

Ajigozen

Illustrator: Yura Chujo

2



The Royal Hostage  
Has

Vanished

The Black Wolf Knight Yearns

for the Persecuted Princess



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Ahh. So it was her.  
She was the source  
of all Nia's problems.

"Wh-What are you  
doing here?!"





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# Chapter 1: McGuine Viscounty Begins

“Hooh, hah, yah!”

“Wai, huh, wah?!”

“Ghh... Just what I had expected from the Black Wolf...”

I, Viscount Ark McGuine, had a routine: Every day, I’d wake at the break of dawn and train, be it in basics, swordsmanship, or anything else. And lately, I had changed this routine up a little; I was currently fighting both Laura and Tom in a training match-slash-real-battle.

The two of them were wielding short-bladed one-handed swords called shortswords, albeit with their blades blunted. I, on the other hand, was wielding a thin pole that was nearly three meters long that the people here called a quarterstaff, though the old man who once trained me said that back east, it was called a cane.

So here I was, fondly looking back on the past as I fended off Laura’s and Tom’s attacks. I was holding my cane in the middle with both hands shoulder-width apart, with about a one-handed sword’s length left on the ends. This gave me some advantage in terms of reach and let me take on both of the servants at once.

“How are you blocking me without even looking?!” griped Tom.

“Nah, I’m looking. I just don’t have my eyes on you,” I replied easily.

“What does that even mean?!”

Despite Tom’s complaints, he wasn’t letting up on his attacks at all. It was just as I’d thought before—he, too, was skilled in wielding easy-to-move, short weapons like daggers and shortswords.

Who was the other one? Laura, of course.

“I guess you could say I’m watching you out of the corner of my eye?” I mused out loud. “Which is why you’re never going to get past me by skulking and



waiting for an opening, Laura.”

“Ghh! I can’t get behind you!”

Unlike Tom, who was loud, Laura kept quiet, moving only slightly as she attempted to suppress her presence and make me lose track of her. But I was subtly changing my position to keep them both in my line of sight. When you fought two opponents at once, there was always an invisible line that would connect both of them. If the line went behind my back, that’d mean I’d lost track of one of them, which was what Laura was aiming for and why I kept on moving.

Anyway, I’d explained it all to Gale once, and I’d decided not to worry about it afterwards when he said that I was the only one who could manage such a thing.

“Then how about this?!” Laura cried before her movements suddenly...slowed down.

On the flip side, Tom was still... Or, wait, he was moving a little bit faster than before. They weren’t attacking at the same time, but instead staggering the timing of their moves. Their aim was good, and Tom’s sudden increase in speed was scarily sharp. The two really *were* good, both in individual skill and in working together as a team. Laura was especially clever, and she could be a nightmare with her mastery of a wide range of techniques.

But my cane was a beast in itself for the way it let me handle things like that.

“Nnargh?!” grunted Tom.

“He blocked it in between his hands?!” Laura exclaimed in dismay.

I couldn’t blame them for being shocked, because I didn’t usually do things like this... Or, well, I *might* have done it sometimes while using two-handed swords, but it wasn’t very common. When I used the cane, not only would I block blows in the space between my hands, but I’d sometimes slug ‘em with it too. It was just like the old man said. Spears, swords, barehanded—you could use the cane at any distance. And, if they were close enough to go barehanded...

“Good job, getting this close!” I said.



“Ghuah!”

That, of course, meant that they were in kicking range.

When I aimed a right roundhouse kick at Laura’s abdomen, she caught on and flew backwards, barely managing to dodge. She really was good. Honestly, just a little *too* good. I then used the momentum of my right leg’s kick to change the direction I was facing, closing in in an instant...

On Tom.

“Huh? Wai, waugh?!”

In the short span of time where Laura was off the rhythm they’d established, stepping closer meant I was fighting Tom one-on-one, even if just for an instant. And if they couldn’t have beaten me while fighting two-on-one, then that meant...

“Wai, sto, we, done?!”

*Tom was really trying hard to take the hit, huh?*

“Sorry, but this ends here!” I yelled.

“That’s just what a villain would say!”

Ignoring Tom’s retort, I strengthened my attacks to finish things all at once. After all, once Laura regained her footing, she’d immediately return to the fight.

Up, down, up, down, down.

Though shortswords were well suited for defense because they were easy to swing, their short blades meant one had a harder time guarding one’s legs from attacks. So, I kept going at Tom’s legs to catch his attention before aiming right at his head.

Or right in front of it, at least. I didn’t want to actually hurt him, after all. Tom, of course, understood this and raised both his hands in surrender.

Then, I spun around, pointing my cane at Laura, who’d been waiting for just the right moment to finish things.

*Whoops! That was really close.* I mean, if she got back in, then it’d just be back to fighting two-on-one, and the fight would just keep going on and on.



“You wanna keep going?”

At my question, Laura kept her shortsword raised, freezing for a moment. Then, she sighed and lowered it.

“You’ve gotta hide your presence a little better. It’s completely obvious that you’re waiting for when I think I’ve won and lowered my guard for your turn to strike,” I advised.

“Nah, no one else has ever caught on to what she was doing before, you know?!” Tom refuted. “You’re the only one!”

“Oh, really?” I replied. “Well, I might’ve seen a few too many people try to play dead on the battlefield for that to work on me.”

Even while Tom and I bantered back and forth, I kept my eyes on Laura. Knowing the two of them, there was a chance that Tom’s chatter was aimed to distract me. And, more than anything, Laura hadn’t admitted defeat herself yet.

It seemed like I’d been right.

“Hah... I yield. You’ve beaten us.” Laura conceded defeat, raising her hands. She seemed to have given up on waiting for me to lower my guard.

And, at that same moment, someone entered the courtyard. I could never mistake those footsteps. It was Nia.

