, she brushed her face against Hannah's cold hand as tears streamed down her cheeks. "Hannah fought splendidly and fulfilled her duties."

The captain desperately implored herself to stay strong, but her efforts were in vain—the tears wouldn't stop. I imagined that she regretted this battle. In retrospect, had she not rallied the militia

and encouraged a battle, Hannah wouldn't have died. But she could only see this with hindsight.

The alternative had been to abandon those villagers and the kidnapped victims and retreat to the royal capital. Neither a single member of the corps nor I blamed Zabine for Hannah's death. The captain had been so close with Hannah—they were irreplaceable best friends. Zabine continued to weep for her fallen comrade; the mantra she'd mumbled to herself moments before proved ineffective as her tears fell upon Hannah's cold hand. I was in a daze as I stared at the sight, but I didn't stop her.

Cry, I thought. *Cry as much as your heart desires.* I'd sobbed so much that I felt like my entire body was dehydrated. It would be best for now if Zabine wept in my stead. I watched the captain cry as these thoughts filled my head. Out in the distance, I heard the faint neigh of a horse, the sound of hooves, and the stomps of boots. I jumped to my feet and called for my reliable advisor.

"Faust!" I said. "Is it Villendorf?!"

"No, Your Highness," Faust calmly replied. "That's not Villendorf."

A pair of bifocals hung around his neck—loot that he'd seized from Caroline. He peered through the item to gaze in the direction of the sound.

"I can see the flag of Duke Astarte," he said. "Reinforcements have arrived."

They're too slow! I thought angrily. *If they'd arrived a day sooner, Hannah would've…* I knew that my complaints were meaningless, and my assumptions were all purely hypothetical. Even if I knew that I couldn't fault them for their late arrival, I also couldn't stop myself from pinning the blame on them. I thought about what my next actions could be.

"Faust, I'm sorry to trouble you, but…" I started. I tried to leave all the decisions to my advisor, but I stopped myself. For some reason, I felt compelled to handle this situation. "Faust, I order you

as Princess Valiele of Anhalt Kingdom, the victor of this battle: We shall welcome the reinforcements. Make haste and prepare our allies."

"Yes, Your Highness," Faust replied.

He bent his knees and bowed. *In the end, I'm still just leaving it all to him. The only difference is making a request or an order.* This may have only been a minor change, but it made a huge difference, at least to me. Until now, I'd clung to Faust and begged him to make the decisions for me. As these thoughts raced through my head, I decided to welcome the duke as well. Faust told the magistrate that reinforcements had arrived; he ordered the militia, as well as the men and boys, to be gathered in one place. He had the gravely wounded out in the front in hopes that the medics would treat them immediately. He called for Helga, his chief squire, and swiftly made preparations.

I tried to do the bare minimum and ordered my corps to welcome the duke. *My corps… I'll have Zabine sit this one out.* She needed time, just like I did—she needed a few more moments to get back on her feet. I entrusted Zabine with a special mission: to guard Hannah's corpse. I then appointed a member of the corps to become the temporary captain—she had originally been one of my candidates for captain alongside Hannah. My corps wasn't doing well by any stretch of the imagination, but I still needed them to act here.

The herald of the reinforcements approached us on horseback. "We're the army of Duke Astarte, dispatched to offer reinforcements! We'd like to confirm the situation!"

"I'm Princess Valiele, second to the throne of Anhalt! The battle has already ended. Caroline has been splendidly slain by my advisor, Faust von Polidoro, and the enemy forces have been annihilated! We're currently in the midst of cleaning up after the battle. Some villagers have formed a militia and joined us in the battle, and several are gravely injured! Do you have any medics around?"

I shouted my response, and the scout seemed a bit stunned before mustering a reply. "U-understood. We've confirmed your situation. Duke Astarte's army should arrive in half an hour, and we indeed have several medics! I ask that you give us a few moments, and I shall promptly report this to Her Grace!"

The knight turned on her heels and rushed her horse back to the approaching Astarte army. I breathed a sigh of relief, but I was already exhausted by the mere thought of meeting with the duke. I was afraid of her eyes. She knew I was nothing more than an ordinary person, and she didn't hide her distaste toward me. Those eyes terrified me—it made her loathing of my mediocre self so clear. It was a reality that I couldn't deny. *How will I fare against her now?*

I'd fought in a battle where we had the disadvantage by numbers, lost ten members of the militia—my citizens—in battle, lost one of my knights, and worked Faust to the bone. Still, a win was a win. My results were satisfactory for a noble, and I'd lost very few lives to achieve this victory.

Perhaps those around me would praise me for such good results, but I couldn't find it in me to honestly accept the compliments. I felt like my existence as the younger princess made me unsuitable for this outcome. *How will Duke Astarte view me?* I was frightened and anxious. The duke had volunteered for the role of Anastasia's advisor, and when I looked into her eyes, I felt like she was questioning not just my worth but the reason for my existence.

No, stop. I'll face Duke Astarte. I must. It was imperative for me to become a person who could lock eyes with her firmly. I had no idea why I felt this way, but that didn't stop the emotions that filled my heart.

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Astarte hated Valiele for her laughable mediocrity. A commoner could've been excused, but a mediocre noble was the one thing that the duke hated more than anything in the world.

"Ten members of the militia were lost, along with one knight, but they managed to defeat seventy soldiers and thirty bandits—a total of a hundred enemies," Astarte said. Her pen glided across her report before she tore off a bit of paper. "Send this back to Queen Liesenlotte on the swiftest horse."

Her attendant bowed and took the report. "Yes, Your Grace."

Within the camp that the duke had set up, soldiers were busily running around treating the injured militia. Her knights were all at attention, ordered to guard Her Grace.

"Now, Princess Valiele," the duke said. "You've achieved a splendid result for your first battle. How do you feel?"

"It's all thanks to the militia, the corps, and above all, Faust," Her Highness replied. "I haven't done a thing."

"I would've guessed as much."

The duke nodded back. She was certain that Faust had done most of the work. When she'd gone to fondle his ass—no, to confirm the situation as her soldiers took over to treat the wounded, she was told that he'd probably killed around forty enemies. The Knight of Wrath never kept track of his kills, and he had a tendency to underestimate his efforts. It was likely that he'd single-handedly wiped out more than half of the entire enemy army. *I'm glad he wasn't born in Villendorf,* Astarte thought. She returned to reality and faced Valiele.

Hmm… Did she always have that look in her eyes? The mediocre royal always stares at the ground, trembling in fear from the gazes of Anastasia and me. Interesting. Maybe I'll speak with her for a bit more.

"Your Highness, why don't we move to a smaller space?" Astarte offered. "I'd like to speak with you."

"Very well," Valiele replied.

"Have your corps stand on guard outside our camp. We're near the Villendorf border, and we don't know what dangers may be

lurking about."

"Right."

Valiele and Astarte headed into a smaller tent. They each took a seat on one of two crude, folded chairs before the duke posed her question.

"So, you lost one of your knights who protected you, and you avenged her by killing the enemy with your own hands. How do you feel, Your Highness?"

"Who told you?" Valiele asked.

"Faust. He bowed his head and whispered a request to me to be considerate of your feelings. He's a kind man, isn't he?" Astarte peered down into the princess's face. "I accepted his request, of course, but it's not like I have to make good on my word."

Astarte would rather die than have Faust hate her. And so, she complied with his request—in fact, she even considered keeping her promise. However, her mindset soon shifted. She was deeply interested in this new Valiele. *She's changed a bit. She can now look straight into my eye. Every now and then, I'll stumble across a mediocre person who undergoes some sort of transformation. What changed for her?*

"And how does it feel? How does it feel to kill someone?" Astarte asked.

"Hannah died a valiant death for my sake," Valiele replied. "I calmly assessed my situation and avenged her. I think my actions live up to my title as a noble."

"I see."

She's lying. She's clearly putting up a tough front. I'd wager that she went into a frenzied state and avenged her knight. Even Anastasia had lost her cool on the battlefield. During the Campaign of Villendorf, she was suddenly attacked during her first battle, and one of her knights was killed in front of her eyes. She went into a fit of rage and charged the enemies before her, which caused

communication with Astarte to disconnect for a brief moment. The same had happened during Queen Liesenlotte's first battle as well.

Astarte herself had fallen into a similar state of wrath during her first battle when a subject of hers had been killed. The duke had slain countless enemies on the battlefield. *That's the blood that we share.*

"Your Highness," Astarte started.

"What? We're related. You can just drop the honorifics here," Valiele said.

"All right. Valiele, while Faust appears to have done most of the work, your first battle is a splendid achievement. I doubt that the other lords and Nobles of the Robe can mock you so easily now. What is your next move?"

This was an important question—Valiele was no longer a backup princess treated as mere decoration. What did the royal want to do? What did she wish for?

"My corps," Valiele started.

"Your corps?" Astarte asked.

"I want them raised and each bestowed with a hereditary knighthood."

It was a peculiar response. Astarte had wanted to know what the royal's plans were, not those for her subordinates.

"Wait, what?" Astarte inquired. "You want to *raise* them? What do you mean by that?"

"I'm not interested in the throne," Valiele replied. "I never thought that I had a chance at the crown anyway, never mind whether I was worthy of it. But even I have something." She clenched her fists as though to keep a tight grip on her newfound goal. "Even I have subjects. And I didn't even notice it until now. I'm an idiot, aren't I? It's no wonder that you looked down on me for being so average."

She let out a dry laugh before she went on. "I thought that my sister would become queen, and I would enter a monastery. That would be the end of my life. I'd been resigned to that fate until now, but I've got a goal—a precious thing that's nonnegotiable."

"And what would that be?" Astarte asked, dying to hear the answer.

"My knights. I'll raise my corps to become worthy of higher ranks. I'll perform military service across the kingdom, enter negotiations, or do any odd jobs that are required. I'll raise their ranks and do anything to give them more experience. I'll fulfill my duties as a noble and as their commander."

What an odd woman. She's grown in the most curious of ways, Astarte thought simply. There were those who stumbled upon success in battle and drowned in greed. Some would go insane from the devastating pain of the loss of their subjects. Others still would love the commoners and the citizens so much that they couldn't handle death. Many nobles would meet an unfortunate end, but Valiele chose another route.

She claimed to need nothing more than bright futures for her corps. To fulfill her simple goal, she was determined to conduct her duties as a noble. Naturally, she would also carry out any tasks that came with her responsibilities, all to achieve her goal. *What an odd woman.* It was all Astarte could think. A person with too much sympathy could grow in the most unexpected of ways.

"Princess Valiele," the duke said.

"What? You're so formal with me," Valiele replied.

"To be honest, I hated you."

The royal smiled. Her expression implied that she was quite aware of the duke's thoughts.

"But now, I don't hate you as much," the duke finished.

"You still won't like me though," the princess pointed out.

"As a member of the royal family, your goals are slightly—no, extremely off base. You're a mediocre person, through and through."

Valiele said not a word. She simply smiled at the duke's words in agreement and implied that she very much concurred with that sentiment. *She's truly grown in the most curious of ways.* Astarte ended the conversation and stepped out of the tent alone. Her goal was to head back to Faust and fondle his buttocks.

Chapter 17.5:
The Trip Back to the Royal Capital

THE TRIP BACK HOME WAS A DARK ONE. I LEFT the duke to handle the rest, and we decided to head back to the royal capital to give an official report. Faust and I climbed atop our steeds and stood at the front. My corps and Faust's citizens walked behind us. In the center was a single wagon that carried the body of my precious knight—Hannah, the vice-captain.

"Faust, I'm sorry," I said.

"For what, Your Highness?" he inquired.

"For this march having been delayed."

Faust's citizens had kindly offered to help transport Hannah's body, but my corps had refused the help. They voiced their gratitude, but they were intent on carrying Hannah's body back with just their hands. Some of my knights had been injured in combat, and they were exhausted from their first battle. Their footsteps were sluggish as they pushed the heavy cart, and now and then, Zabine would burst into tears. My captain was a wretched mess, and the vice-captain had been killed in action.

I must be the one to remain strong, I thought. I did my best to remind myself of that and decided to ask Faust's people for help. I knew my corps would be against it, but we needed the support to transport Hannah's body.

Just then, Faust opened his mouth. "Could you wait here, please?"

I wasn't sure if he'd heard the words I'd said moments before as he stroked Flugel's back and jumped off his horse. He ran ahead.

"Faust?" I called.

Occasionally he'd glance around. It seemed like he'd found something on the side of the road, and he crouched down with his massive body. His hands delicately darted across the ground, and he seemed to have plucked something before he slowly stood up to turn back to me.

"Flowers?" I asked.

He clutched plain wildflowers in his hands. The road ahead was dark, unlike our bright victory, but he'd finally spotted a cluster of flora. He plucked many of the tiny blooms, and with large strides, he slowly walked past me and the subjects following me. The Knight of Wrath approached the wagon that contained Hannah's corpse.

"Lady Zabine," he said.

The haggard captain, who'd been slowly pushing the wagon, looked up quizzically. "Sir Polidoro? Those flowers…"

"I know it's not much, but I'd like to pay my respects to the knight who protected Princess Valiele," Faust said. "May I?"

Zabine fell silent for a few moments and showed hesitation until she finally gave her answer. "I don't think Hannah's ever received flowers from a man before. Sure, go right ahead. I'm sure that it'd make her happy."

"Thank you."

With that, he took the flowers and carefully placed them in the simple casket that contained Hannah's body. Once he finished, he turned back to the captain.

"Lady Zabine, please stay strong," he said.

"I know," Zabine replied.

She looked a little more cheerful. *Ah, that must be where I'm lacking as a leader,* I thought. Faust ruled over a small territory, but he was a terrific lord knight precisely because of his actions. While I was worried about the return trip's delay, Faust's mind was filled with ways to soothe the pained hearts of the ladies. He slowly approached me.

"All right, let's go. We're in no rush; let's take it easy," he said.

I thanked Faust just as Zabine had done, but my voice was reduced to a whisper, and then I fell silent. I felt embarrassed for failing to do what he'd just done. I had no right to even relay my gratitude to him and could only give a vague response.

"Right," I said.

We slowly began our march once again, but our pace was much quicker than before. We took a break in between that helped replenish our stamina, but that one simple gesture from Faust had cheered up my corps a great deal. I wasn't capable of such consideration.

"Faust," I called.

"Yes, Your Highness?" he replied.

"Why don't you quit being my advisor and work under my sister? There've been talks about changing your post."

I now had a dream: to raise my corps into magnificent knights. I'd do anything, and make my knights do whatever they could so that they might be bestowed with hereditary knighthoods. I felt guilty about dragging Faust into my goals.

"I'll decline," he said casually. "I've actually already been scouted by Princess Anastasia once, but I refused her offer."

"Why?" I asked.

Surely he could receive more money and enjoy a higher status if he worked under my sister.

"I've got a few reasons, but for now, my biggest factor is that I'm very curious about you, Your Highness."

"I've got nothing to offer."

"That may have been so, before this first battle." He patted Flugel's back now and again and enjoyed the feeling of his horse's hide. "But you firmly voiced your intentions to Duke Astarte, and you

spoke about wanting to raise your subjects into magnificent knights. I quite like that side of you."

"Did you hear it from Duke Astarte?"

"She told me everything before I parted ways with her." Faust glanced at me. "I've got emotions too, you see. To be honest, I admire and respect you very much, Your Highness."

He gazed straight into my eyes, smiled, and turned back to face the path before us. I felt a bit embarrassed by this exchange. *Admiration and respect, huh? What do I think of Faust?* I thought back to when we met. At first, it was purely a contract. I'd issued orders to a lord knight who was waiting to have the queen's audience to report a change of lords. I gave him some money and the prestige of being the advisor to the princess. In exchange, the lord knight would become my pillar of support. It was a clean transaction, and nothing more. At least on the surface, that was all it was.

In truth, I had a few more thoughts within me. "Father…"

I wasn't sure how intensely my mother and my sister felt, but they surely held similar feelings toward Faust. My father hadn't been as tall as the lord knight, and they looked completely different. They were both kind, but they didn't share the exact same personality. Still, they resembled each other, somehow. He was just like my late father, Robert. Perhaps they had a similar aura.

"So you found a replacement for our father, did you?" Anastasia had said.

I quietly recalled my sister's words. She'd made that remark as she passed by me in the palace. She must've ridiculed me for clinging onto a man who resembled my father so much. Maybe her words implied that she wanted him for her own. Back then, only one thought flashed across my mind. *I never want to hand Faust over to her.* Yet the words I'd just said to Faust had contradicted those same thoughts—I'd suggested that he work under my sister.

Though my words were contradictory, they weren't lies. He was loyal to me—to a princess who wished for the happiness of her idiotic corps. And I wished the same sort of happiness for him as well.

"Faust, can you hear out a request?" I asked.

"What is it, Your Highness?" he asked. He looked puzzled at my question.

He assumed that the conversation had ended, but it hadn't at all. On the contrary, it'd only begun.

"You're my advisor," I said. "I'm counting on you."

No doubt Faust felt admiration and respect for me—nothing more. But Faust had just said that he'd never forsake me. It seemed this first battle had changed me a great deal after all, and I'd gotten greedier.

"One day," I said. Should my prayers be answered, surely that day would come. "I'd like to visit your fief, Faust."

Someday, should this all be over, I wanted to be by Faust's side. Should a day come when I'd planned to enter a monastery, and all the fuss had truly ended, perhaps instead a princess like me would be allowed to become the wife of a lord knight who ruled over the tiny Polidoro fief. If I could fully utilize the minuscule bit of power that I obtained from this first battle, perhaps my wishes would come true. I began to see a little dream. Although of course my wants could never be prioritized over the desires of my beloved corps members.

"Right…" Faust said. He blinked a few times and looked a little troubled, unaware of the thoughts that raced through my head. "My land is by no means wealthy, and we truly don't have much to offer, but if you don't mind that…"

He didn't understand the true meaning behind my words. It seemed Faust was utterly dense at times—he had zero clue that a small seed of love had sprouted within my heart.

"I'm counting on you," I said.

I closed my mouth and quietly continued the ride back home; we'd reach the royal capital soon. I began to think about preparations for Hannah's funeral procession.

Chapter 18:
The Beginning of the Battle's Aftermath

I WALKED WITHIN THE ROYAL CASTLE. I'D FULFILLED my duties as the princess and taken care of the battle's aftermath before I'd returned to Anhalt's royal capital. I'd brought Hannah's body with us. My corps, Faust, and I were present for her burial. Only the sixteen of us quietly laid Hannah to rest.

My mother had wanted to give Hannah a befitting rank, as she'd lost her life to protect me. The queen suggested a posthumous promotion for my knight and solemnly promised to expedite the process with the Nobles of the Robe—the queen's corps. I didn't think Hannah would like that. My corps and I requested to conduct Hannah's funeral just between ourselves; we believed that it would make her the happiest.

Above all, I feared that the story of her honorable death would spread, and her family would abruptly change their tune. If they began to visit her grave to glorify her death, I knew that Hannah would be most displeased. She'd scold me angrily from the afterlife.

"Zabine," I called.

"Yes, Princess Valiele?" my captain replied. She was beside me.

"Are you still preoccupied with Hannah's death?"

Zabine sighed sadly. She hadn't been able to regain her energy just yet. "Your Highness, about the villagers in that land…"

"As you may already know, Duke Astarte's handling it. I've also spoken to my mother. You've got nothing to worry about."

Zabine had riled them up and sent them to their deaths. The magistrate had toughed it out through the injury that she'd sustained and commanded the militia, thereby restoring their dignity. Including the wounded, thirty members of the militia had survived,

and the men and boys had been rescued from their abductors. Duke Astarte had stated that she'd send us the ten fallen members of the militia.

The weapons and money that Caroline had stolen were collected by the duke. The loot would then be divvied among the bereaved families of the fallen militia. We'd lost a few women, but we managed to retrieve the men and boys. My mother would order a few bureaucrats to gather a few immigrants who'd move to that village. The officials would keep a close eye while slowly restoring the population, and that tiny village would be able to rebuild the little bit of happiness that they'd lost.

It was a long road ahead—it'd take a while for the survivors to move on from the deaths of their friends. The destructive scars that Caroline had left in that village would take many years to heal.

"I see…" Zabine muttered.

No doubt it'd take longer for the village to rebuild their lives than it would for Zabine to get back on her feet. This incident had allowed her to climb two ranks. The rest of my corps had also increased a rank. Ultimately, we'd managed to stop a traitor who'd attacked a village under the royal family's control, abducted men and boys, stolen money, and even tried to sell our kingdom's information to Villendorf to defect. My mother had declared that Zabine's role in our battle against Caroline was worthy of a promotion. However, Faust had a few words to say about Zabine's two-rank promotion. My mother looked confused; she'd heard that it was the corps' captain who'd mobilized a militia to join the battle.

"It was the optimal solution in that situation," Faust said. "I'll admit that anyone can see that, looking at the results of this battle. Still, I'd like to say a few words."

Faust spoke honestly and provided some candid complaints about Zabine's speech. My mother's jaw clenched when she heard the full story, and in retrospect, the captain's words were too callous for a noble. But the ends justified the means.

My mother stated that she would order the Minstrel Guild to weave a tale of heroism where the militia were struck by Zabine's passionate words and rallied together to fight against evil. This time around, she'd fudge the details a little. I could still recall the look of resignation on Faust's face—he agreed with my mother's solution.

Thus, Zabine managed to keep her promotion. I decided to scold her a little so that Faust wouldn't be so irritated next time. Of course, I didn't expect Zabine to repeat her mistakes. It seemed like she genuinely regretted causing the deaths of the militia members and Hannah. I only hoped that the falsified tale of her valiance that would circulate around the royal capital wouldn't pain my captain too greatly. The minstrels would sing as they were ordered to, after all.

But I won't hold my breath for it. Zabine's face was as glum as ever, and I wondered whether she was sleeping at night. Occasionally, I'd jump out of bed in fright as the sounds of the battlefield and the face of the woman I killed haunted my dreams. *Would time help me move past it all?*

I decided to think about something else. *Did Faust receive anything for his efforts this time around?* After the Campaign of Villendorf, Faust had only asked for a paltry sum of money in exchange for his grand efforts. My mother and the other Nobles of the Robe had decided that he was a man with no greed.

Faust's reward for this battle hadn't been publicized yet. *Wait… am I supposed to reward him through my budget? I mean, he entered the war as my advisor. It's only natural for me to reward him, and perhaps that's why my mother hasn't said anything about it yet.*

It all made sense in my head, and I nodded. I could allocate some money for him from my tiny budget with what little power I had, but I didn't think it'd satisfy him. *I must consult my mother about this later. We can reward him from our national budget or maybe increase my annual budget so that I can satisfy his needs. I preserved the dignity of this kingdom; surely I deserve that much, at*

least. I walked within the corridors of the royal castle as a number of thoughts swirled around in my mind.

"Ah, Valiele. Good day," my sister said.

"Anastasia," I said. "Um, yes, good day."

I froze under her gaze. *Damn it.* I was able to lock eyes with Duke Astarte, but my older sister still terrified me. *Besides, you really do look way too scary. Even Faust doesn't like to gaze into your eyes. I'm allowed to be scared by you, aren't I?* I knew that I was making excuses. As a princess, I'd sworn to stand tall and proud so that I wouldn't humiliate my corps. *I have to look her in the eyes.*

"So, you can finally greet me properly," Anastasia said. "Very good."

"Um, thank…you?" I replied. I was a little confused. Did my sister approve of me now, even just a little?

"I'd like to ask you something."

"Go ahead."

What does she want to ask me? I haven't the faintest clue.

"Did the lesson I gave you on steeling your resolve prove useful to you?" she inquired.

I fell silent for a brief moment. *What did she tell me again? First, I cannot predict what'll occur on the battlefield*. *There are times when there are discrepancies between reality and the information that I receive. Second, I may think that in the rear, I'm protected and a safe distance away, but elite soldiers can sneak around and attack me. And third, the life of my beloved can be snuffed out in the blink of an eye.*

"The battle went exactly as you'd warned me," I said. "But unfortunately, I wasn't able to make use of your advice."

"Is that so?" Anastasia replied. "I read Faust and Astarte's reports. It's clear to me that the situation you were in was absolutely horrid. You don't need to be so bothered by my advice."

"Regardless, I apologize for being unable to utilize your words."

My apology was genuine. While I couldn't know what went on in her mind, I could tell that she'd been worried about me in her own way.

"Valiele," she said.

"Yes?" I replied. I stared into her snakelike eyes.

"Were you able to maintain your composure and calmly assess your situation, even after someone dear to you died right in front of your eyes?"

"No."

I'd put up a tough front for Duke Astarte, but I decided to be honest with my sister. *Have I failed as a royal?*

"I see. That's very good to hear," Anastasia said.

"Pardon?" I asked. I stared back at my sister blankly, unable to understand the meaning behind her words.

"When our loved ones fall in front of us, we go into a bit of a frenzy and wildly slash at our enemies. Our entire bloodline shares this trait, you see."

I didn't respond. *Uh, is that…a good thing? Shouldn't we be calm at all times? Even more so during times of emergency.*

"Quite honestly, I doubted whether you were from our bloodline at all," Anastasia said.

I remained silent. *You hated me that much, huh? I knew that, but still.* I was taken aback by her confession.

"But it seems I was wrong," Anastasia continued. "I see you in a new light now, Valiele."

"Th-thank you," I replied.

This time around, I could tell that she was praising me. *I guess I can be proud of myself then, right? Quite frankly, her words are a bit iffy.*

"Normally, this is where I'd part ways with you, but I've got one more thing I'd like to say," my sister said.

"Certainly," I replied. I puffed my chest out; it didn't seem like she was about to say anything unreasonable.

"Your actions this time around were rather unnecessary. Because of your excellent results, my succession to the crown has been delayed a little. According to Her Majesty, I must mind the balance of power now. How convenient it would've been if you remained meek and returned home to report your failure."

I said not a word. *All right, so you* are *gonna be unreasonable. How should I know? You don't have to totally disapprove of my work.*

"Valiele, death serves no meaning and simply signifies an end," Anastasia said. "Precisely because one is still alive, they have a chance to bloom into a beautiful flower. As a part of the royal family, we serve as the highest-ranking commanders. We aren't allowed to die, no matter the cost. Should you have died, even if the battle was won, Faust would've received some sort of penalty as the advisor to your battle. He would have been punished in some way."

"I'm aware," I replied.

Sounds to me like you were actually worried about Faust and not me. I couldn't tell where her concerns lay.

"Two more things," she said.

"And what would those be?" I replied wearily.

I'm tired of this. I don't wish to be blamed any longer.

"First, I'm glad that you returned alive, my dear sister," she said.

I was more stunned than happy—I'd never expected her to say such words to me. She was so brazen and stone-faced that the Nobles of the Robe wondered if we were biologically related at all. Her demonic glare had always been pointed at me ever since we were children. It was a real feat to earn her sincere praise.

"Second, my advisor Astarte will transport the fallen villagers from that area and do some work on her way back," Anastasia said. "You'd best be prepared."

"Prepared? And what work will the duke do?" I asked.

I'd internally shouted with joy at my sister's words, but her follow-up had caused me to stare at her dubiously. *Preparations? Work?*

"The aftermath of the battle hasn't been taken care of," Anastasia said. "The primary cause of your situation lies in the older sister of Caroline the traitor, Helma von Bosel. Helma had won the battle for inheritance and had become the new lord. That's all well and good, but she'd allowed Caroline and her subjects to flee. This resulted in the traitor directing the bandits and attacking a village under the royal family's control. We haven't questioned Helma for her carelessness yet. Astarte's nearby already, and she'll escort Helma back to the royal capital."

I fell silent. Hannah's death had shocked me so much that I'd completely forgotten about the lord—the primary reason behind our battle. She was the one who'd backed us into a corner, and I also recalled my promise. Faust had requested that I pry a handsome sum of money as compensation from Helma von Bosel for the ordeal she had caused. Faust had mentioned that he detested lord knights who couldn't clean up after themselves.

"You won't be the one interrogating her," Anastasia said. "Our mother, the queen, will be the one to do so as our ruler. However, you were involved in this entire affair and went through quite a bit of trouble. You have the right to voice your opinions should you disagree with Her Majesty's judgment."

"My…opinion," I murmured.

"Helma's trial and her punishment shall occur in the throne room. Nobles of the Robe and other members of the nobility or their representatives shall be in attendance. Everyone's rather busy, so

they won't all gather, but you must attend along with Faust, who serves as your advisor."

"Very well."

With that, my sister turned around and walked down the hall. *I should be mad at Helma.* Had she not allowed Caroline to flee, I would've simply cleaned up a few bandits, and my corps would've all been alive to return to the royal capital.

Of course, that was just an assumption. I had no idea what would've unfolded on the battlefield against just the bandits. Even so, the anger wouldn't well up inside of me. I couldn't even express my fury at Caroline—in my mind, this matter had all ended, and I was trying to move past it. But it wasn't over yet. Not at all.

"Sorry, Faust," I muttered. "I know that you want to return to your fief, but I need your help for just a bit longer."

I internally apologized to Faust, who was surely in the manor provided by the royal family, grumbling about his reward and wishing he were home.

Chapter 19:
Helma von Bosel's Defense

IN THE THRONE ROOM, QUEEN LIESENLOTTE SAT on her throne. She was surrounded by the Nobles of the Robe and other lords, along with any representatives, who stood facing each other. Helma von Bosel had been called to the stand. She was the lord of her land who'd managed to come out victorious in a battle over the succession of her house and ruled over a city that had over a thousand residents.

Her sin was the carelessness that allowed Caroline to escape. Faust saw these nobles as prosecutors and defense lawyers, ready to question the criminal for what she'd done. The Nobles of the Robe wanted to use this opportunity to strip the Bosel fief away from the lord and place it under their rule. They were the prosecutors, and their demands were quite clear.

"We should take down the Bosel fief!" they claimed.

However, the other lords didn't agree. Queen Liesenlotte may have been the parent or master in this relationship, but it was very rare for her to completely destroy a regional lord. While such cases existed in the past, the lords wanted to make them as few and far between as possible. Judging from their positions, that was absolutely the one scenario that they wanted to avoid. And so, they served as Helma's lawyers of sorts.

"We shall compensate Sir Polidoro and the royal family for their trouble," the lords claimed. "We should end this ordeal with that."

The two sides stood across from each other in the throne room as they continued to clash. Needless to say, Queen Liesenlotte was very much aware of the intentions of both sides.

"Stand down," Her Majesty ordered. "I shall reach a decision once I've heard the defense of Helma von Bosel."

To her right were Princess Anastasia and her advisor, Astarte. To the queen's left were Princess Valiele and her advisor, Faust. Everyone had gathered, and the stage had been set. All that was left was to await Helma von Bosel's arrival. What would she say? How would she defend herself and protect her land? Faust was eager to find out as he cheerfully waited.

He had quite a few issues with this military campaign. It had started with Helma allowing Caroline to flee, and it escalated Princess Valiele's first battle. While the results reflected that it was the right choice, he still couldn't believe Zabine's heartless speech, completely unbefitting a noble. Ultimately, the battle led to the deaths of ten members of the militia and one member of Valiele's corps.

Above all, Caroline's final words had bothered Faust. When he asked Duke Astarte about it, he learned that what the rebel had whispered was the name of her only daughter. Faust was very displeased by this revelation; he regretted ever hearing her last words. No doubt the young girl had been hanged already—an innocent life of a child snuffed out, just like that. While children of nobles bore more responsibility than others, Faust's values from his previous world stuck with him. This was an atrocious, unforgivable act.