“Good work, you three. Would you like to stop for breakfast soon?”

“Y-Yes!”

As soon as I heard that it was indeed Nia, I immediately gave a hearty answer and stood at attention. There wasn’t really any need to stand at attention, though, but it was important to me as a man not to show her I was slacking off in any way, even in training.

Whether Nia understood what I was thinking or not, she gave me the same radiant smile as always and lifted the basket she was carrying a little bit.

“If you’d like,” she said, “then how about we put down a sheet and eat breakfast out here, since the weather is so nice? We could have a picnic!”

“That sounds like a nice thing to do every once in a while,” I answered almost



immediately, as I looked over at Tom out of the corner of my eye. He'd ended up taking the brunt of my attacks during the fight, and it didn't take much to see that he was completely exhausted. It'd probably be better for us to take a break-slash-breakfast out here instead of making him do any walking.

Laura? She had either been pacing herself or had a lot more stamina than Tom, because her breathing was steady.

And so, since I, as the tentative master of the house, had given the okay, the maids began setting out cutlery, the food, and drinks as per Nia's instructions. Owing to their efficiency, breakfast was served only moments later. Etiquette required that I, the tentative master of the house, sit down first, before Nia could sit down next to me, and Laura beside her. Laura had tentatively agreed to regard me as her master.

Using "tentative" so many times in a row made me sad, but I bounced back quickly. It wasn't something I needed to worry about right now.

Tom, by the way, was sitting a little farther away with the old gardener. They hung out often since they were already acquainted. I wanted to join them, as we three were the only men in the manor, but our respective positions got in the way of that.

As I sat getting a bit melancholic first thing in the morning, Nia handed me a cup.

"Here you are, Lord Ark. It's lemon juice and honey mixed with water. I've heard that it's a good thing to drink to recover after sweating and exercising so much."

"I'm touched that you're so considerate. Thank you, Nia."

"Oh, it's nothing." Nia's angelic smile (in my eyes, at least) healed me. It was strange how much some emotional comfort did to cure physical exhaustion. "I've also had these made to be easy to eat. Please, enjoy them after you wash your hands," she continued.

In the basket she offered me was one of those infamous hot dogs, though it was a normal one, half the size of the one we'd eaten before. Beside the hot dog was another fad food created by that one baron's daughter: slices of bread

with food stuffed in between them, called sandwiches. Apparently she didn't know why she named them that way either. *Seriously, why?*

Brushing off all of the questions I had that would never be answered, I washed my hands in a bowl full of water and wiped them thoroughly before picking up a sandwich. Why did I wash my hands? Because apparently it helped stop the spread of sickness. Some researcher somewhere had noticed that the number of people who had suffered from an epidemic was different between villages where they washed their hands and villages where they didn't, and the researcher started advocating for it afterwards. And, of course, Nia was the one who knew about it. Go Nia.





As soon as I'd taken a bite, the freshly baked bread and the umami of the sausage mixed, filling my mouth with their flavor. "Mmm, this is good! Could it be that you were the one who made these, Nia?" I asked. As I spoke, I couldn't help but think that this was a perfect start to the day. The meal seemed less like it had been made for work, if that made sense. I mean, yeah, the chef always made our meals properly, and from her perspective it was indeed work, so I wasn't about to blame her for it, but...

It seemed that my hunch was correct, because Nia gave me a happy smile back. "Oh my, I didn't think you would notice. Yes, I made them. To be quite honest, it bothered me to just relax while you were out here training, so... Ah! I did have the chef bake the bread for me, though."

"You're such an admirable woman," I murmured.

"A-Admirable?!"

*Shoot, I accidentally said what I was thinking out loud! How do I brush this off... No, wait. Instead of trying to play it down, it'd be better to just come out with it!*

"E-Er, yes, admirable. Most wives of viscounts wouldn't even consider cooking anything themselves, but you did it for Laura, Tom, and me, right?"

Plus, she was a former princess. It wouldn't be strange at all if she had no idea how to cook. With her past being what it was, though, it was easy to guess that she'd had to make her own food. But I was working hard to keep that past where it belonged.

"It's a bit embarrassing to have you acknowledge my efforts like that, but...I'm really happy."

"Nia..."

*Ahhhhh, she's so cute! Our Nia is so cute!*

Despite my internal struggles, I managed to keep a straight face. After all, there were so many other people with us: Laura, Tom, the gardener, attendants, maids, servants, just to name a few. Any grinning I did would be known by every single person in the manor in an instant, and as soon as I was



seen, any dignity I had been able to accrue as the master of the house would surely be damaged.

Also, I'd like some understanding on how much of a loser I was for not being able to call Nia "mine," even in my head. I know. I know! But I couldn't; it would be unthinkable! So please, just get my reasoning!

"Lord Ark, please, try this too."

"Th-Thank you, I will."

Completely unaware of the battle raging in my mind, Nia served me another sandwich. *I didn't let it slip, right? It's not written all over my face, is it?* I mean, in Nia's case, she'd probably keep quiet even if she noticed, so I couldn't be sure. Anyway, if she was going to pretend not to notice, then I would just roll with it, because it was way better than trying to be smart.

"Ah, this is great too. I could eat a ton of these," I commented.

"Hee hee! I made a lot of them, so eat as many as you like!" replied Nia happily.

*Mornings like this are nice sometimes*, I thought to myself as I savored this happiness.

After I'd eaten through a fair chunk of my breakfast while being healed by Nia, Tom suddenly asked me a question, having recovered somewhat from today's training. "By the way, Master, why'd you want to do some ridiculous training like that, anyway? You didn't do it just for the fun of it, did you?"

"Ah, yeah. Something my swordsmanship teacher said made me wanna start doing that."

"I see. And what did he tell you?"

"He told me not to fight three-on-one, though two-on-one was fine," I answered, only for Tom to silently give me a sour look. When I looked over to Laura, she had her brow furrowed.

"From that statement alone," she said, "I feel keenly that your teacher was a dangerous person."

"A lot of the stuff he taught me was like that, yeah. He said that two-versus-

one fights were okay because as long as you can take out one opponent on the first strike, it'll just be one-on-one," I explained.

"That idea in and of itself is crazy! Why would you assume you'd take out one opponent with your first strike?!" cried Tom.

"Oh, I don't *assume* I could. I'm just training to get there."

"The issue is you thinking you can get there at all!"

The more I answered, the sharper his retorts became, and honestly, I was happy that we'd gotten to a point where Tom wouldn't hold back with me anymore.

"But none of that works when you get on the battlefield. There, you might get three people charging you at once. Or maybe I should say up to three at once?" I continued.

"Oh, so after you beat one in the first hit, you'd take on two at once?" he asked.

"No, if I took out two in the first hit, then it'd be one-on-one again, right?"

"That thought process is even worse!"

Tom's quips continued, but there was some actual logic behind my thoughts.

"I think about it in proper numbers, you know? His Highness taught me that every triangle has a circumscribed circle in the middle."

"Huh?"

"Ah, so that's why you use your wolf tooth cudgel, isn't it, Lord Ark?"

Tom looked completely lost, but Nia seemed to understand what I was saying immediately. Go Nia.

"Um, Princess... Er, Madam, what do you mean?"

"Any arbitrary combination of three points, especially those that are not bound by any rules to govern them, will always have a single circle that goes through all three. Like this," Nia explained, using a stray stick that was nearby to draw three points before drawing a circle—or rather, the curve of one that went through all three.



Tom looked at it in interest for a little bit, before suddenly looking as if he realized something. “Wait, you mean that each of those points is an enemy, and Master swings his wolf tooth cudgel in a way so the curve hits all three?”

“Yup. Which is why I can mow down three in one swing, which would theoretically mean I could take on four opponents at once.”

“Ah, I see, so if you beat three at once, then you’d be one-on-one with the last one. Perfect logic right there. Even if that’d be completely impossible for a normal human!”

Ah, he snapped. *Probably shouldn’t expect him to be the straight man all the time, huh?*

Now, some of you may be wondering why I was training like this first thing in the morning. Some of you might’ve already realized. To put it simply, we were getting close to the day we’d all set off to the new territory I’d been given. My marriage to Nia was all finished, and we’d reached a point where I could pass on leadership of the Special Battalion. We needed to get a move on, and quickly.

The territory I’d been given was the one we’d recently gained from the war, after all. No doubt the current residents were both worried about us and hostile towards us, so we couldn’t leave them lordless for long. What’s more, Brigandia had sent a brigade there ahead of time to keep order, and we wouldn’t want to risk having the region’s stability turn into just plain military rule from the brigade. Of course, Prince Alphonse hadn’t picked someone who would do something like that to be the brigade’s commander, but the moment a person got away from the capital and took total control of a province, anything could happen.

And so, one of the reasons I’d wanted to train like this was because I wanted to gauge Laura’s and Tom’s skills before we left in a few days. I’d sensed that they were capable from the moment I’d met them, but until I knew just how capable they were, I’d worry. But now that I’d actually seen them fight myself, they were even better than I’d thought.

The duo’s close-range battle skills using swords were levels better than the

average knight, and they were a good team. Tom had the physical strength and guts to fight head-on, while Laura, who was good at strategizing and finding the opponent's weak points, could take them out once she had an opening. Not many people would be able to handle them together like that.

With their skills, I would be comfortable leaving them as Nia's guards. After all, I was going to be incredibly busy once we got to Stonegaze—I wouldn't always be by Nia's side. On the other hand, it was rarer for Laura and Tom *not* to be with Nia, especially when she was out and about.

I mean of course, as the wife of a viscount, Nia would be assigned guards, but they would be from the brigade, and I had no clue what those people would be like. Honestly, I couldn't be sure what the brigade would think of me either. Which was why I was checking Laura's and Tom's skills rather than trusting someone whose strength was a complete unknown to me.

My other reason for our training was to sharpen their senses. The two were always keeping an eye on everything around Nia, so I knew they'd be able to pick out any suspicious people near her. The problem was that things had been a little *too* peaceful as of late, so I was worried that their defensive senses and ability to time their counterattacks might have been dulled. That was why I'd had us fight two-on-one. And their reactions had, in fact, improved in the last half of the battle.

Oh, but in their defense, they were still pretty damn strong off the bat. I hadn't been able to end things with my first attack, after all. But even saying that, I was sure we could get their senses to be even sharper.

"So that's why we'll be doing this every morning from tomorrow on."

"S-Seriously...? I mean, I'll do it, but," Tom grimaced at my declaration before nodding. I wasn't threatening him or anything. He just understood the power dynamics at play here, so he was doing as I said. It's not like I was forcing him to do anything completely unreasonable.

"Don't worry. I don't want to tire you out physically and cause problems during the move, so I'll keep the lengths short," I reassured him.

"Sounds nice, but you can't fool me," he glowered. "I did notice how you slipped the words 'physically' and 'lengths' in there."



“Oh, good job. Yeah, it’ll be quality over quantity. I’m gonna be figuring out your limits before you get hurt or die, so just know that by the end of it, your nerves will probably be totally shot.”

“Could you try not saying scary things with a smile on your face?!”

It looked like he couldn’t help but screech at me. *Yup. His energy is a good thing.*

I glanced over at Nia as I thought that, and she gave me a little nod before speaking. “It’s okay, you can do it, Tom. And I’m sure you’ll be protecting me a lot more once we’re there, so it will relieve me to see just how dependable you are.”

“Princess... Okay. Old Tom here’ll do his best!”