But what was done was done. A frontier lord like Faust von Polidoro could make no difference at all—it was how he chose to cope with reality. He was convinced that Helma von Bosel was a lady who deserved any and all punishments that she'd get. *The nobles will come to her defense, and her house will remain, but a handsome sum of money should be paid to both me and the royal family,* Faust concluded.

"Faust, what are you smiling for?" Valiele asked.

"I'm just excited for the massive sum of money that I'll take from Lady Bosel's hands," he replied. "Will you mock me for my thoughts?"

"Not at all. You have every right to it."

This was unexpected. Faust didn't expect Valiele to agree with his train of thought; clearly, she'd matured just a little. Perhaps she'd realized something important through her first battle. Just then, the lady in question arrived.

"Helma von Bosel, step forward," the queen ordered.

Helma obediently did just that. The lady who'd won the battle of succession against Caroline looked so frail and sickly. There was no other way to describe it. She required a staff to get around and had been gravely wounded on her right leg, likely due to an attack from Caroline. And beneath the injuries, Helma herself looked very fragile. Her face was pale, and her slender limbs were reminiscent of a tree's dying branches. She very much resembled the final moments of Marianne, Faust's mother. A person like Helma couldn't possibly live for very long, and even the queen seemed quite astonished by the lady's appearance.

"Helma, I see that you've been injured by Caroline during your battle for succession," Her Majesty said. "I suppose your wounds haven't healed yet?"

"No, Your Majesty," Helma replied with her sickly frame. "My body has always been frail, and I've looked this way since birth. Please forgive me."

I can hardly believe that she managed to flee from Caroline's grasp. It seemed the queen held the same thoughts as Faust.

"How were you able to escape from Caroline's clutches?" Liesenlotte inquired. "The report states that…"

"I should've died," Helma replied.

"What was that?!" The queen was astonished.

"I should've died to my younger sister, Caroline. But I desperately clung to my life and fled into the safe room within the manor. I cowered in fear as I waited for my subjects to rid me of my younger sister and force her to retreat." Despite her fragile frame,

Helma's eyes burned with passion. "I should've died by Caroline's hands. That would've been best for everyone."

"Helma, I know not of the matters of your land. The others do not either," the queen said. She hastily stopped Helma's monologue. The Nobles of the Robe and other lords and representatives began to chatter among themselves in confusion. "I would like to hear about your situation. What happened in the Bosel fief? Only then will I come to a decision."

"Then I must tell you of our shame—the shame of my land and of myself." Helma paused for a moment before she spoke and dug through her memories. "First and foremost, as the elder daughter, I was born frail and sickly. This was the single most unfortunate event that occurred within the Bosel fief. In contrast, Caroline, the second daughter, was born very strong and sturdy. She was loved by the residents and ruled while personally mingling with the people. Ever since she was sixteen, for the next decade, she participated in the military service with our squires in my place."

Caroline's citizens were absurdly loyal to her; not a single one had fled until their dying breath. Every single one of them fought with their life on the line in a desperate attempt to allow Caroline to flee to Villendorf. That was all that mattered to them. When his mind wandered back to the battlefield where Caroline had fallen, Faust could easily comprehend the loyalty that he'd seen. For the past decade, she'd formed a bond with her residents. He'd felt that she was indeed a respectable woman, and now his assumptions were proven true.

"I believe that my mother had also planned to make Caroline the head of the house," Helma went on. "I'm incapable of ruling the land and fulfilling my military service, after all. Unfortunately, my mother hadn't made her wishes clear while she was still alive."

"Why hadn't she?" Liesenlotte asked.

Yeah, I'm curious too. Why didn't she? Faust wondered.

"I cannot say," Helma answered. "My mother suddenly passed away due to a stroke. Perhaps she took pity on her sickly daughter, or Caroline had some sort of issue that I wasn't privy to. Thinking back, I do find it odd myself. My mother didn't allow her vassals to accompany Caroline for her military service and instead had the vassals rule over the fief while Caroline was away. I truly cannot tell you what my mother's thoughts were, but had she announced Caroline as her successor while she was still alive, none of this would've happened."

Helma's answers lacked any sort of substance. Any real answers were kept in the shadows.

"Naturally, I also assumed that Caroline would inherit the house," Helma continued. "I hadn't seen it unfolding any other way. I even planned on giving up any sort of claim—as I've said before, I'm unable to fulfill my military service and I cannot rule over the land. But it seemed my sister had thoughts of her own. She assumed that she was the backup. In hindsight, I have many regrets about how this situation unfolded, but I believe that is what she thought about herself."

"Had you not talked it out amongst family before the situation got out of hand?" Liesenlotte asked.

"Caroline despised me. I was the sickly older sister who pushed military service and governing duties onto her, after all."

Helma spoke glumly. As the only son of his household, Faust couldn't quite understand her troubles, but he wondered if that was simply how some families were. The Nobles of the Robe and the other aristocrats all grimaced awkwardly, as though they could somehow relate to her struggles. And Valiele, who sat next to Faust, had a similar expression. *Strife between family members occurs in every household, I guess.*

"In any case, as I think back, I believe that Caroline had some fears about the future," Helma explained. "She was likely worried about the future of her only daughter, Martina, who she had with her

late husband. She had squires and residents who were fiercely loyal to her, and she was uncertain about their futures as well. Our fief has over a thousand residents, and while she and her subordinates were excellent, they were in the minority. Perhaps she feared that they would all be killed following the death of our mother. She may have thought that they'd be seen as nothing more than nuisances. Of course, I can only make assumptions about her mindset."

Queen Liesenlotte was as silent as a tomb as she listened intently, patiently waiting for Helma's monologue to end.

"Ultimately, once my mother died, Caroline exploded," Helma said. "My sister rounded up the squires and residents that she'd fought alongside during their military service and raided the manor of the Bosel fief."

"And then what?" Queen Liesenlotte prompted, knowing the answer.

"I've already said it before, Your Majesty. I was supposed to have been killed, but I was so desperate to live that I fled into the safety of my manor. My vassals and knights overpowered her with sheer numbers, and Caroline and her forces had to retreat." Helma seemed to genuinely lament the situation. "But my vassals didn't fight out of loyalty. That wasn't what propelled them to act. They were simply gripped by old traditions and assumed that the eldest daughter was most fitting to be the successor. They planned to use me as a puppet so that they could rule over the Bosel fief as they pleased."

The queen was at a complete loss for words. Her face said it all—what a foolish battle this all was. What future awaited this fief? Over a hundred lives of the Bosel fief had been lost, all told, and the squires and residents who had conducted military service until now had been killed. How on earth could this fief contribute to military service in the future? Since the vassals had managed to somehow force Caroline to retreat, they may have had some sort of skill, but most of the participants would be complete newcomers with

practically zero experience in the military. Above all, they'd lost seventy precious human lives.

The moment a rebellion broke out at all, this fief had been at risk. *"Can there ever be a bright future for this land?"* Liesenlotte's face seemed to ask. The Bosel lord may have been sickly, but she wasn't a fool; Helma had astutely grasped the queen's thoughts.

"No future awaits our land," Helma said. "But in times of emergency, we can only see what's directly in front of us. Such is the folly of human nature." There was no doubt that the situation the Bosel fief found itself in qualified as an emergency.

"Caroline was then chased out of my fief," Helma continued. "Her squires and vassals stole everything of value from the manor, stole two carriages, and fled. My sister escaped from my fief with seventy of her loyal subordinates."

"And then they took over a group of thirty bandits," the queen added.

"As far as I've heard, that's precisely what happened, Your Majesty."

Helma paused to cough several times. She seemed to be in genuine pain, and it would come as no surprise if she coughed up some blood. *When my mother was in her final moments, she'd often cough up blood.*

"Excuse me," Helma said between coughs.

"I don't mind," Liesenlotte replied. "You may continue. Take all the time you need."

"Thank you, Your Majesty." After a pause, she managed to continue with her story. "Caroline sided with the bandits, and her actions after are extremely hard to defend. In hopes of providing some sort of gift for our enemy, Villendorf, she attacked a plot of land directly under the royal family and kidnapped the men and boys."

"I know the rest from Faust von Polidoro's report. She was successful in her raid and tried to seek refuge in Villendorf."

"Precisely. Caroline must've thought that she'd lost everything. In those conditions, she had little choice but to seek refuge in a neighboring nation."

The pieces of the story finally connected.

"Why did you not send your forces to chase after Caroline?" Liesenlotte asked.

"My vassals risked their lives and stormed out of my fief in search of her, Your Majesty," Helma replied. "But once they stepped out of my territory, it was Caroline who had the upper hand. She had ample military experience and knew how to traverse the land well. She must've assumed that her life was at risk and acted accordingly. It was all I could do to swiftly send an envoy to your land and order everyone to run."

"I'm honestly astounded by how useless your vassals are."

In short, you should've just died, Helma, Faust thought. His train of thought was frighteningly cold, but even Helma had said so herself. He simply wasn't callous enough to voice his thoughts. Once she finished recounting the events, it was time for judgment.

"Helma," Queen Liesenlotte said. "Why didn't you die?"

Her Majesty's question was shockingly straightforward. Even Faust couldn't be so cold, but the queen had spoken those words without a second thought. Had Caroline been victorious, the land of the royal family wouldn't have been attacked. The second daughter, who'd served the military for the past decade and contributed to the nation, wouldn't have died either. The vassals surely would've listened to Caroline's orders, and Helma's life served little purpose at this point. As a noble, she should've died when it was proper. This was the decision that the queen had reached, and Helma seemed to agree.

"As I've said at the start, this is my shame," the Bosel lord said. "That is all I can say, Your Majesty. In hindsight, I should've died."

I guess she instinctively clung to her life when it was at risk. Faust felt compelled to click his tongue in annoyance, but he just barely managed to stop himself. He knew that such an attitude was unbefitting for the throne room, and Helma, who spoke the truth, didn't deserve his anger.

"Your Majesty, I have one request," Helma said.

"And what would that be?" the queen inquired.

Her anger was crystal clear, and everyone could sense her wrath. The Nobles of the Robe and the other lords were in silent fear as her displeasure was plain for the world to see. Yet Helma was undeterred, her voice straining as she made a desperate appeal.

"My younger sister, Caroline, has left behind her daughter, Martina. Please allow her to take over the fief," Helma implored. "I beg of you! It's truly the only way for House Bosel to remain!"

Her entreaty astonished everyone who heard it.

Martina's still alive? Why? I thought she was hanged already.

Amid the sudden confused atmosphere of the throne room, Helma continued to shout at the top of her lungs; she paid no heed to the troubled chattering of the nobles.

"Please! Please have mercy, Your Majesty!" Helma screamed. "Please spare the life of Martina and allow her to inherit my house. Without her, our house and fief shall fall into ruin!"

Caroline was a rebel and a traitor who'd lost in the battle to inherit her house. To have her daughter, Martina, inherit House Bosel seemed like a contradictory end to this entire ordeal. Helma had eked out a victory and inherited the house—or rather, she had mistakenly clung onto her life—but she continued to make a desperate plea for Martina.

Chapter 20:
Even a Hunter Pities the Hunted

QUEEN LIESENLOTTE MADE HER RAGE apparent and silenced the Nobles of the Robe along with the other lords. Beneath her menacing aura, however, she was astonishingly calm. She concluded that this house must be destroyed. Her Majesty was up against a regional lord, and the Bosel fief belonged to House Bosel, but she no longer cared. Mistake after mistake had been made from sheer incompetence, which ultimately led to her youngest daughter being inches away from death. Perhaps the one positive note was that Valiele seemed to have broken out of her shell since her first battle, but none of that mattered right now. *My daughter isn't the priority at this moment,* the queen thought. *I must act calmly as the queen who rules over Anhalt. My daughter's troubles are but a factor in this entire debacle, and I must think about how to destroy House Bosel and make their fief my own.*

Until now, the queen had found it rather difficult to do so, but after Helma had given her story, it was all too easy to take her land. *She's a fool beyond salvation.* And for that, House Bosel would be destroyed. It was the only conclusion that the queen could reach.

"No," the queen finally said. "Caroline has committed many sins, and her child is guilty by association. Quite frankly, I'm shocked that she hasn't been hanged by now. And now you claim that you want to make that child—Martina, was it?—the next heir to House Bosel? Cease your foolish talking at once."

"As you can see, I'm frail and sickly, Your Majesty," Helma replied. "While I've hidden this from my people, I've got a husband and tried to birth a child when I was still much healthier. Unfortunately, they've all ended in miscarriages, and my illness has eaten away at my body. I don't think I can ever have a child."

Helma once again let some of her selfishness slip. Had she told the truth to her fief, surely they could've provided some sort of solution. It would've guaranteed that Caroline's daughter Martina would've inherited the house in the future, and the traitor might not have rebelled at all.

"Only Martina carries our bloodline and can inherit House Bosel," Helma begged. "There's no one else."

You've no need to worry about that. Any fears you possess shall become meaningless very soon. House Bosel shall be destroyed. The coldness of the queen's very heart urged her to make a heartless decision. She knew that the lords and representatives against her choice would voice their dissent, but it was quite simple to silence them in this situation. She was eager to end this farce as soon as possible.

"I shall be frank," the queen started. "The Bosel fief will—"

"Please wait, Your Majesty," Duke Astarte interjected. She was to the right of the queen, and her powerful voice reverberated throughout the throne room. "Before you reach your judgment, I'd like for you to meet one more person."

The duke's expression was solemn and sincere, but that only proved irritating in this scenario.

"Who, pray tell?" Liesenlotte asked.

"I've also brought Martina, Caroline's child," Astarte explained. "I ask that you meet her before your decision."

At this stage in the trial? The child of a rebellious noble who'd sought refuge with the enemy had to be hanged. What use was there in meeting such a girl? *But the suggestion comes from none other than Astarte… Perhaps it's worth meeting this child.*

"Very well," the queen relented. "Bring her in. Will this take much time?"

"Not at all, Your Majesty," the duke replied. "She's already waiting in a nearby room."

Astarte turned to one of the guards and gave the order to call for Martina.

What kind of child is she? Judging from Astarte's personality, I might be able to hazard a guess.

The queen said not a word as the guard quietly brought in a girl restrained in handcuffs. She looked to be around eight or nine years of age; her eyes were bright and showed that she was wise beyond her years.

I see. I now understand why Astarte, who obsesses over talent, has taken a liking to this child. I suppose she wants this child's life to be spared, at the very least.

The child's silence puzzled the queen. *Why is she quiet? Why does she not beg for her life?* Only then did Liesenlotte realize that her words were vital to break the silence.

"You may speak. I shall permit it, Martina," she said.

"Thank you very much, Queen Liesenlotte," the girl replied. She bent her knees and showed her respect despite being in chains.

Ah, so she was waiting for my permission. She's a very bright child, indeed.

"Queen Liesenlotte, forgive my shameless words, but I have but one request," Martina said.

"And what would that be?" the queen asked.

She was willing to spare the child's life. Martina would become a commoner, and she would be stripped of her power. It would ensure that she would no longer be a threat, and she could live the rest of her life in squalor while she received the bare minimum aid from the kingdom. It wouldn't take much effort on the queen's part, and the girl's life would be spared. However, Martina's request shocked those who heard it.

"When I'm put to death, I ask that Sir Faust von Polidoro decapitate me," the girl said.

"What?" the queen asked. Her true emotions slipped through as her mask of composure fell off for just a moment.

"My mother committed many atrocities. She rebelled against the royal family and tried to flee the kingdom. I cannot blame you for declaring death to be my penalty as well. A criminal she may be, but she was still my mother. At the very least, I ask to be killed in the same fashion as she was. For my final moments, as a noble, I would like to die proudly. A hanging would be humiliation for me. However, if Faust von Polidoro, the Knight of Wrath, kills me as he slew my mother, I can die with my head held high. Or perhaps this sort of begging may come off as shameful."