When Nia encouraged him with a smile, he straightened right up and gave her a good reply. He switched back to “Princess” from “Madam,” but it’d be tactless for me to point it out.

Anyway, it really seemed like a good idea to leave the emotional management of the servants to Nia. I’d need to be able to do things like that with them one day, but at this point, the lengths of time we’d been together was just too different. But they were already opening up to me a little bit more compared to before, so things were improving on that front.

“Ah! I’m sure you knew, but I’ll be relying on you too, Laura.”

“Yes, of course I knew. Just leave your safety to me, Princess.”

Nia remembered to bring Laura into the conversation too. Go Nia. But compared to Tom’s slipups on how he referred to Nia, Laura was definitely intentionally using “Princess” here. But I’d ignore it, because I was afraid to point it out. There was no doubt that Laura was devoted to her mistress, so that was all I needed to know.

“I’ll be busy once we get there, so Nia and I will probably be separated from each other quite often. I’m really counting on the two of you,” I added. I’d learned the importance of building things like this up from His Highness Prince Alphonse. It was why his subordinates looked up to him despite him always asking for the impossible.

“That’s right. You’ll be busy having meetings with the brigade, and I’ll need to go and greet all of my acquaintances,” Nia agreed, her tone a tad worried. That was the reason why we’d be splitting up.

The region that was becoming my viscounty, the province of Stonegaze, was actually a group of regions: Stonegaze, Stonehunt, and Diamoncut. And, as I’d learned during Nia’s quiz battle with Lady Emilia, my new wife had personally been there. Due to her past efforts as Sylvario’s princess in trying to solve their problems, all the citizens, village leaders, and town leaders had a good impression of her, so she was going to travel to ask them for their help in governance.

But of course, since Princess Sonia was currently considered missing and possibly dead, we couldn’t have the fact that she was still alive become public. That was where Nia’s conversational skills and natural virtues came into play, and knowing her, I wasn’t worried. Once again, go Nia.

“I would accompany you, but I’m pretty sure if you were to tell them that the Black Wolf was coming, then they’d probably stress or go on the defensive or possibly even get scared.”

Unfortunately, it was really easy to imagine this happening. In the first place, the reason why I had been made lord of the region was in the hopes that the negative reputation my nickname came with would spook the residents of Stonegaze into following my orders. Hell, His Highness had probably had the rumors spread just for that purpose. If I were to suddenly show up somewhere, then the citizens might just submit out of fear.

While that might’ve been a good thing for short-term governance, in the long term that would most likely invite local resistance and probably lead to a full-scale rebellion. Since we were planning on developing the region a ton, we wanted to avoid that. Which was why we were going to stealthily make it known that Princess Sonia, whom they already trusted, was back, and try to use that to make building trust with the region’s citizens that much smoother.

“I’m sure that the citizens will be relieved when they learn what sort of person you really are, Lord Ark, but with the rumors ahead of us, most people will probably be rather prejudiced towards you at first,” Nia said apologetically.

“We can’t help that, since we’re using that fact already. I actually feel bad for asking you to patch things up for me.”

Honestly, I knew the situation was a given. Since we’d used my nickname “the Black Wolf” to dampen our enemies’ morale, of course it’d make the people fear me once we were occupying and ruling the area. The only thing we could do after that was to get them to understand me otherwise through my policies and behavior. And if those policies led to more fear, then they might reject them outright. It was for those reasons that Nia was tasked with building a better foundation for them to accept us with, but I felt bad knowing how hard a task it would be.

Plus, I was just sad that Nia and I would have to part. But I wouldn’t let that show on my face. I couldn’t. Absolutely not. So I was concentrating on keeping my expression schooled, but...

“Oh? But I’m happy that I can help you. If I can finally repay you for everything you’ve done for me so far, then I need to work hard,” Nia said.

Her saying something so adorable while lifting both of her arms to pump her fists killed my schooled expression in an instant, with the force of an avalanche. *Dammit, my wife is just too cute...*

By the way, most of the attendants and maids watching looked at us with warm and fuzzy expressions. Though Laura had her trademark expression of looking like someone had stuffed sugared ginger in her mouth.

*Anyway, if Nia is gonna be that enthusiastic about it, then I have to work hard too, I swore to myself once again.*



## Chapter 2: Hints of Disquiet at My New Post

*A few days later...*

Laura's and Tom's skills had improved, and I got a good thrill out of it, so our personal preparations were perfect.

Nia had sorted out all of the things that we would be moving with without a hitch. Go Nia.

I'd also finished everything I needed to do to hand over command of the Special Battalion, and I'd gotten a number of instructions from His Highness Prince Alphonse.

"I've had communications personnel stationed there, so make good use of them," said Prince Alphonse. "I also have a letter for Count Farlon, the brigade commander. Give it to him."

"What is it? Did you get ahold of his weakness or something?" I asked skeptically.

"What are you talking about, Ark? I'm a member of the royal family. There's no need for me to go out of my way to get someone's weaknesses. My letter might just include something that will make him more than happy to listen to my request, though."

"Urk. That sounds fishy. I mean, I'll deliver it, but still."

We might've bantered like usual too.

By the way, Count Farlon was a count palatine without any of his own territory and one of the most distinguished bigwigs in the Royal Order of Knights, which was the backbone of the Royal Army. Since he owned no territory, he had no motivation to expand his holdings, and there was no sign of him acting as a hound for a higher-ranking noble like a marquis or something.

"I see, so he's the ideal person to send to command a brigade in an unstable border territory. The reason the Order of Knights sent someone of a higher rank

than me must have been because they want to keep the brigade independent.”

“Probably. You were quite the hot topic of conversation after the war, after all.”

“It isn’t like I wanted to be...”

I gave an exaggerated sigh at His Highness’s teasing tone.

The relationship between the Royal Order of Knights and the Special Battalion was a bit of a pain in the ass.