The queen could hardly believe that these words came from a girl who was no older than nine. *Truly, she is bright. It'd be a shame to kill such an intelligent child.*



Hmph, Astarte has let her bad habits show. She truly loves talent, after all.

"Should I be killed in the same way as my mother, I may be able to meet her on my way to the afterlife," Martina said. "Please, I beg of you your generosity and benevolence, Your Majesty."

Astarte must've hoped that Liesenlotte would feel inclined to allow the child to live. *But things won't go quite according to plan. This child is far too intelligent. She might decide she wants vengeance in the future and rebel against the royal family. And my policy is to nip all threats in the bud.*

"Guards, bring Sir Polidoro's blade. I shall permit him to carry his sword," the queen ordered.

"R-right away, Your Majesty!" the guards replied.

Don't underestimate me, Astarte. I shall protect this child's dignity as a noble, but I'll do so in execution. She'll be better off dead, anyway. Little did Liesenlotte know that she had made a grave mistake. The queen was ensnared by Faust's appearance, but she knew very little about his personality. She'd heard poems and songs about the valiant efforts of the Knight of Wrath on the battlefield, and she'd read reports about his behavior, but that was all.

Astarte, on the other hand, had stood right next to Faust while she fought in the Campaign of Villendorf. She'd carefully observed his lifestyle when he stayed in the lodging of the royal capital, and she understood the man's mind quite well. The duke's meticulous research was about to pay off.

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You've gotta be kidding me, I thought.

"Sir Polidoro, you have been permitted to carry your blade in the throne room," a guard said.

What the hell? I was silently infuriated. *Was I just ordered to behead a little girl with my own hands?* I wished that I was just a

bystander right now. I just wanted to observe this ordeal from the sidelines.

Quite frankly, I knew that I deviated from the norm. My body bulged with muscles, and my late mother had given me training as a knight. I may have been seen as an aberrant man by the women of Anhalt, but I still held my pride as a noble. My very existence was the manifestation of my feelings, but admittedly, I had a few issues with my birth. My values from my previous life remained in my heart, and I could do nothing about them. Had I been just a bystander, perhaps I could've turned the other way; it had nothing to do with me. Martina was a noble, just like me, and I genuinely pitied her as she headed for death. She might have been the child of a criminal, but even so, I would've mourned her death and hoped that she would at least be at peace. I might have been able to keep my emotions in check. But if I were to actively participate in her death, that was a completely different matter. Blood rushed to my head as it boiled with anger. *Screw that, Queen Liesenlotte!*

"I absolutely refuse!" I bellowed. "You ask me, Faust von Polidoro, to take the life of an innocent child?! Do you dare humiliate me?!"

I roared with anger, and the guards cowered with fear, almost dropping my greatsword onto the carpet in the face of my fury. My face turned a shade of deep scarlet, fitting for the Knight of Wrath. Queen Liesenlotte, the Nobles of the Robe, the other lords, the representatives, and even Anastasia, Valiele, Helma, and Martina all looked at me with shock. Only Duke Astarte maintained her cool as she whistled. *Is she playing around? At the very least, you would've known that I'd be furious with this suggestion.*

"Queen Liesenlotte, I refuse your order," I growled. "No, a simple refusal isn't enough! I shall not permit anyone other than myself to kill her! None of you shall be allowed to harm this child!"

An unreasonable declaration tumbled out of my mouth. The values of nobility that I'd learned from my mother's training held a delicate balance with the moral values from my past life. I had just

barely managed to keep myself in check, but the order from the queen had caused me to completely snap. I'd turned into a stubborn Knight of Wrath who was completely unpredictable to the nobles of this world.

"Sir Polidoro! I ask that you regain your composure!" one of the lords shouted.

"Composure! You want *me* to keep my composure?!" I shouted back. "Why will none of you jump in to save this child?! How in the world can you all stand back and let the life of an innocent child be stripped away before your eyes?!"

Even I knew that I was making no sense. Mere moments ago, I'd also been willing to forsake this child's life, and I had a cruel side to me. Yet the words that came from my mouth were absurd. They weren't coming from a place of logic, but of emotion.

"What sin has this child, Martina, committed?!" I yelled. "The only crime she's guilty of is misunderstanding her mother's crimes for her own as she atones for those sins! She's just a pitiful girl! I can no longer stand aside and watch this wretchedness! My honor as a noble shall not abide this!"

This is my honor. My noble birth was mixed with my values of my normal past life, and had formed this awkward shape of dignity. To have this sullied any further would threaten my very existence. I walked forward. I stepped past the guard who carried the magical greatsword of my ancestors and past Princess Valiele. I ignored the onlookers and finally reached Martina, who was in chains. I grabbed her restraints and used my superhuman strength to snap them apart.

"Faust!" Valiele cried.

It seemed the princess had snapped out of her astonishment as her voice echoed throughout the room. *Please forgive me, Princess Valiele. But I simply cannot let this slide.* Once I offered up a silent apology, I let my emotions take over. What did I want to do? Even I didn't know—I was clueless. But with my anger, I'd expressed

the form of my dignity as a noble. I bent my knees, called on my etiquette, and opened my mouth.

"Queen Liesenlotte," I started.

"What is it, Faust?" Her Majesty said. "Do you have any issues with my decision?"

"I believe I've already made myself clear. I ask for Martina's life to be spared."

The queen's posture went stiff. I had no idea what was going through her mind, but I'd already made my choice. I couldn't take back what I'd already said.

"Faust—no, Faust von Polidoro, do you understand what you're trying to do?" Her Majesty said. "You've gone against my royal orders. If you don't want to kill her, that's all fine with me, but you just spat on my judgment against her crimes and on my decision regarding how to deal with her."

"Even if you are my master, when it goes against my code of honor, I must strictly refuse," I replied quietly.

"Do you truly think that happiness awaits this child? She's the daughter of a rebel and a traitor to her own fief. She cannot enjoy the life of a noble—far from it. This girl must abandon her duties, and it's rather unlikely that she can attain happiness as a commoner. I've no doubt that she will continue to live with people pointing at her back with mockery. Having her die with dignity may very well be the only path to happiness for her."

"As a noble, I very much understand that one must die when the moment calls for it. Failure to do so shall only bring a life of shame. However, only when one clings to life shall they have any sort of hope for a future. Is this response insufficient for you?"

I knew that I was being unreasonable. Could these words have a chance to convince Queen Liesenlotte? *Of course not! Even an idiot like me knows that!*

"That child, Martina, may one day detest you for not killing her sooner," Her Majesty said. "She may ask why you didn't allow her to die with honor. And with those hateful words, she may turn her blade on you. What then?"

"I do not know," I replied. That was all I could say; I truly had zero clue about my future and spoke honestly. "I'm unsure if I will cut Martina down or receive her blade. I simply cannot judge until that time comes."

"What if—and this is but a slim possibility—she ends up inheriting the Bosel fief? The hatred for the child of Caroline, who caused the death of over a hundred residents, shall not fade. She has hardly any chance of ruling her land well. What say you to that?"

I fell silent, unable to reply. When it came to land management, I had no say. I might have been able to spout some sort of pretty excuse, but it would be nothing but lies, and foolish words would only taint my honor. Queen Liesenlotte's reasoning was sound. I knew that, and despite it all, I still chose to act. I could no longer stop my body from moving. I wished that I was a bystander, but as I saw cornered prey, I took pity on Martina and could no longer abandon her.

"Faust von Polidoro, your honor is pure, almost dazzling to my eyes," the queen said. "However, that alone cannot possibly rule over a land. And that is something that you must learn."

Her tone implied that this discussion was over. *Will my words never reach her? No, but even so…*

"Queen Liesenlotte," I said.

I no longer gave a simple bow. I folded my legs underneath me and pressed my head against the floor. I kowtowed in front of everyone. The Nobles of the Robe, the other lords, and all the representatives saw me on the ground as I prostrated myself. The strongest knight of Anhalt now took a form of absolute submission and invoked sympathy in all who could see. I looked like a beggar pleading for mercy. *But I can't think of any other way.*

The sound of my forehead scraping against the ground seemed deafening as it echoed throughout the room.

"Faust, stop this at once. That will change nothing," Queen Liesenlotte said. She hastily stood from her throne to stop me. "You're the most powerful knight of our kingdom. Have you given no thought to your own honor? Begging for the life of a criminal's child shall do you no favors and will bring you no benefit. Will you spit on the trust and honor that your ancestors of House Polidoro have built before you?"

I gave no response as I once again loudly rubbed my forehead against the stone floor. I had nothing more to say. This silence wasn't my choice; I had no rebuttal to the queen's words and couldn't possibly win a debate against her. All I could do was rub my head against the floor. The friction tore my skin, and my blood spilled onto the tiles, dyeing them scarlet.

"I have no intention of changing my judgment," the queen said. "You must understand my position, Sir Polidoro."

I continued to kowtow and rub my head on the ground to the point where I bled, but all of that wasn't enough. Her decision wouldn't waver. My pride couldn't overturn the queen's decision, and lowering my head wouldn't change a decision she made as the monarch of the kingdom. *But even so! I have to see this through! I must have my way!*

"Your Majesty, then I would like to say one more thing," I started.

"Any speech shall be meaningless. This conversation is over," the queen said. She turned away angrily and refused my request. "Stop at once! Raise your head!"

I ignored it all and kept my head low. "As a reward for my work in the Campaign of Villendorf, I received a letter of praise from Princess Anastasia," I said quietly. "And along with her letter, I received another piece of parchment, which I keep on me at all times."

I still had one method left. Thanks to this piece of paper, the desperate, childish plea that was born from my primal instincts could still be heard. And it was in my hands.

"I, Faust von Polidoro, have fulfilled my duties as a knight and risked my life in a duel, where I achieved victory. As you wished to reward my efforts, I have been promised your benevolence just once, Your Majesty."

As a knight who served her, perhaps my method would be seen as cowardly or dastardly, but this promise would allow me even to trample upon her head once, if that was how I wished to use it. I had received that letter of gratitude from Queen Liesenlotte for my efforts in the campaign. I might have been a mere frontier lord, but this was a reward that I had earned, and I had the right to use it for the sake of my dignity.

"I would like to surrender that paper, noting the benevolence that you have granted me—" I started. I shoved my hand into my chest pocket.

"Stop!" the queen shouted. Her voice filled the room as she admonished my ridiculous actions in a shocked voice. "Very well! Stop it! You've proved your honor and dignity! Raise your head, Faust! You must realize that as a knight, you carry the honor of your fief on your shoulders!"

The queen retracted her decision, thereby sparing Martina's life. I remained on my knees as I raised my head and locked eyes with Her Majesty.

"Faust… You… What propels you to go this far?" she wondered.

The queen had cut herself off, and I couldn't understand what she was trying to say. I was keenly aware that this didn't solve all of our problems; perhaps Queen Liesenlotte's words were all true. *No, from an objective standpoint, they are. She was absolutely right in her judgment.*

But I was able to prevent Martina's death. I was satisfied that my dignity had gotten through to the queen. My method was vulgar, and perhaps no one else would understand. I knew more than anyone that my entreaty was pitiful and desperate, unlike my heroic tales that had been spun by the minstrels. I felt blood trickle down my head and onto my lips.

Chapter 21:
Faust's Discipline

I *'LL THINK ABOUT THIS POSITIVELY,* THE QUEEN thought. *Faust von Polidoro will now be indebted to me. He's a diligent and solemn man. His debt shall never be erased. I've got an extra pet to do my bidding, and I suppose letting a bright child live isn't a bad payoff.*

The queen could now order Faust around as she pleased. No longer was she restrained to orders that pertained to his military campaigns or his role as Valiele's advisor. Liesenlotte decided to be more optimistic about the outcome, or else she wouldn't be able to stand it. *Does he think that I* want *to do this? Does he truly assume that I personally relish the murder of children?* Liesenlotte simply had no choice as the queen. But that wasn't her only concern.

"A letter of gratitude from your queen isn't meant to be used for a silly reason like this one," Liesenlotte muttered.

It was lunacy. Faust had risked his life in a duel where his victory wasn't guaranteed. He'd raced through the hellish war zone, and in return, he'd received a reward that granted him a pardon for anything he wished. *My letter of gratitude mustn't be used to spare the life of a child that we'd just met. Something like that isn't allowed.*

"That is a reward, an honor that you rightfully earned as you risked your life for our kingdom," the queen said. "Should you waste such an accolade here, my caliber shall be doubted."

She spoke as softly as possible as she reasoned with herself. The life of this young child was hardly worth the prize that Faust had earned himself, and should his wish not be granted, Liesenlotte's obstinacy and small-mindedness would become apparent to all. At the very least, that was what she'd think if she were only a

bystander. The queen had little choice but to accept Faust's plea here.

Faust had begged for mercy and even implored the queen to grant his request as he rubbed his face onto the ground. The queen had to exhibit her clemency here. *I don't think Faust tried to threaten me with my letter either. I doubt he actually understands the value of that sheet of paper.*

"That paper, you see, is very valuable," the queen explained. "If any of your successors were to betray us on the battlefield, they would be forgiven, no questions asked."

This was a paper that was practically priceless, and she'd only drafted it for him because his efforts against Villendorf had called for such a hefty reward. *Why would you use it so easily for such a trivial matter? Do you so deeply loathe seeing the beheading of a child? Do you wish to save her, even if it means sacrificing all the glory that you've attained until now? Or is it my fault for falling in Astarte's trap—for failing to see Faust's personality, his true nature? No, that can't be. I don't believe it. This is all her fault.*

Had Astarte used her rank and influence as duke to spare Martina's life while she shouldered full responsibility for the girl, the queen would've relented. *You brat! Don't use Faust for your silly goals!* There was no end to the grumbling of the queen, but she soon stopped her quiet complaints. She had to confirm the situation. The audience had become confused at Faust's plea, but they soon settled down and awaited Liesenlotte's judgment. *I don't plan to prolong this trial either. The situation has changed, but I shall be quick.*

"Helma von Bosel, it is now time for my judgment," Liesenlotte said. "You'd best heed my words."

"Yes, Your Majesty," she replied.

"The Bosel fief shall be seized and placed under direct control of the royal family. This decision shall not change."

Helma hung her head as her staff fell from her hands. The queen remained firm in her decision.

"Your Majesty, forgive my impertinence, but the Bosel fief is a land that has been passed down to me through the generations…" Helma started.

"I've told you that my decision shall not waver," Liesenlotte replied. "Do you think your flimsy words will be effective here? You've caused the deaths of over a hundred of your squires and residents. Caroline stole all your capable vassals, and my daughter Valiele has ended their lives. Your remaining vassals are all full of cunning, hoping to use you as a puppet. Can you, a woman who had the audacity to flee from death, rule over your fief with an iron fist? Frankly, your fief is finished. I've not the faintest clue what calamity will be borne from your desolate fief, but I cannot sit back and twiddle my thumbs as I wait with anticipation."

"I do not mind if I die, Your Majesty. Should you give me your order, I shall end my life right here! But please, I implore you for your benevolence! Please allow Martina to inherit the fief!"

I truly have no care for your life. Compared to Faust, who rubbed his head on the stone floor, you're less than worthless. Liesenlotte clicked her tongue. *But I must think about maintaining that delicate balance.*

"At first, I was intent on seizing the Bosel fief and killing Martina," the queen said. "House Bosel would be finished, and there would've been no future for you. But you had best thank Sir Polidoro for his efforts; he made himself look pitiful to spare this girl's life. I shall at least ensure her future."

It was easy to silence the lords and the representatives, but she wanted to maintain her image, not to mention stability. There was no need to completely destroy House Bosel.

"House Bosel shall become bureaucrats and shall attain hereditary peerage," the queen declared.

This seems about right. The house won't be destroyed, and I'm sure the other lords will understand. Though they're probably secretly upset by this outcome.