As you might guess from the name, the Royal Order of Knights was an order of knights created by the kingdom, under the command of the kingdom, or rather His Majesty the King. Normally, they would be the country’s main source of fighting power. But with His Majesty having barely any hand in politics at the moment, all of their combat capabilities were currently being wasted. They needed orders from the king to be dispatched in times of emergency, but the king wasn’t in any position where he could make those orders.

Currently, in order to take any action, the knight commander would need to make an inquiry to His Highness Prince Artur, the second prince and current proxy for the king. Prince Artur would then need to check with His Majesty the King before getting the highest ranks of nobles to come to a consensus so that the knights could get their marching orders. This, of course, created a huge barrier to their ability to respond to any issues in a timely manner. The reason why Brigandia had struggled at the beginning of the war with Sylvario was because the Order of Knights was stuck like that.

As an aside, Count Barracuda was not a member of the Royal Order of Knights. He instead led a personal independent force of knights from his county, which allowed him to go wild on the battlefield.

And so, since the Royal Order of Knights was stymied by bureaucracy and were essentially useless for Prince Alphonse’s plans, the Special Battalion was made under His Highness’s direct command. And unlike the Order of Knights, which prized discipline and tradition, the members of the Special Battalion were given discretionary power on the battlefield to make flexible decisions on the fly, and they didn’t really give much importance to noble rank. The biggest examples of this were my appointment as a special diplomatic envoy and the

common-born Gale being able to rise to become platoon commander and later company commander.

All of this led to the Order of Knights viewing the Special Battalion as a bunch of wild newbies while we thought of them as hardheaded, idealistic royalist lapdogs, making the relationship between us all a bit awkward. What's worse, the knights weren't amused by the fact that the Special Battalion and I had done so well during the war. Even though we were just doing our jobs.

"You don't think he'll go crazy trying to distinguish himself, do you?" I asked hesitantly, thinking about everything up until then.

"I don't think so. While he can make decisions on the spot to fight in the case of Sylvario attacking, he would need my brother's permission as His Majesty's proxy to attack them," His Highness answered, with a wonderful smile befitting his nickname of "the Smiling Iceberg."

"Your Highness, may I have a look at this letter? I'm *really* worried about what you've written now."

"Don't worry, I didn't write anything that would rile the count up. In fact, I just told him some things to convince him that helping us would be to *his* benefit."

"Your words might say that, but it's for that very reason I'm worried you'll rile him up."

His Highness had a knack for rubbing people and their pride the wrong way, and having seen a number of people dig their own graves because of that, I couldn't be confident in his reassurances. But at the same time, I trusted that he wouldn't do anything to paint me into a corner. Whatever the case was, there was nothing I could do but deliver the letter as ordered, so I had to suck it up.

His Highness gave me a reassuring smile (that did nothing to reassure me). "Anyway, we aren't in a situation where starting internal conflict would do any good."

"Ahhh, you mean with Sylvario recruiting mercenaries?"

"Yep, that. Do they not have any idea that every single thing they do is getting



leaked to us?”

“If they know and they’re doing it anyway, then they’re either incredibly self-confident or have no idea how important intelligence is. Either way, it’s obvious they haven’t learned their lesson.”

The Kingdom of Sylvario, the nation we were at war with just a short time ago, had lost the war and had been made to pay massive monetary reparations and cede territory to us after the ceasefire, but it seemed they wouldn’t go down without a fight. In the first place, their coffers were flush from their trading port, which was the largest in the region, and they *should have* been a fierce opponent by using that economy to support their military armaments.

But in the war, they’d all been kinda...inconsistent? Their supplies had started getting delayed halfway through, leading to everything collapsing due to their blunder. We were currently investigating how that had happened, and we would probably get to the bottom of it all soon.

Anyway, Sylvario was currently using their funds and their boats to their advantage by recruiting mercenaries. We’d learned of this through the various channels we’d put in place while we were inside their royal palace investigating their breach of the ceasefire agreement, so our sources were very likely to have accurate information. And if they were gathering more than a thousand of them, that was pretty damn threatening. The only thing we could conclude was that they were getting ready to restart the war. It was more important than ever to ensure there were zero issues with the defensive force we had placed in our new territory.

“It could go either way. Apparently their second prince is the one at the center of it all,” Prince Alphonse continued.

“The second prince... I see. That sounds just right for his personality from what I’ve heard from Nia.” I nodded.

The second prince of the Kingdom of Sylvario, Balthazar. He was the oldest child of the king’s concubine and was spoiled by his mother and her father, a marquis, who wanted to make him king. He was hostile towards the first prince, Elmer, who was likely to become the crown prince. That hostility, plus his desire for power by becoming king, made him very ambitious. And here he was,

gathering mercenaries—it was quite likely that he was going to try to take back the territory Sylvario had lost in an attempt to bolster his achievements...with no thought to the fact that any failure would put the nation in a position it could never recover from.

“So that means that not only do I need to build a good relationship with the brigade stationed in Stonegaze, but also with the village leaders of the surrounding area too. We want any information that could end up a precursor to invasion, after all. But ideally we’d want them to work *with* us in the event we mobilize the troops.”

“Yeah. I’d like to avoid needing to force anyone into conscription.” His Highness nodded, agreeing with my thoughts.

Any time you started trying to move a group of troops past a certain scale, signs of what they were doing would start popping up somewhere. The textbook example would be all of the food and fuel in an area being bought up, but from a normal person’s standpoint, most changes would be minuscule. Which was why, if we had a relationship with the local leadership where they were comfortable in mentioning the little things as well as the big developments, then we’d be able to tell if Sylvario was making any moves. Since we were the new rulers of the area, it’d be hard to build a relationship like that very soon.

The other thing, which would be even harder, would be getting the citizens to the point where they would mobilize as our troops of their own free will rather than being conscripted.

Currently, Stonegaze and the other regions that were becoming McGuine Viscounty had no soldiers under my direct control. That was why the brigade led by Count Farlon was stationed there, but those forces weren’t something I could move directly. That meant that in a time of battle, there were no troops in the region I could actually move on my terms.

Count Farlon would, of course, probably mobilize his troops if His Highness requested it of him. The Order of Knights and Special Battalion might not have been on friendly terms, but as organizations of the same kingdom, we wouldn’t go so far as to consider each other enemies. The problem was that we couldn’t

make them do anything at the speed that we usually went, and there was a nonzero chance that owing them a favor would end up biting us in the ass later.

All of this was why His Highness and I honestly wanted some forces we could move on our terms, but any mandatory conscription of a populace we hadn't won over yet would be just asking for antagonism. And with a future of governance in mind, we wanted to avoid any possible antagonism as much as possible.

"No one can really tell what will happen with the situation until we get to Stonegaze and get a feel for how the citizens see us," I said. "Thanks to His Highness Prince Artur sending ample supplies to the area, we probably haven't bred any animosity due to the brigade doing any pillaging or forcing a levy on them."

"Yep. I haven't heard of anything of the sort from the communications personnel I had sent there first. Everything that will happen next will depend on your capabilities as the new regional lord."

"Please stop. My stomach is already hurting, and here you are trying to burn a hole through it!" I complained jokingly, but it was true that almost everything relied on me. If I'd had to go do it all alone, then burning a hole through my stomach would be the least of my problems.

"That's what you have your wife for, isn't it?"

"I think that's only because it ended up that way. Though she herself seems eager to work when we get there, so I have no reason to stop her."

In fact, she'd looked absolutely thrilled at the fact that she'd finally be doing something. Nia was cute like that too. But even saying that, I didn't want to rely too much on her desire to work.

"Anyway, now that it's all come to this, I'll work hard to get the best outcome we can get."

"Yes, please do. I'm sure you'll be fine," His Highness said with a smile.

*Ahh, dammit! That part of him is so unfair!* Of course I'd do my best after he said something like that to me! And that effort would give results.



“Understood. I will meet your expectations, Your Highness.”

That was why I always replied with a smile.



With moving preparations finally complete, the entire McGuine household set off to our new territory.

Leading the group were two members of the Order of Knights. I was right behind them, with Nia’s carriage following me. Tom was driving the carriage while Laura was, of course, inside with Nia. Behind them were another two carriages carrying the other servants and our luggage. Bringing up the rear was another pair of knights.

It was probably quite a small procession for the entire household of a viscount headed to a new territory, especially from a security standpoint. But in our case, we had a lot of people who could defend themselves.

It’s probably worth mentioning that I was on horseback for security reasons. Most might think that the lord of a territory taking guard duty would be a bad idea. But since I was the strongest one here, there wasn’t much I could do about it.

The fact that I couldn’t just relax and chat with Nia inside the carriage hurt, but keeping everyone safe was my top priority, so I just had to suck it up. I was the lord of the territory, after all! Although, come to think of it, even if I was with Nia in the carriage, my bulk might’ve made her feel cramped. That would be the only time I would curse my physique, which was usually a blessing.

Anyway, our rest breaks were some of the only moments I could recharge. Stonegaze was roughly a week’s travel from the capital. If we’d only been on horseback, then we probably could’ve gotten there faster, but the carriages made that impossible. If you wanted a horse to go as fast as it could without straining itself, it could only go about 1.5 times the speed of a human walking. The fact that they could do that while carrying a ton of luggage was a huge plus, though. With all that in mind, we made sure to pad our journey with the occasional break.

“Are you feeling all right, Nia? You’re not too tired?” I asked Nia as I helped

her out of the carriage for our noon break.

“No, I’m not. Thank you for worrying about me, Lord Ark,” she replied, smiling in a way that would mask any exhaustion. Her gait as she stepped down from the carriage was actually completely steady, and her complexion looked fine. I was relieved to know that she wasn’t just putting up a front.

“Madam, I believe this would be an appropriate place to sit,” said Laura as she spread a mat on the ground.

*...Huh?*

“Wait, Laura,” I said. “You didn’t have that mat with you when you got off of the carriage a second ago, did you?”

In these parts, when a servant rode in the same carriage as their master, the servant would disembark first in order to ensure the area was safe before assisting their master outside. So when Laura disembarked from the carriage just a second ago, she hadn’t been holding anything. Yet somehow, in the span between disembarking and helping Nia, she’d prepared a mat.

“Of course I didn’t,” Laura replied. “I wouldn’t store something as bulky as a mat in the same space Madam was sitting in.”

“So how do you have a mat here already?”

“I just retrieved it from the servants’ carriage.”

*Seriously? All while Nia and I were talking? I really can’t underestimate her. She honestly might take me out from behind if I don’t pay attention. But wait. She shouldn’t have any reason to. Gotta stay on her good side...*

“C’mon, you sit down too, Master! I’ll get a meal ready for us,” Tom said, building something out of a few pieces of metal.

*And that is definitely one of the portable cooking stoves the military uses. Look at him, putting it together with practiced ease...*

I wondered if I should comment on it but decided to leave it be since the only people around us were members of our household. I sat beside Nia while pretending not to notice a thing.

Continuing his work, Tom said to me, “Well, ‘a meal’ may be a bit of an

exaggeration. It's just something simple."

"We're on the road. Just having something warm is already a treat," I replied. "On the battlefield I had to just choke down hard bread and dry fruit with some water."

"Ahh, oh yeah, you have experience with that, huh?"

"And because of that experience, it's hard for me to sit here and just do nothing," I admitted.

"You're the lord of a territory now, Master. You've gotta let us do stuff for you."