Helma said not a word as she hung her head. She likely didn't agree with this outcome, and with a house at stake, some lord knights would have been willing to fight until the bitter end. However, the Bosel fief had no army to fight back with. Any vassal who dared to dissent would be killed, and that would be that. They'd be nothing more than a slight nuisance.

"Are you satisfied?" Liesenlotte asked Helma. *I'm only looking for one answer here.*

"I understand," Helma finally relented. "I leave House Bosel and Martina in your hands."

"Martina shall not take over just yet. *You* will be the one to lead your house."

Though I doubt you'll last long with your sickly body. You've still got two things you must do.

"As for Princess Valiele's first battle and those results…" The queen turned to her left. "Sir Polidoro?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," the Knight of Wrath said.

He stood beside Valiele, having regained much of his composure.

"I know that you were hoping for monetary compensation from the Bosel fief," Liesenlotte said. "The royal family shall be responsible for paying those dues instead. Inform me at a later date whether you would like a lump sum or a set amount of money over a decade. You will get more money should you choose the latter method."

"Your Majesty, I just went against your royal order," Faust started.

"Every good deed must be rewarded. Do you wish to embarrass me?"

Indeed, Faust's actions had to be rewarded to a degree. However…

"And no sin shall go unpunished," Liesenlotte added. "Faust, you have gone against my royal order. You may have the right to show hesitance about killing the child, but to beg for her life is a clear display of your dissent, despite my final ruling."

"You're right," Faust replied.

"I must penalize you for that, unfortunately."

Now then, how shall I go about this? I wouldn't want to be too harsh, or his debt to me would begin to fade. Hmm… Yes, perfect. Why don't I have him clean up this troublesome mess in front of me?

"Martina shall be your knight apprentice," Liesenlotte ordered. "Until she can succeed her house, you must raise her to become a faithful knight to the royal family. Are we clear?"

"Pardon?" Faust asked. He looked utterly stupefied.

What's with that face? You should've expected as much, really.

"Queen Liesenlotte, if you may permit me to speak, I am the man who killed Caroline," Faust said. "I'm the very man that Martina must wish to seek vengeance upon. I believe Duke Astarte would be best for the role."

He glanced at Astarte, who stood to the queen's right. His suspicious glare implied that he sensed Astarte's schemes—had she utilized him to spare Martina's life? All too late, he seemed to have caught onto her ploy. *That's right. She's at fault, Faust. You're no fool. I trust that you won't hate me and will instead realize who is truly to blame for this series of events. It's Astarte, and no one else. Glare at her more.* The queen was silently rooting for the knight before she snapped back to reality. She looked forward to seeing how Astarte would try to quell Faust's anger in the future. It would likely be quite troublesome for the duke.

"Then why don't we ask Martina?" Liesenlotte suggested. "Martina, quite frankly, you're nothing more than a nuisance to us."

"I'm well aware, Your Majesty," Martina replied calmly.

"Surely, then, I don't need to spell it all out to a bright child like you, though perhaps Faust's appeal has already said it all. You're the daughter of a traitor and a rebel. You will continue to live with people pointing their fingers at you, and you shall become a knight apprentice. Only Duke Astarte, who brought you here, or Sir Polidoro, who begged for your life to be spared, can take you in."

"I expected as much."

Martina maintained her composure. She didn't act like a child who was annoyed that everything was spelled out for her—she remained completely expressionless. With her silver hair and blue eyes, Martina hadn't even flinched when she made a plea regarding the manner of her death. This nine-year-old looked as though she had given up on her life and was difficult to read. *She's clever, but a bit creepy. I can hardly believe that Faust begged to spare the life of this eerie child.*

"Then let me ask you, Martina," Liesenlotte said. "Who would you like to be trained under?"

"Sir Polidoro," the girl replied. "I would like to be under Faust von Polidoro, if he doesn't mind."

So her choice has been made, I see. I thought as much, although Faust can't seem to understand.

"Martina—I mean, Lady Martina," Faust stammered. "As you can see, I am a man, and yet I have focused on my training as a knight, leaving my education quite skewed. Frankly, I'm not confident that I can train you well…"

"Surely that is what knight apprentices are for," Martina replied. She gazed right into his eyes. "Any matters you find troublesome, I shall handle. To be honest, I had planned on dying here today. One might even say that you sullied my dignity."

"I see…"

"And I don't quite understand your honor and dignity either. Sparing my life won't benefit you in any way."

Faust slumped his shoulders. "It seems that I've only troubled you," he muttered.

"Indeed. You're exactly correct. However, I've changed my mind." Martina's expressionless face formed the faintest of smiles. "Since my life has been spared, I've decided to follow the man who has saved my life."

"Is that so?"

Faust seemed rather happy to hear it. His actions weren't seen as selfish or troublesome, and that must've soothed him greatly. *This man is more trouble than I thought. I expected him to be a lot simpler, but he's more complex than he lets on. I don't hate it, though. As a queen, I could never agree with his decisions, but from a personal standpoint, I like this side of him.*

"Then it's decided. Martina, you shall be under the care of Sir Polidoro," Liesenlotte said. She turned to the crowd. "Are there any issues from the lords or the Nobles of the Robe?"

She had to at least act as though she was listening to everyone's opinions, though she already knew their answer.

One of the lords dared to speak first. "They may have lost their fief, but the house shall remain. We have no complaints. In fact, we find your judgment to be quite fair and just. Truly, your decisions are perfect."

"We also believe that it's the perfect compromise," a Noble of the Robe added. "We respect your wise decision, Your Majesty."

Both sides must've had some words they would've liked to say, but they came to a suitable accord. Killing Martina and seizing the Bosel fief would've been most beneficial to the royal family. *But I don't mind giving hereditary peerage to a girl. And meanwhile, I must work to build back the Bosel fief. It'll probably take some time*

until they begin to turn a profit, but some bored Nobles of the Robe will have something to do now. It's their job, and I shall simply give my order. That'll be all.

"The trial shall end here," the queen said. "You are dismissed from the throne room. Helma and Martina will be under the care of Duke Astarte for a while. Once things settle down, help Helma find a new place to live in the royal capital. Hand Martina over to Sir Polidoro so that she may begin her training."

"Your wish is my command," the reply echoed through the room.

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Out in the corridor, Princess Anastasia and her advisor Astarte walked with Princess Valiele and her own advisor, Faust. As the four walked along, Anastasia was silently furious that Astarte had led Faust to rub his head against the floor. Surely the duke would receive a rather forceful interrogation when she was alone with her advisee. Astarte refused to meet Faust's gaze and tried to give him some space for now, while Valiele gazed at the frontier lord worriedly. The emotional actions that he had shown in the throne room had deviated from his usually composed demeanor.

As for Faust, he silently walked ahead in a daze. *I screwed up. I screwed up. I screwed up. I really did.* He didn't regret imploring for Martina's life to be spared. His education as a noble, combined with his moral values from his previous society, had formed an amalgam that he called honor. Yet he didn't rue his action. Had he not acted during the trial, he felt that he would've lost his sense of identity. *But even so…I could've gone about that better. Am I an idiot?* Faust continued to admonish himself for his prior petition and reminded himself that he was a lord knight who shouldered the honor of more than three hundred people. He hailed from a small village, but he still had people to protect.

What the hell did I do? He shouldn't have lost his cool. He could've calmly denied the beheading of Martina and kept his composure while he begged for her life to be spared. Even if the queen's statements had struck a nerve with him, he shouldn't have kowtowed in front of a crowd. He couldn't stop himself from lamenting what he'd done. *I'm not a hero. I'm just a lord knight of a poor frontier who commands less than three hundred residents. I've got no political power.*

Simultaneously, he was a man who shouldered the honor of three hundred citizens, and he wasn't allowed to act recklessly or let his emotions take the reins. *I gotta show more discipline!* But at the same time…

"It's not like…" Faust mumbled. He spoke quietly under his breath.

It wasn't as though he'd lost anything. He chose to be optimistic about this; he'd been able to get his hands on some money as well. His residents who lived in poverty could add another dish to the dinner table thanks to the extra coin. While it would be a bit awkward for him to take care of Martina as a knight apprentice, it was part of Caroline's dying wish. *Since she lost a duel against me, why not protect the only attachment that she had in this world? I don't mind that. Above all, I have very little to lose. I may have acted pathetically in front of everyone, but it's not like that really lost me anything.*

Faust had never been invited to any parties with nobles anyway, so it wasn't as though this would affect his future life in society. *Sure, my rampage might be a point of mockery to others, but I'm just a weak lord knight. It might affect the valiant tales spun about me, but I was underestimated to begin with because of my low social ranking. I have such little influence that it's almost depressing.* This train of thought allowed Faust to be more nonchalant.

Little did he know that he wasn't invited to noble parties because Duke Astarte and Princess Anastasia had personally seen to

it, wanting to ensure that he wouldn't attract any unnecessary competition. Indeed, Faust had zero clue about his influence as well. He wasn't underestimated as a lowly and weak lord knight by the lords and Nobles of the Robe—far from it. He was seen as the future paramour of Duke Astarte and Princess Anastasia. Sometimes, ignorance was truly bliss.

Faust was none the wiser to the truth as he stretched to crack his back and met up with Helga, who was waiting outside the castle gates. The two left and headed for the lodging within the royal capital, where his beloved residents awaited him. *Finally, I can head back to the Polidoro fief.*

Chapter 22:
You're a Bona Fide Idiot

ANASTASIA WAS IN HER ROOM. THE HOUSE Bosel affair had just concluded, and she'd parted ways with Faust.

"Are you *asking* to be killed?" she growled.

"Of course not," Astarte replied.

The royal cornered the duke in her room, but when it came to raw strength, the latter had the advantage. However, this was only under normal circumstances; Astarte felt like she had no chance of winning against a wrathful Anastasia. When their bloodline went berserk, their power would increase exponentially, and the princess had even used her halberd to slay three elite Villendorf enemies in one swing when she was only fourteen. The duke could probably exert the same, if not more power if she were angered too, but she currently couldn't find that emotion within her.



“Why did you make Faust do that?” Anastasia demanded. “What are you planning to do?”

“I planned on jumping in!” Astarte cried. “Seriously! I planned on helping him out!” She wasn’t lying—her initial plot had been to offer her aid to Faust. “I didn’t think that Faust would get that angry and just completely lose his temper!” the duke added.

“What the hell did you expect?! He’s called the Knight of Wrath!” Anastasia shouted back. “You didn’t think he’d get angry or something?!”

“Not to that degree, no!” Astarte slammed her fist onto the desk as she refuted the accusations. She’d expected Faust to be unable to behead a young, innocent girl. He was kind to a fault. While he held his status as a lord, he was a man of boundless generosity. Had he been a bystander, he surely would’ve looked the other way if Martina met her grisly demise as she fulfilled her duty as a noble. But when this helpless bird had sought refuge, he couldn’t personally land the killing blow. On the contrary, he protected her and begged for her life to be spared. All of this was according to Astarte’s calculations…until a certain point.

“I knew that he’d ask for that girl’s life to be spared,” Astarte admitted. “But I didn’t think that he’d be that infuriated! Who would’ve expected him to grind his forehead onto the ground to save her life?!”

“What did you want to do, anyway?!” Anastasia shouted. She slammed her own fist onto the desk in turn. “Did you just want to spare Martina’s life?!”

She was right on that point.

“Yeah, I wanted to save her life,” Astarte replied. “She’s brimming with talent, and I would’ve loved it if she lived and worked under me. I considered raising her as a vassal or an attendant, but I could’ve easily done that using my influence as the duke.”

"Of course you could've," Anastasia replied. "With your social standing, if you declared that you'd take full responsibility for her, I'm sure that my mother would've allowed it."

"I know! I know that! And I didn't mind doing that, but I had a devil whisper in my ear!"

Astarte continued to desperately make her excuses. She felt like if she stopped, Anastasia might murder her.

"A devil's whisper?" Anastasia parroted.

"Y'know, I thought that I could win Faust's favor or something," Astarte replied.

"Are you an idiot?"

The princess's rage had dissipated. Needless to say, Astarte wasn't a fool at all. Her intelligence made her stand out among her peers.

"How in the world did you come to the conclusion that Faust would you like you more?" Anastasia inquired.

"I first realized my chance when Faust came to me and asked about Martina," Astarte replied. "That name was apparently Caroline's final word; that's what he told me. And I gave him the truth using the data that I'd gathered—I informed him that Martina was the name of Caroline's daughter."

"And?" Anastasia demanded.

"Then when I went to escort Martina in my carriage, I was surprised by her wisdom, and I got an idea!"

Astarte now only seemed like a woman who indulged in her lustful desires, and the duke's stature was plummeting by the second in the princess's mind.

"When Martina asked who exactly had killed her mother, I told her about Faust and his beauty and splendid demeanor," the duke said. "That's when the devil whispered in my ear! I thought I should

manipulate Martina and encourage her to request that Faust behead her."

"She's a bright child, but she's only nine," Anastasia replied. "Getting her to do as you wish must've been quite easy. And Faust will have realized it all by now. He may have a narrow view of politics, but he's no fool. Quite the contrary, in fact. And? Go on."

Astarte fell silent before she buried her face in her hands and groaned. The realization that Faust would've realized her ploy by now dealt a lethal blow to her psyche. Once he regained his cool, the Knight of Wrath was clever enough to easily assume that Martina had been manipulated somehow.

"Do you think he's mad?" Astarte asked.

"Of course he is," Anastasia replied. "In fact, he probably has a horrible impression of you now."

Faust was penalized. And that's not all, Anastasia thought. He now owed one to Queen Liesenlotte. *Both he and my mother are aware of that. I wonder if Mother will give that debt to me… Probably not.*

"Maybe I should send him something expensive," Astarte said. "It'll probably get sold off in a flash, but Faust could be overjoyed to know that he'll have enough money to add another dish to his residents' dinner tables. And maybe I should visit his lodging and personally apologize to him too. I must think of a suitable excuse… No, maybe I'm better off just telling him the truth. He might see me in a more positive light then."

"I don't give a damn about how you'll curry favor with him," Anastasia replied. "Why did you think that Faust would like you more?"

Frankly, the princess couldn't have cared less about Astarte's standing with Faust. It didn't matter to her one bit. What Anastasia wanted to learn were the inner machinations of the duke's mind.

"The way I saw it going… Martina would ask to be killed by Faust. Faust would be troubled, and he'd never agree to that," Astarte started. She spoke very simply.

"He'd be troubled indeed," Anastasia agreed.

"With the hunted right in front of him, the gentle Faust wouldn't let it slide. He'd beg for her life."

"I wouldn't put it past a man as compassionate as him."

"But the cruel Queen Liesenlotte would never accept that. She's like a demon. Your mother is truly a piece of shit."

"I'd argue that you're far worse, but no matter. Go on."

Mother's probably beyond infuriated at Astarte. I should send the duke to apologize later.

"Faust would agonize over his powerlessness," Astarte continued. "And as the duke, I'd act as the middleman. I'd go save him."

"He'd be ecstatic if you did that."

Though your actions are so shallow and easy to read that I'm sure Faust would've seen right through your scheme.

"I'd beg for Martina's life to be spared," Astarte said. "Faust would be moved to tears! He'd leap with joy."

"Yeah, a man as kind as him would surely be happy."

How much longer will you speak in these choppy sentences? Anastasia was exhausted by it, but she continued to reply patiently.

"He'd come to me and thank me for my valiance," Astarte went on. "He'd love me! And I'd be so excited that I'd get wet."

"Yeah, I can understand that, though I couldn't care less if your undergarments are wet or not," Anastasia responded.

It seemed a bit too convenient to the royal, but it was certainly a possible scenario had things gone according to the duke's plan.

"He'd be so moved that his dick would stand erect, and I'd already be wet!" Astarte cried. "And then we'd become one!"

"You're a bona fide idiot," Anastasia replied.