Tom's hands never stopped moving as we bantered, and before I knew it, the stove was lit. *He did that fast. He must have experience doing stuff like this,* I thought, glancing at Nia beside me. She must have taken breaks like these often.

"Is something the matter, Lord Ark?"

"No, I was just remembering that breakfast we had a few days ago."

"Ah, the picnic? Hee hee, stuff like that is so liberating, don't you think?"

Though Nia smiled as she said that, I wasn't sure how to respond. She'd had a hard life growing up in the Sylvanian royal palace. To her, it was probably more comfortable to eat outside; if she was going to have a terrible meal completely unfit for royalty, then she might as well eat it out under the wide sky.

"That's right. The weather is great today too."

I looked up at the big, blue autumn sky and mulled about how time had just flown by since I met Nia. I decided to avoid saying anything that might make her remember her past. She wasn't Princess Sonia anymore. She was just Nia, just one human among the rest.

"How long has it been since I last had a nice day like this to relax? I almost want to nap," I commented, deep in thought. Or rather, trying my damndest to block the heavy memories of the days I'd been living up until then from bubbling up in my mind.

"You were quite busy, weren't you? Then, how about..."



Nia began speaking before trailing off. I looked over to her again, with the passing thought that it was unlike her to speak in such a way, only to see that her face was a little bit red. I waited for her to continue, and a moment later she opened her mouth again.

“Wh-Why don’t you take a nap? Um, you could lie on my lap, if you like,” she continued, patting her lap. Her face was red. Bright red.

*Huh? What is this heavenly offer?! Can I really?!*

I was thrown into a total panic. I was probably bright red too. I’d never thought Nia would make me such a bold offer.

What was I supposed to do? What I *wanted* to do was accept. Immediately.

But I could feel Laura’s gaze on me, and it was cold. Subzero, just like His Highness Prince Alphonse. Maybe not cold, actually, but sharp. Not the sort of look you give your employer.

Nia was my priority, of course, but at the same time, I didn’t want to do anything to piss off Laura and, by extension, the other servants. So what was I supposed to do?

It was in the midst of my panic that Tom’s voice rang out, without a care in the world. “Princess, Master, I’ve made tea!”

Both Nia and I straightened right up.

“Hm? What’s wrong?” Tom asked, looking puzzled at how formally we were sitting considering we were on the ground. What, did he not hear us? Or did he hear us and was throwing me a life-saver? Or was he trying to interfere? His expression told me nothing. Though he probably didn’t hear us at all. I wouldn’t pry.

“Oh, nothing. Thank you, I would love some tea,” I said.

“Yes, I would love some as well,” agreed Nia.

And so, both fortunately and unfortunately, I accepted the cup that Tom offered me.



Once their break was over, Nia and Laura returned to their carriage to set off once more. The moment the door closed, Nia put her head down and covered her face with both her hands.

“Princess?”

“Oh, what should I do, Laura? Lord Ark is just so cute!” Nia squeezed out, seemingly trying to suppress her feelings.

Two thoughts flew through Laura’s mind simultaneously at Nia’s words: “What part of a man like that could possibly be cute?” and “No, you’re the cute one, Princess.” But as a well-trained maid, she kept her emotions off of her face. The expression she made instead, though, could only be described as blank.

“I believe that you should just continue wrapping him around your little finger,” the maid replied in an emotionless monotone. She’d been using this tone a lot more lately. That was, of course, because she used it every time Nia started asking her for advice (or rather, mooning over Ark).

“Really? You don’t think he would dislike me manipulating him?”

“Absolutely not. I don’t even believe he would consider it manipulation.”

Laura made sure to only call him a loser within the confines of her mind. No matter what she thought of him, there was no way she could insult him so openly when he was both her current employer and Nia’s legal husband. She still had enough sense for that. But she could hardly be at fault for wanting to, not when the man had pissed her off so thoroughly by winning over the princess she’d raised yet completely failing to interact with her properly. Truly, the hearts of maids were complicated things.

“No matter how you look at it, he’s thrilled by your advances,” Laura said. “He just doesn’t know how to respond due to his obvious lack of experience. You have nothing to worry about, Princess. If anything, you should push harder and keep a firm hold on the reins.”

“P-Push harder... You give good advice, Laura.” Nia nodded along, swallowing hard.

In this day and age, in aristocratic society, it was expected for women to let

the men take the lead. But in reality, most married couples were led primarily by the wife. It was to the point where great women—while donning the mask of an upright lady—would say that they grant their husbands the opportunity to look good publicly, because at home, they were completely whipped.

Having very little experience in society herself, Nia had heard via Laura that most houses where that was true ran surprisingly well. So her maid was most likely advising her to follow in those footsteps. Probably.

As Nia thought that to herself, she suddenly voiced another thought she'd had. "But it's so strange that he has so little experience. He seems like he would have been quite popular."

Laura nearly burst out with a "HUH?!" before her senses came back to her and stopped her mouth. She then tried to think of Ark logically, without her bias, but she still couldn't agree.

"I think, in Master's case, most people would sooner avoid him than try to get to know him."

"Huh? But he's so handsome..."

The saying "love is blind" rose to Laura's mind, but she waved it off. Thinking about it calmly, she had to agree.

"Yes, he might be good-looking, but he also has many flaws that would disqualify him as a match," Laura pointed out. "In the first place, he was so busy with work that hardly anyone ever saw him."

"That's true," Nia conceded. "No matter how handsome he may be, that would be of no help if no one had seen him."

"Right? So in noble circles, he would most likely have been known as 'the third son of a baron, worked nearly to death by His Highness the Second Prince, who, as a knight in the Special Battalion, could actually die at literally any time.'"

"Th-That's quite a description," Nia commented. "But there's nothing there that I can refute."