It was the exact phrase that flashed across her mind. *She's genuinely just stupid. She's usually so smart that it's almost frustrating, but why does everything lead back to her lust when it comes to Faust? Didn't you pay money in apology for fondling his ass in front of his residents? He's a kind man, so he's forgiven you, but with this matter…*

"This whole thing definitely made Faust hate you," Anastasia said firmly.

"Why?!" Astarte wailed. "Why didn't it go according to plan?! Why was Faust so mad?! And I even knew that he'd get mad, but why did he rub his head on the ground to beg for that girl's life?! He even tried to use that letter of gratitude that he received during the Villendorf campaign, didn't he?!"

"I don't know. I'd always thought that Faust was rather mild-mannered off the battlefield…"

Did something happen during the skirmish? Caroline said her final words to Faust as he killed her in a duel. Maybe she begged for Martina's life to be spared if the girl was still alive or something. Why else would Faust act to such an almost pitiful extreme? No, that's still not enough to force him to act to such a degree. Faust had claimed that he implored Martina's life to be spared due to his own honor. The importance of his honor and dignity was a concept that only he had known. Anyone other than him wouldn't have a clue.

"He really was something back there, huh?" Astarte said. She flailed her legs with lingering regret.

"What?" Anastasia asked.

"He was so beautiful, wasn't he? I ended up whistling."

To that end, the princess agreed as she recalled the Knight of Wrath. He'd thrown a tantrum like a child and refused to behead

Martina. Ultimately, he declared that he wouldn't permit the girl's death as he glared around the crowded audience room. He bowed and continued to make desperate pleas to the queen. Finally, at a loss for words, he threw away his dignity and reputation as he rubbed his forehead onto the ground. And yet every single action he took was charming.

"I didn't find it pitiful or pathetic," Anastasia said. She was unable to hide her thoughts. "I suppose this is all due to love."

"It definitely is," Astarte replied. "Faust's actions will probably be gossiped over far and wide among the lords and the Nobles of the Robe."

"Will his standing suffer?"

"Had it been done by any old noble, it would've been seen as pathetic, and that would've been that." The duke flailed her legs before she swung them over on the sofa and calmly voiced her opinion. "But Faust is different. He's the strongest knight in Anhalt and commands power that dazzles brilliantly. For this hero to take such extreme action…"

"So it'll depend from person to person. It may be a divisive point."

The man had begged until blood trickled from his forehead. He begged for the queen's mercy. Some might find it pathetic, while some might wonder why he went so far to save a girl's life. Some might call it an act of insubordination against the queen, while some might see it as a result of his honor, which even the queen couldn't take from him. Others might consider it as pitiful as it would have been from a normal knight. But if Faust had been the one to act as the hero, rubbing his forehead against the stone tile for his honor, perhaps he would be the exception. Each person held different values, and it could easily become a trigger for debate. Nobles might argue about their viewpoints during parties while commoners would fuss over it at saloons.

Truthfully, no one was eager to behead an innocent girl, even when it was an order from the queen and even when they believed that the child would die with honor. Everyone would reach their own conclusion due to their differences in social rank or train of thought.

"I can easily imagine Anhalt being split, but what about Villendorf?" Anastasia asked.

"Those barbarians…will probably fully support Faust," Astarte replied.

The strongest within the nation had protected a weak young girl. This child was none other than the daughter of a woman who he had killed in a duel, and he went against the orders of the queen to beg for her life to be spared. No matter how pathetic he looked, he ultimately managed to overturn the decision. If that wasn't a show of one's honor to Villendorf, nothing else would be.

"They're a troublesome lot," Anastasia grumbled.

"They really are," Astarte chuckled. She'd regained some of her energy.

"We're trying to form a peace treaty with Villendorf, but we've had no luck yet. We did too much damage when we tried to counter-invade them. It's all your fault, Astarte the Annihilator."

"Nuh-uh! They started it, and I just fought back, that's all. I'm not to blame!" Astarte replied, but the duke didn't mind the princess's complaints one bit. Anhalt was in the midst of peace negotiations with Villendorf. Following the campaign, an antiwar pact was currently in the works, but it hadn't progressed much. The royal army that was in the North couldn't be sent to Villendorf's borders, and it was a tall order to have the duke with her army of five hundred handle those powerful barbarians.

Anastasia's first battle couldn't have been more daunting. Even those with a death wish wouldn't have wanted to fight against an army of a thousand. The enemy forces were twice the size of her allies. The mere thought sent chills down the princess's spine.

"We *must* successfully secure a pact with Villendorf," she said.

"Those savages will keep the contract even if they die," Astarte replied. "As long as we can negotiate peace, we'll never go to war against them while that contract is in effect."

"And for that…" Anastasia paused for a moment, reluctant to speak her mind. But she soon opened her mouth. "Worst case, we may have to send Faust as our envoy."

"You're kidding, right?" The duke showed an obvious expression of displeasure. "He'll get assaulted. The lewd beasts of Villendorf will definitely be after his lower half."

"Even those savages seem to know how to act around those with power. I don't think he'll be treated too terribly."

But there were no guarantees, and so, Faust would be their trump card. He was a tool that would be used if they were completely out of options. The man had earned the utmost respect from Villendorf, unlike the vulgar creature they called Astarte the Annihilator. Faust hadn't participated in the counter-invasion of Villendorf either. Captain Reckenbell, the pride and joy of Villendorf, had been killed fair and square in a duel against the Knight of Wrath, and they gave him another nickname for his honorable actions: Beautiful Beast.

Should we have Faust von Polidoro act as our envoy to negotiate peace? Princess Anastasia was agonized by the temptation to reach up her sleeve for the ace.

Chapter 23:
Zabine's Wooing

IN THE OUTSKIRTS OF THE ROYAL CAPITAL, I, Faust von Polidoro, sat in a cheap saloon.

"Hmm…" I mumbled.

I took my seat and stared at my wooden stein holding a pint of ale. Just the other day, Princess Valiele's corps had received a promotion for their actions in the debacle with Caroline, and a small ceremony had been hosted in their honor. Zabine had gained two ranks, while the others climbed one. But the gathering at this saloon wasn't to celebrate their promotions—it was to mourn the loss of our comrade, Hannah. I was called in to participate as well.

"It just feels so empty and lonely without fifteen mugs," Zabine had said. She'd called out to me just as the ceremony had ended. "I can't call Princess Valiele into a cheap saloon. I know that you're busy with preparations to head home, and I'm really sorry, but couldn't you join us? It'll be a memorial service of sorts for her."

I had no reason to refuse. I'd even attended Hannah's funeral as the princess's advisor, and the vice-captain had fulfilled her duties as a corps member. Her acts of valiance made her into a hero.

"Folks, our comrade, Hannah, has crossed into the afterworld," Zabine said. She removed her shoes and stood on the table to begin her speech. "She was a shield for Princess Valiele and died in Her Highness's stead."

No voices of complaint came from the saloon. The place was reserved only for the corps today, and the fifteen members of the memorial service had all scraped together what little money they had to buy a cask of liquor. Since I'd be receiving compensation from the royal family, I offered to pay for it all, but chipping in was apparently customary for the corps. Hannah had done so until now,

and they wanted to continue the tradition. There was nothing I could say to that.

"Oh, how I envy the way she died. Her death will never…" Zabine trailed off.

Tears streamed down her cheeks. *A dangerous person like her is crying,* I thought. Perhaps my impression of her was wrong, and even she was able to feel human emotions.

"We'll never forget you," Zabine said. It was clear that she'd changed her speech in the middle, but none of us said a word. The other thirteen members and I went on silently listening. "We'll never, ever forget you. Remember when we went to peek on the page boys' training and we got caught, only to be scolded by Princess Valiele? You kicked my shins and grumbled that we got scolded by Her Highness because of me. Hannah, I still remember the pain from those kicks. It hurt so much. But you agreed to tag along with us, didn't you?"

What the hell are the corps doing?!

"You were the most interested in raunchy talks, and when I talked about the male body, your eyes would urge me to quickly divulge all the details," Zabine said. "I remember you well, Hannah. You really loved to talk about sex, didn't you? You were the most perverted out of all of us, that's for sure."

Seriously, what the hell?!

"I'll never forget you, Hannah," Zabine sobbed. "I'm sure you're in Valhalla by now and bragging about your honorable death. I'm sure the valkyries have taken you there, and you've joined the einherjar. But we'll never forget you. We know that just like us, you're a hopeless fool, and one who was relentlessly mocked by the Nobles of the Robe around you. We'll never forget you until the day we die."

Zabine, the captain of the corps, continued her speech as she cried loudly. "Listen well. We don't know when we'll die on the battlefield too. We must work hard for Princess Valiele's sake. If

we're ordered to die, we must rush to our deaths, and if we're ordered to live, we must cling to our lives with everything we have."

Tears rolled down her cheeks, but she spoke without a thought to them. Society saw her as a key player in this whole ordeal. She'd fired up the militia, gathered those who wished to fight, and led Princess Valiele to victory in her first battle. Zabine was touted as a hero and already had a poem dedicated to her. *But that glory probably only brings her more pain. She'll never forget this battle. Maybe I should rethink my opinion of her and take back my earlier complaints.* I could no longer find it in me to hate Zabine.

"You idiot. Don't go dying on us without receiving express permission from Her Highness," Zabine spat.

Her last sentence sounded more like a criticism, but her tone was filled with affection for her lost friend.

"Enough!" Zabine shouted. "I'll end this boring speech! I wish glory for Hannah as she fights the giants in Valhalla! Cheers!"

"Cheers!" the fourteen of us shouted back.

Our voices rang within the saloon. On a personal level, I hadn't known Hannah very well. I only knew her as a valiant soldier who used her life to protect the princess and fulfilled her duty as a knight. *But if she lived with the other members of the corps, no doubt she was, at the very least, quite content and happy with her life.* Before I chugged my drink, I called out to the captain.

"Lady Zabine," I said.

"Ah, Sir Polidoro," she replied. "Truly, thank you for coming here today. It really does mean a lot."

We clinked our wooden steins together.

"I know that this isn't the most cheerful of gatherings," she said. "I know I forced you to come, and I cannot thank you enough."

"I'm quite happy to," I replied. "I attended Lady Hannah's funeral, after all."

She was a good woman. It's a shame. Had she still been alive, I would've wanted her for my wife. I know that my wishes will never be granted, and I might never have even had this thought had she not died in Princess Valiele's stead. In any case, I was here today partly because Helga, my chief squire, had asked me to find the most suitable lady within the princess's corps. She had even recommended Zabine.

Uh, but I don't think now's the time for that. I wasn't keen on finding a wife in this scenario either; today was Lady Hannah's memorial service. And that was good enough. *I'll have to give up on finding a bride this year.*

"May I sit here?" Zabine asked.

"Of course," I replied.

The captain took a seat across from me. The other members of the corps reminisced about Hannah as they shared some of the more fun stories. *Does she not want to mingle with the rest of her comrades?*

"Lady Zabine, I'll be fine by myself," I said. "Why not speak with the other members of the corps about Lady Hannah?"

"I can speak with them any time I want," Zabine replied. She took a large gulp from her pint of ale and let out a breath of satisfaction before she turned to me. "Sir Polidoro, you'll be returning to your fief, won't you?"

"Yeah, I'll leave soon."

Princess Valiele's first battle had ended with success, and I'd finished my duties to maintain my fief, as well as my role of advisor to Her Highness. I had no reason to stay in the royal capital anymore; the families of the residents I'd taken also eagerly waited for our return. *I must return home soon and help with the farming as well.* My fief was by no means wealthy, and once we received monetary compensation from the royal family for the Bosel debacle, we'd be set for the next decade. My plan was to reduce taxes, have my residents work, and increase the size of our farmland as much as

possible. I could almost imagine the beautiful golden fields lying before me, lush with rows of wheat.

"Could I ask you something?" Zabine started. "Why did you choose to spare the life of Martina, Caroline's child?"

"Does that upset you?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No, Hannah's death had already been avenged when Princess Valiele personally killed the assailant. I'm not upset or angry."

The only reason our first battle had turned into such a disaster was because of Caroline. I'd assumed that Zabine was annoyed that I decided to spare Martina, but it appeared that wasn't the case. And the captain was right; Hannah had been avenged the moment Her Highness killed their attacker.

"I'm more curious about the honor that you spoke of, Sir Polidoro," Zabine said. "I simply do not comprehend it. I can't understand. What benefit did it bring you? In fact, you now have a debt to the royal family, don't you?"

I fell silent. *Zabine might sound dumb, but she's pretty smart. But I suppose no person who can make such a capable speech is a* completely *uneducated fool. I wonder why she was expelled from her house and forced to enter Princess Valiele's corps. When we're talking to each other so calmly, I can't possibly see her as a moron. Is it because her personality is far too cruel? I don't really see her that way anymore. Has she grown in her own way following this first battle?*

"Won't you answer me?" Zabine inquired.

"I will," I replied.

It seemed my lack of response had been taken as a refusal to answer, but I chose to be honest. *We're all drinking anyway, and it's not like being honest here will cause any problems.*

"Even speaking as a noble, don't you find it odd that a young child must shoulder the crimes of their parents?" I asked.

Zabine answered me with silence, but frankly, that was all it boiled down to. Had Martina been much older, I would've lopped off her head as both an act of chivalry and a display of mercy. My mother had trained me as a knight to hold dignity as a noble, and that had meshed with the moral values that I'd held in a more modern society, back in my previous life. This amalgamation of values—including my honor and pride as a noble—that I'd created had me question the customs of this world.

"And I just didn't like that. That's all," I finished.

"Really? That's all?" Zabine asked. She stared at me blankly.

"That's all."

"You're quite the strange one."

"I can't say that I disagree."

I was the odd one out in this world, and I was very much aware of that. But I just couldn't cast aside my values and live purely as a noble within this world. *Surely, I can come to a compromise and continue to persist here.* I tried not to let my circumstances rule me.

"But I don't hate that," Zabine said. "Surprisingly, I feel like we'd get along."

"Are you trying to woo me?" I asked. I was joking, but it really sounded like flirting.

"And what if I am?"

I turned stiff and fell silent. *Is she actually trying to get with me?* In this world, at the very least in Anhalt Kingdom, a muscular and tall man like myself was unpopular with the ladies. I was nowhere near mainstream tastes. *Or is she…*

"Are you after my wealth?" I asked. "All I have is a small plot of land with a population of less than three hundred. You'll only be a lord knight of a small village."

"Ah, but your standing is much too impressive for a knight like me, the first of her generation to receive a promotion of two ranks. But that's not what I'm after this time around," Zabine replied. "I've genuinely taken a liking to you."

She can't be serious. I had no idea how to respond. *Helga, my dear chief squire… You told me to try and seduce Zabine, the one you favor so much, but for some reason, she's the one seducing me.* Admittedly, this wasn't a first for me—Duke Astarte would try to woo me practically every single day, given that she wanted me for her paramour. *That reminds me… I'm pretty sure that the duke manipulated Martina so that the girl would beg for her death by my hands.*

While I prostrated myself of my own accord, Her Grace likely predicted that I would beg for Martina's life to be spared. *Even if she wanted that girl's life saved, the duke's tactics are too underhanded. I can't believe she would trick even me, her brother from the Campaign of Villendorf. I'd thought we were comrades in arms through the blood and sweat of that battle. I'll never forget this humiliation. It's a shame, since I'd have to bid farewell to your giant tits, but I can't help that I've still got values from my previous life. Whatever, I'll forget all that for now.*

"Sir Polidoro, is a woman like me not to your liking?" Zabine asked.

I fell silent. *Are you kidding? I love all curvy women. If you've got boobs, I'm your man. And I can tell that you've got a giant rack even though you're clothed—you couldn't be a more perfect fit for me.* This world had so many women who were needlessly beautiful, and at this point, if a woman had some bazongas, I was all in. But if I voiced my true thoughts, everyone in this world would despise me, and I'd be considered nothing more than a prostitute. And I had my social rank to consider. I was a noble, and my wife would need to be at least competent enough to go on military campaigns in my stead. *Huh? Wait a minute… Is Zabine the perfect fit for me? Helga even recommended her.*

"I wouldn't say that," I said. Myriad thoughts swirled in my head as I provided a vague response.

"Thank goodness," Zabine replied. "I'm genuinely happy to hear that."

What the hell is going on? Why am I being wooed by the person that I once insulted as cruel and merciless? And why do I feel so charmed by her? Please tell me, someone, anyone. How do I answer her? What am I supposed to say? Don't expect a virgin to be on his best behavior in a situation like this.

"Sir Polidoro, you see, I lost my best friend, Hannah," Zabine said. "But at the same time, I was able to form a bond with you, Her Highness's advisor. Perhaps it was Hannah who helped us form this bond. As the captain of Princess Valiele's corps, and on a personal note, I hope that we can continue to strengthen our ties."

"Y-yes, I do as well," I replied.

I accepted her handshake. Her hand was rugged from the blisters of wielding her sword and spear, but it felt oddly soft to the touch. *Crap… I think Zabine's beginning to grow on me.*

"And if possible, I would also love to foster a relationship as a woman and a man," she added.

Her glittering pupils pierced through my heart. *It must be because I'm usually unpopular. It has to be. Or maybe it's because I still feel hurt from Duke Astarte's horrible act of betrayal toward me. I can't believe such big tits betrayed me…* In my anguish, Zabine's wooing, along with the huge knockers that I could see underneath her clothes, had caused me to be drawn to her. I felt my cock get hard under the metallic chastity belt, and I internally began to mutter a prayer. It was a chant that I often used to relieve the pain of my groin as I begged for help. *My dick hurts.*

Bonus Story:
The Duke Who Loves Fondling Butts

THE BASE WAS LOCATED A REASONABLE DISTANCE away from the border between Villendorf and Anhalt. Georgine von Astarte lay on the ground—she'd just been punched. She wasn't punched by Faust von Polidoro, the man with a large body who looked quite troubled by this turn of events. The one who dared raise a hand against the ass-grabbing duke wasn't the man who'd just been sexually harassed. It was chief squire Helga, Faust's subject.

"Let's kill her. I can't stand this any longer," Helga growled, and then spat a glob of phlegm.

The residents of the Polidoro fief all gripped their blades to surround the duke, ready to skewer her at any moment. Anhalt and Villendorf were currently at war—the two nations had engaged in a violent clash. Each refused to surrender as they fought for the border in a vicious battle to claim more land for themselves. Despite this perilous situation, Helga glared at the duke with disgust, punched the noble, and spat on her. The chief squire had only one reason to turn against a precious ally—Georgine von Astarte loved to fondle butts.

"I understand," Anastasia von Anhalt said. "It's all Astarte's fault. But I still would like for you to calm down."

The crown princess of Anhalt had come to the duke's rescue. The royal had blood of the highest esteem in her veins, and she had expressed her sympathy to a commoner. Anastasia was fully aware that the duke was entirely at fault for her foolish mistake. Helga and the rest of the Polidoro citizens respected their lord immensely, and Faust was the only descendant of House Polidoro. Yet Astarte had thrown caution to the wind and grabbed his rear.

Needless to say, this sort of act was completely unbefitting of a lady and was completely inexcusable toward a nobleman. The duke had no right to fondle Faust's butt and treat him like a male prostitute at some sort of brothel. Such behavior undermined not only Faust's pride but that of the Polidoro citizens. It was all her fault, and anyone could tell at a glance that Astarte deserved everything coming her way.

"One must not touch the buttocks of another," Anatasia had said to Astarte. "Doing so to a knight serves to humiliate them and everything they own, including their fief, the lives of their residents, and their predecessors."

Time and again, the princess had clearly explained herself to Astarte, the duke who held blood ties to Anastasia's family. She had told the duke never to sexually harass others in such a fashion. In fact, Anastasia felt like this didn't need to be spelled out. Any human with even an iota of common sense would surely know that touching another's rear was completely out of the question. Even so, the royal had felt the need to warn the duke numerous times. Astarte had agreed; the ass-grabbing duke had replied that she wouldn't do such a thing, much to Anastasia's relief.

"We're in the middle of a war," Anastasia had said. "You understand that, don't you?"

Yet Astarte had gone and fondled Faust—the very man who had been the greatest contributor to this war and served as the strongest knight within the kingdom. Armies on both sides had suffered casualties that climbed into the triple digits, and they were now past the point of no return. If Anhalt didn't achieve victory while keeping any further casualties to a minimum, their dignity would be lost. Faust had put his life on the line as he contributed greatly to the precarious war despite this disadvantageous situation, and Astarte had the gall to fondle his butt.

It was an unforgivable act that tarnished the honor of a noble. Astarte couldn't utter a complaint if she was killed on the spot.

"But I had no choice," the duke protested. "His butt was right in front of me."

An excuse was a way to justify or rationalize one's actions. It was a way to explain any mistakes or inconvenient occurrences, and excuses had no obligation to be legitimate.

"I saw his butt," Astarte said. "Faust's defenseless butt was right in front of me."

Indeed, the duke's excuses were nowhere near legitimacy.

"Am I truly the only one to blame? Surely I'm not the one at fault," Astarte said. She pinned the blame on Faust's defenseless behind. "Faust's helpless nature is the real issue, if you ask me."

Her words only fueled the wrath of Helga and all the Polidoro residents who respected their lord.

"May I kill her now?" Helga inquired.

The chief squire would usually never have the right to speak to the crown princess of the kingdom, but they were in the middle of a war, and she served as Faust's right-hand woman. The restrictions on her were a little less tight than usual. Clearly, Anastasia was in charge of supervising Duke Astarte, and the princess had now been foisted with the responsibility for the duke's misdeeds. While the princess and the royal were relatives, truthfully, the former had doubted her blood relations to the latter. Sadly, as the two ladies shared the same vibrant red hair, their biological ties were painfully obvious for the world to see.

For a moment, even Anastasia considered the duke's execution, but she stopped herself.

"Wait," the princess ordered.

It was reasonable for the duke to be killed on the spot, and everyone would likely nod their heads with understanding. In fact, Anastasia was convinced that House Astarte would claim that the eldest daughter of the family had valiantly gone to the front line in the war against Villendorf, expertly taken command of the troops,

and died with glory on the battlefield. The thought flashed across the princess's mind—it wasn't a total lie either. Georgine von Astarte had been made the commander of her army of five hundred, and her courage was second only to Faust's. She'd contributed immensely to the war effort.

"I witnessed your brave battle with my very eyes. You fought until the very end, and your valiance is seared into my mind," Astarte had solemnly said to every one of the soldiers in her army. Her tone was genuine as she firmly promised that they would all be rewarded for their efforts. The duke then went around to clasp the hands of all of her soldiers who had fallen in battle; she promised her comrades that she would take all the dead back and give them proper burials. She acted exactly as a leader should.

"We're in the middle of a war," Anastasia said. "Helga, surely you and the rest of the Polidoro residents understand that we need Astarte for battle."

No one doubted the skills of Astarte as a noble, soldier, and leader. But sadly, she had fondled Faust's butt. Even the soldiers who were convinced that a noble as excellent as Astarte couldn't possibly exist in Anhalt were taken aback by the duke's behavior. How could a noble of her splendor have such perverted fetishes? Anastasia did her best to take the duke's side.

"Astarte is an amazing commander on the front line and can expertly wield her soldiers," the royal said. "Without her, we won't be able to win the war."

"She fondled our lord's buttocks," Helga replied.

Her icy tone betrayed her emotions. Neither she nor the Polidoro residents cared about the outcome of the war. Faust was their only lord, and he had been insulted since his birth because he'd failed to meet Anhalt's beauty standards. This man caked himself in blood and dirt as he loudly declared that he wouldn't allow a single ally in front of him to die. He'd fought desperately, undeterred by the obvious disadvantage in numbers that he had.

Even a powerful man like him had his limits. He sustained several injuries, and blood flowed from his wounds. He wore no plate armor and instead donned crude chain mail, which meant that his body was covered with gashes. Only when he saw that all his residents were safe did he dare breathe a sigh of relief and praise every single one of his soldiers. Every time he did so, his citizens were almost brought to tears.

And yet, the duke dared to fondle his ass. It was an act of humiliation beyond measure. The residents would willingly toss their lives away if it meant that they could slaughter this butt-fondling duke.

"Astarte, apologize," Anastasia ordered. "This isn't a matter of social standing between nobles and commoners anymore."

The princess thought that only a heartfelt apology would settle this issue.

"I shall decide whether to kill her based on her reply," Helga said.

She retained just a little more composure than the other citizens and knew that she had to protect Faust's honor while also keeping the residents calm. The chief squire tried to pry an apology from the duke. This insane war made some become a bit mad. Astarte was one such person—she'd often lecherously breathe loudly whenever she stood by Faust, but she had managed to keep her impulses in check until now.

The butt-fondling duke said not a word as she sat up. Her lower half remained glued to the ground as she opened her mouth.

"I'll say it as many times as it takes!" she shouted. "Are we sure that Faust isn't to blame? *He* was the one who clung to me! He cared not about our blood and sweat mingling as he stood in his armor and hugged me! He told me that he was glad that I had survived, and we each confirmed that the other was still alive and well!"

Faust and Astarte had fought alongside each other on the front line. The duke had created a strategy where Faust's superhuman strength would pin the Villendorf soldiers in place, and she'd use the cavalry to attack from the enemy's flank. Her clever plan had worked out perfectly, and she only sexually harassed Faust back at the base after all was said and done.

"Had our plan been off even a little, either one of us or the both of us would've perished!" Astarte continued. "My instincts were focused on clinging to life, and I fought desperately! We all did! And then along comes the man I'm infatuated with who has an amazing ass, and he genuinely rejoices that I'm still alive. He clung to me! As I've just claimed, my instincts were focused on survival! And in that situation, Faust hugged me—surely, he's partially to blame!"

An excuse was a way to justify or rationalize one's actions. It was a way to explain any mistakes or inconvenient occurrences, and excuses had no obligation to be legitimate.

"Are we certain that Faust shouldn't be faulted for having such a great ass?!" Astarte cried. "That's my question for everyone!"

Astarte threw out her chest, including those needlessly large tits, as she declared that she wasn't to blame—not one bit.

Yeah, she's dead to me, Anastasia thought.

"You may attack her with your spear. You don't have to hold back," the royal said.

The duke's excuses were far too shallow after she'd sexually harassed the man. Helga paid no heed for her future as her mind was set to murder Astarte. The rest of the Polidoro residents fumed with wrath as they milled about, preparing to murder the butt-fondling duke.

"Wait!" Faust called.

He'd been on the sidelines until now, but he was the victim in all this. The faithful Polidoro residents stopped to listen to their lord's orders.

"I was careless," the Knight of Wrath said. "I understand that Duke Astarte was feeling a bit excited on the battlefield, and she moved in accordance with her instincts."

Anastasia, Duke Astarte's army, and the Polidoro residents all froze in astonishment. They looked at him like some sort of saint. How could anyone be so forgiving?

"But I can only let things slide in secret if matters don't become public," Faust said. "Since the duke's army and my citizens are present for this, I can't just forgive her act and sweep matters under the rug."

He was right. The duke's obscene act had been one of humiliation to nobles and couldn't be forgiven so easily. Regardless of his being a lowly lord knight, even a duke wasn't allowed to do such a thing. Faust, who had his reputation to consider, couldn't simply forgive her and end matters amicably.

"And so, I request a letter of apology along with monetary compensation," he said. It seemed like a decent compromise.

"Sorry, I'm getting excited," Astarte mumbled.

She'd fondled his butt and received Faust's kind forgiveness, and still the duke couldn't suppress the excitement that she felt. When Anastasia heard those words, she genuinely wished that Astarte was dead. But as infuriating as it was to admit, if Astarte died, the princess would truly be in a rocky position, and so the duke's life had to be spared. Without her, the scales of war might very well tip in Villendorf's favor.

In any case, Faust's suggestion sounded perfect. The officer of arms, who was in charge of the finances of the duke's army, flew to the lord knight's side. Monetary compensation was immediately prepared and paid. The officer scribbled down the fee on a piece of paper and handed it to the duke.

Bill

Butt-fondling fee

30 silver coins

The fee was rather hefty and required the signature of Duke Astarte as commander of the army. Anastasia furrowed her brows. *Butt-fondling fee? Surely there's another way to word that.* As the duke's relative, Anastasia vehemently prayed that this paper wouldn't be kept around for future generations to see. If Anastasia ever had a child who came to her with this paper scrap, she would surely disown them. But Astarte had already inherited her house at the young age of sixteen, and it was all too late to worry about that. The duke calmed herself and signed her name on the slip of paper.

"Paying money…" she mumbled. "I paid coin to fondle him. That very thought excites me."

There was nothing that anyone could do. Her voice had reached everyone's ears, but Anastasia made no effort to express her rage. *Why in the world was such a monster born in the duke's household?* She could only lament the reality that she was faced with.

"Thirty pieces of silver!" Astarte cried.

It was the exact amount that one of the thirteen apostles had been given to betray their savior. The traitor had then used the silver to purchase a field. When Astarte recalled the tale, she began to grow more excited still and could no longer be controlled.

"Next is a letter of apology," the officer said. A piece of paper was offered to the duke.

"This is getting kind of fun!" Astarte shouted.

She sounded as though she wasn't thinking; no one could keep her under control. The butt-loving duke was beyond salvation. She was skilled in her own way, and if one showed talent, she'd pay no heed to whether they were a commoner. They'd be made into a

knight by her own hands, and she would offer genuine praise to those who worked well. The duke was by no means evil. The duke's army even included commoners who were valued less than the third daughter of a household, and they supported their lord from the bottom of their hearts. Astarte was a lady worth their protection until their dying breaths. She was an excellent commander who would forgive all if one brought forth excellent results, and everyone was aware of her skills. She was a superb knight.

"Done!" Astarte cried.

But that didn't mean that she could just molest other soldiers. Astarte finally stood up and energetically read the letter of apology that she'd just drafted.

"Here is my apology letter!" Astarte shouted. Her gusto only made Anastasia anxious. "But before I apologize, I'd like to speak about my love for Faust. Ever since I was young, I always thought that Robert—Anastasia's father and my uncle—had a great ass. Thinking back, I do think this initial experience shaped me into who I am today."

It was a light jab on the duke's part. She articulated how she had felt sexual desires for Anastasia's late father, Astarte's biological uncle. While the princess already knew all about it, she wasn't keen on hearing the details.

"As a woman, I believe my horniness for men isn't anything out of the ordinary," Astarte went on. "Yes, I've occasionally gazed at the behinds of page boys. But none of these butts proved satisfactory. I was promised to become the future head of a duchy, but the asses of the guys around me simply weren't enough for me. None came even close to my ideal."

Anastasia was aware of the duke's fetishes, and the royal wasn't eager to hear about them once more.

"Time went on, and by the time I turned sixteen, I'd already come to a realization," the duke continued. "Thinking back, my

uncle, Robert, was very tall and muscular. It wasn't easy to come across a butt as firm as his."

Anastasia glanced at the crowd and saw a hint of melancholy on their faces. They had gradually stopped caring about the duke's spiel.

"It was then that a man called Faust appeared," Astarte said. "A man over six and a half feet tall and two hundred and eighty pounds, he rippled with muscles that resembled steel, and his large stature made him into an extraordinary knight. When I first gazed upon him, I immediately fell in love. I honestly thought that our meeting was fated."

It seemed the butt-fondling duke had forgotten the point of her apology letter. She was too busy talking about her fetish to get to the apology.

"I hoped that one day, I could have his hips pound between my legs," Astarte said. "I wanted this man with a great ass to pound his hips into me."

You don't need to say it twice. Faust, the victim of it all, was taken aback by this candid speech.

"Once this war is over, I plan to use every ounce of power I have as a duke to have him do what I just said for me," Astarte declared. "I have such powerful emotions within my mind, and yet Faust carelessly decided to cling to me. I believe he should be partially to blame, and I strongly believe that he should be proud for being a man with an ass that's very much worth the thirty pieces of silver per grab. I believe that it will be best for everyone if he becomes my paramour in the future."

The duke, who loved to fondle butts, had just claimed that Faust's buttocks were of equal worth to the Lord and Savior. This was but a declaration and was by no means an admittance of her guilt.

"That's all, folks! Thank you for hearing out Georgine von Astarte!"

The moment she ended her speech a punch flew out from her side. Anastasia could no longer hold herself back.

"Why don't you just drop dead?!" the royal screamed. Anastasia's furious roars echoed pitifully into the distance. Ultimately, the duke was too obsessed with ass to offer a proper word of apology, but everyone stared at her with resignation. There was no way to spare her. Her attitude was so awful that it was almost impressive. The crowd only stared at her with a touch of fascination.

Bonus Story:
Hypothetical Good Ending, Valiele's Route

IT ALL STARTED WITH A SMALL CHANGE. Perhaps someone was a bit off in their round of applause at the end of a traditional song. Perhaps the flap of a butterfly's wings caused a tornado elsewhere. But I think it was at *that* moment that everything changed.

Once Princess Valiele's first battle was over, and we returned to the royal capital carrying our fallen comrade, I'd stopped to pick some wildflowers. The flowers weren't anything special; they were plain chamomiles. The plants I plucked with my large hands were likely not even worth a single bronze coin. I felt bad for taking the life of these flowers that were blooming their hardest, but I didn't stop my fingers.

The petals gave an aroma similar to apples as I neatly offered this small bouquet to the freckled woman in the simple coffin, who'd served her duties faithfully. When I spoke to Zabine and returned to Princess Valiele's side, I heard the royal whisper faintly.

"Thank you," she said.

Her voice was so feeble that only a person like me with extraordinary ears could've heard it. It sounded as though she was expressing her gratitude for everything that I'd done, and a sad smile stretched across her lips as though she found my actions terribly endearing. When she thanked me, her expression remained in my mind.

Truly I could only state that it must've been the most minute of gestures. When I saw her sad smile, I felt my heart pound with enchantment. And so, the world had been flipped upside down. I hadn't been able to predict such a strange outcome as I faced the reality that was right in front of my nose.

A lady cradled a baby in her arms. She was no taller than four and a half feet and had an extremely petite frame. When compared to her older sister or mother, she seemed to not have fully developed, and her chest was rather small, too. But despite that, she was curvy in other areas, and her skin was smooth as a child who knew no suffering. This lady was over twenty years old, and I may sound a touch impertinent, but she hadn't grown a bit since she was a teenager. She'd matured considerably as a person, but her frame was very flat.

I preferred women with large racks, and this little lady's chest was anything but. Since she was the daughter of none other than the former Queen Liesenlotte, and the younger sister of Queen Anastasia, I could only complain that she didn't resemble these two ladies a bit more. The only feature that connected her to her bloodline was her beautiful flaming hair.

"Hannah's in a good mood today," my wife said.

The lady in front of me was none other than the former younger princess of Anhalt Kingdom—Princess Valiele. She'd just given birth to a child, but she looked exactly the same as she had before birth. No one would assume that she'd birthed a child before. I gazed at her as she continued to coo at her baby. Again, she'd changed a great deal over the years. Ever since her first battle six years ago, Queen Liesenlotte had entrusted the princess with some tasks of the royal family, and Her Highness Princess Valiele had done her best to fulfill every role that she was given. She'd even gone out of her way to greet a stubborn lord knight who only showed up during conscription or to announce a change of lords.

I had also often been mobilized to get rid of bandits, arbitrate between lord knights, and handle other minor skirmishes.

"Hannah's always in a good mood," I said.

I watched over my eldest daughter Hannah with a gentle gaze, but I made no attempt to stroke her head. My daughter was given the same name as a knight who'd passed during Valiele's first battle.

I suspected that my child wasn't fond of my thick, rugged hands, covered with blisters from wielding my weapons. Every time I tried to pet my daughter, she'd kick up a small fuss, and so I gave up as I continued to reminisce about my past. *This isn't bad at all,* I thought.

I didn't hate Princess Valiele and had received special compensation from the royal family since. After her first battle, she continued to exert her influence as the younger princess of the kingdom; I didn't mind it one bit. Before I knew it, lord knights from other fiefs had joined in to offer their assistance, and she'd gained a few noble comrades in arms.

My standing within the Anhalt Kingdom had also gradually improved over time. As Faust von Polidoro, I didn't mind my relationship with Valiele, which allowed me to protect my tiny yet irreplaceable fief. But even I knew that my ties with the princess would come to an end one day—we couldn't do this forever.

I decided to voice my desires to the princess two years after her first battle. I was twenty-four.

"I'd like to marry soon," I'd said.

I hadn't formed bonds with nobles in the royal capital to be worked to the bone by Princess Valiele and the royal family. My priority was to find a wife. Since the princess was now able to exert her political influence, surely she could arrange to find my wife and the future mother of my child. If possible, I wanted someone pretty and tall, like a model. If I was allowed to be choosy, I also wanted someone with tits. If I was allowed to be even pickier, I wanted someone with really huge jugs. I mean, just enormous. Truthfully, I liked women with thick thighs and the biggest rack feasible.

In short, I'd like a woman who's the polar opposite of you, I thought. I stared at Princess Valiele while I refused to let even the slightest hint of my thoughts show. Valiele, who couldn't have been more different from my type—at the time, she was sixteen, with a

flat chest, a petite stature, and a childlike appearance—nodded in agreement.

"You're right, this is the perfect timing," she said.

I sighed, relieved that she would finally lend me a hand. I was grateful that the princess would now use her political influence to find me a wife.

"Why don't you marry me, Faust?" Valiele suggested. "I shall abdicate my claim as the second heir for the throne and head to your fief. Everyone in my corps was able to receive decent promotions, and Zabine was able to receive her hereditary knighthood. I think everyone will be set in the future."

I could barely understand her words and wasn't sure that I'd heard correctly. *What the hell is she saying?*

"Oh, uh…" I started.

No, thanks. I almost instinctively tried to refuse her offer, but I found myself unable to utter those words. *Wait, do I really not want to marry her? This lady in front of me doesn't hit any of my preferences, and I only saw her as a girl with a pitiful body. In fact, I'd almost forgotten the fact that she's a woman.*

I couldn't sense any value in marriage to her, but I was drawn to the princess's personality. Ever since she was fourteen, she had diligently worked her way up, and I did indeed like her as a person.

"My sister promised me," Valiele explained. "After I'm gone, my corps will still be given work and won't be chased away from the spotlight. They'll do just fine. Since she'll become the queen, my role as a backup will be over. In other words, I must think about my future as well. My sister said that she wouldn't stop me if I wanted to marry you and become a lord knight as Valiele von Polidoro. I'd be on the frontier with you."

Do I not get a say in this? Why's the royal family deciding that for themselves? As a lord knight, I haven't given my consent in this matter.

"And if you're marrying me, a princess, your Polidoro fief would be provided with aid in money and resources," Valiele went on. "Needless to say, the royal family will have no right to butt in on how you manage your land. You can say that you're simply receiving support from the royal family, and they expect nothing in return. Anastasia thus wants to make sure you're aware that she's a kind woman with endless generosity."

These conditions are enticing. If I were to receive aid without the royal family ever affecting land management, it would be a welcome deal. *That last sentence is a bit confusing, though…* I used to think that Princess Anastasia swallowed humans whole for lunch; I found her terrifying, though by now I had learned that she had a completely different personality from her appearance.

"Are you reluctant to marry me, Faust?" Valiele asked.

I thought for a few moments. *If I were to ignore the fact that she's totally not my type, it's an enticing offer. She may have abdicated her claim to the throne, but she's still got royal blood in her veins, and that would mix with the blood of House Polidoro.* Royal blood was highly coveted within noble society. Princess Valiele might have lacked confidence as she stepped into her first battle, but she had blossomed into a lady through higher education and firsthand experience of combat.

It'd been two years since her first battle, and she'd managed to become acquainted with various nobles, being far more sociable than I ever could be. If I were to view her in totality, she was a more capable lord knight than I was. I could go out to war, and Princess Valiele would manage the land. If we worked together, we could surely raise the Polidoro fief higher than ever. That much was crystal clear.

I maintained my silence and thought for a few more seconds, but my answer was already clear. The princess's hands trembled ever so slightly, like a timid cat. *I can't do this to her.* That was all it took. *I probably love this young lady. Somewhere in my heart, I don't stand a chance against her. She isn't my type at all, but I don't*

hate her. I've got zero desire for a lady with a flat chest on a tiny frame. I continued to repeat the words in my head and tried to lie to myself, but I couldn't do so any longer. I couldn't fool myself. Valiele might have matured considerably, but she'd always been a timid and shy girl. I couldn't even begin to imagine the courage she had to muster to voice her confession of love to me. I was completely out of excuses.

"Princess Valiele… Please let me call you 'Valiele' instead," I started.

"Yes, Faust?" she asked.

Ultimately, I found myself unable to abandon this young lady. If she told me to die, I would likely do so. If she was in a tight spot, I'd jump through flames and swim through icy waters to rescue her. Even if she were surrounded by an army of a thousand or stuck in the pits of Hell, I'd brave my way through it all just to save her life. I'd much rather keep her by my side so that I wouldn't have to go to such lengths, though. In fact, I wanted to be with her even after death.

"I, Faust von Polidoro, humbly ask for your hand in marriage. I would love to live by your side. In fact, I'd hope that we can sleep for eternity beside each other when the time comes for us to enter our graves."

If I felt so strongly about her, I shouldn't have had a lady confess her love to me, and I should've sprung my proposal instead. Even in this society where gender roles were flipped, I still had my pride as a man.

Valiele accepted my proposal, and we were set to marry. Four years passed, and I found that I was able to accept her as my wife. Soon after, Hannah was born. She was my eldest daughter and carried my blood, set to be the future successor of House Polidoro. The fief was managed well, and the golden fields of wheat shimmered under the rays of the sun. I was filled with happiness…or so I thought. I just had one little, tiny problem.

"Perhaps it's called a cowardly regret," I muttered.

I loved Valiele as my wife—there was no denying that. She was my partner, and I wanted to spend my life with her for eternity, even in the grave. However, she had a flat chest and a childlike frame. I loved women with thick thighs and enormous racks. My fetish persisted within my mind. As stated, my life was filled with happiness. I was sure of that. Still, I'd wanted to be bestowed with the grace of the gods. More specifically, I'd yearned for the grace of the Boob Goddess.

"Faust, I've been meaning to ask," Valiele started. She sounded as though she'd just recalled something.

"What is it?" I replied. All the while, my feelings of anguish swirled in my mind.

"My sister and Duke Astarte each recently gave birth to a child. They look shockingly similar to you."

Well, of course they do. They're my kids, too. I almost told the truth, but I knew there was no reason to. It was clear that she'd already known, and I was aware that she wasn't the type to get angry over this matter. This world severely lacked men, and it was common for men to be shared by several women. As long as one had permission from their legal wife, it wouldn't be counted as infidelity.

"I told those two not to lay a hand on you," Valiele said. "I know that in terms of social rank, it must be hard for you to say no to them, but you *did* at least fight back a little, didn't you? You expressed your reluctance, right?"

Clearly, Valiele was already aware of the situation. When I'd gone to the royal capital for my conscription and left Valiele to protect my beloved fief, the two nobles had invited me to their bedrooms and had their way with me. Frankly, I couldn't deny them either—I was starved for boobs and couldn't resist.

"I've always been in love with you! I've always been too roundabout in my methods, but I've no need for excuses or a cool

façade now! Just lay down and let us fuck you!" the duke and the princess cried.

I was cornered by two beauties—one had a beautiful pair of tits and the other had magnificent melons. If I were to push them off here, I'd lose my very identity. Social rank and differences in power had completely slipped my mind. I asked Valiele for her understanding in this matter.

"I know that those two are madly in love with you," Valiele said. "I suppose I can just barely manage to turn a blind eye to them, but I received a letter stating that Zabine is also heavy with child. That fact itself should be celebrated, but I've just got one thing to ask. Why is her daughter named 'Marianne'? Isn't that the name of the previous lord of this fief, Lady Polidoro? Even I can put two and two together if the clues are this obvious."

Zabine had named her child with me after my mother. *Quite frankly, I've got nothing to say about that either. Seriously, that blonde chick with massive titties should be to blame. Obviously I don't stand a chance against large breasts.* I was incredibly devoted to the Boob Goddess, and she gazed upon me from the heavens as she bestowed upon me her grace. I couldn't be to blame for that.

"Why don't we betray Princess Valiele just a little? I'm sure she'll forgive you," Zabine had whispered into my ear. She then dragged me into her bedroom, and I was powerless to stop her.

We had both gone crazy from the guilt of backstabbing Valiele. We committed a grave taboo, and we hadn't been more turned on in our lives. There was nothing I could do, and I shouldn't be the one to blame for that. I stated as much to my wife.

"Can I punch you?" Valiele asked. "Seriously, can I punch both of you? I guess I can't hurt a pregnant woman, so I'll be hitting you with everything I've got, Faust! I won't be able to forgive you otherwise."

"I'm sorry. Yes, you can hit me," I replied.

Okay, so it is *my bad.* I was a coward with regrets, and that was obviously wrong. I told her the truth and chose to admit aloud that those three ladies carried a child with me. I decided to apologize profusely, especially for Zabine, and chose to bear full responsibility for her pregnancy. *I'll get punched by Valiele and not utter a single complaint.* I steeled myself, ready to get absolutely clobbered.

"But before that, can I just say one more thing?" I asked.

"What?!" Valiele snapped.

She called for Helga, our chief squire, and entrusted her with baby Hannah. My wife whirled around and glared at me—she had a flat chest, a petite frame, and a childlike physique. She hadn't physically matured one bit since she was fourteen, but she was my beloved wife. No one else could come close to how endearing she was to me.

"I still love you from the bottom of my heart, Valiele. It's true," I said.

"I'll believe those words," Valiele replied. "I'll enter the same grave as yours, and we'll be together for eternity."

I couldn't tell if she was angry or happy. It was hard to read her expression as she opened her mouth once more.

"But even so, I'll still punch you."

"Yeah, you may," I replied.

And with that, she swiftly began to punch the ever-loving hell out of me.



Afterword

FIRST, I'D LIKE TO DEEPLY THANK YOU, THE reader who purchased and read this book. I'm sure long-time readers are aware that this series was originally a webnovel that managed to make it into publication. I had no idea that my story would develop into a published series, much less receive the popularity for that to happen. This was written completely from my personal tastes and fetishes and contained no coherent plot.

Since this is, of course, my first time publishing a book, I had no idea how to go about things. I'd like to thank my editor and the publisher for bearing with me and my clueless self as they also got involved with marketing my series. I had expected a rejection, but I decided to shoot my shot anyway and asked for MELON22 to be in charge of my illustrations. They graciously accepted my request, and I cannot thank them enough for their kindness.

Truly, thank you so much.

Now then, since this book has been jam-packed with everything I can fit, I can only write one page for my afterword. This will end with me simply providing a word of thanks to everyone, but by the time this volume is out, the series will have progressed quite a bit. Please check it out if you're curious about where we're going.

If, by any chance, I'm lucky enough to publish a second volume, I do hope that you will all continue to follow the life of the knight Sir Faust von Polidoro. I've added to and revised the script quite a bit since the webnovel version! I hope to see you all again. Thank you.



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