Laura's assessment was cutting and somewhat harsh, since there was no one

but them in the carriage to hear, but Nia couldn't deny it. Before their marriage, that would have been an accurate summation of Ark. But ironically, it was Ark's achievements in the war against her own home country which had afforded him a change in status, and it was that development that Nia was conflicted about.

"Keeping the popular view of him in mind, anyone who saw him in the flesh would probably think he looked inhumanly strong or tall enough you'd have to crane your neck, with a strength to match. Things like that."

"I see," Nia murmured. "The only people who could get a good look at him were knights and other military personnel. The things which would be complimentary to them would terrify a lady."

From Nia's point of view, all of that made Ark look reliable. But for most noble ladies, especially those who wanted to move up in the world, he would have absolutely no value. In fact, they might look at him and worry about the possibility of domestic violence. They would probably prefer someone who could do well in noble society while also being able to benefit their family.

"That reminds me. My father-in-law told me that a flood of marriage proposals arrived for Lord Ark the moment he was named a viscount."

"Yes," Laura said, "he would have changed from simply being 'an overworked knight' to 'a greenhorn viscount just ripe for the picking, trusted by the second prince and given his own territory.' Of course they would flock to him."

"Not to mention the fact that if all goes well in the future, he could easily be promoted to a count."

Nia understood what Laura was saying, of course. But it was because she understood that she was unhappy about it. Even though thinking about marriage strategically was a given for those born into nobility.

"None of them understand Lord Ark's appeal at all. Well, maybe it's better that no one understands, because I'm the only one who needs to... But still!"

"I understand what you mean, Princess. But in reality, those qualities aren't very easy to show in public."

"You're right, but..."

Taking her eyes off of Nia, who let out a great big sigh, Laura looked outside. She sat with her back facing their destination, so she could see Ark, who'd been glued to the back-right of the carriage since they'd left. If bandits were to attack a carriage, they would most likely do it from the angle of the door, which was difficult for both the coachman and guards to see.

This blind spot made it the most dangerous place on a carriage, and one where the strongest guard would usually be posted. And here Ark was, putting himself right there. Of course it would normally be unthinkable for the lord of a territory to do something like that, but Ark's skills made it so that no one could argue with his decision. Even though his eyes were on the wide-open plains beyond and behind them, he still rode his horse completely straight in a clear display of superior equestrianism. The moment he unsheathed his sword, he would be stronger than any of the knights sent to guard them.

While Laura didn't want to acknowledge his strength or determination, those qualities would be hard to bring up in polite conversation. The best one could do would be describing his acts of heroism.

"The only other option would be to openly be lovey-dovey with him and show off how much he dotes on you and you alone," Laura advised.

"L-Lovey-dovey?! We could never...!" Nia cried in response, her blushing face shooting back upwards.

Another two things came up inside Laura's mind simultaneously: "Aww, she's so cute," and "Dammit, that pisses me off." The second one was, of course, towards Ark, a burst of misplaced anger. But despite that anger, Laura couldn't help but tease Nia a bit, because she was so *cute*. And plus, seeing her mistress like this was a perk only she was given. Of course, that meant feeling jealous of Ark whenever she did it, but the prize outweighed the consequences, so much so that she couldn't stop herself.

"You aren't going to deny that he dotes on you?"

"Hwaugh?! I-I mean, I, um, know he does..."

As Laura poked fun again, Nia blushed and looked at her with upturned eyes. Once again, the maid was assaulted simultaneously by both anger and thoughts of her cute mistress. But she felt a little superior as well. To Ark, of course,



because he still wasn't close enough to Nia to see her act like this, and also because the former princess wasn't used to doing things like this either.

"You could begin teaching him how to show off from this point forward."

"T-Teach him? Would that really be okay?"

Laura had corrected herself before she said "train him," but Nia wasn't showing any signs of rejecting the idea. It seemed that she was okay with it. The thought of her princess growing up made her both lonely and jealous, but there was nothing the maid could do about that, since it was all a step towards her mistress's happiness.

Motivated by a rather warped sense of loyalty, Laura began her lecture for an audience of one, inside a carriage where no one could see them.

## Chapter 3: The Awkward Relationship Between the Viscount and the Brigade Leader

And so, we continued on our journey with no issues. Nia, who I'd been the most worried about, was tougher than I expected, and the female attendants and maids seemed hardy enough to make it smoothly through the trip as well. According to them, it was way better than the discomfort they felt back in Sylvario's royal palace, and all the extra work they were forced to do there had given them great stamina.

So it seemed that not only was Princess Sonia mistreated, but her servants as well. That meant that not only would they probably not object to any conquering we did peacefully, but they might even actively help. And His Highness had probably incorporated this into his strategy too. In the first place, his plan had been not to attack and destroy Sylvario, but to only hit the places necessary and annex them more or less peacefully. By doing it that way, we could keep potential harm to the general populace to a minimum and make future governance go that much smoother.

To be honest, the average citizen (especially the commoners) didn't really care much at all about who was ruling them. What they cared about were things like land taxes, other taxes, if they'd be conscripted, and how their daily lives would be changed. That was why they were more concerned with whether the person governing them directly would change or not.

And Prince Alphonse was just the sort of person who fully and carelessly accepted such a thing and simply folded it into his plans. Normal royals might fuss about their dignity as rulers and how that was *lèse-majesté*, but His Highness understood where authority would work in a situation and where it wouldn't.

I mean, to a villager who'd never even seen a royal in the flesh, the power of the crown would mean nothing. For city folk, it wouldn't even be odd if they just considered royals as nasty people who stole away their money through

taxes. If you suddenly started telling them to obey because the royal family was ordering them to, then it would just invite conflict. In the worst-case scenario, you could be attacked and lose your life.

This was all why His Highness never took his power as a royal for granted and made sure to include the perspectives of the common people into his plans. Sometimes I seriously wondered if he was a demon or something, and honestly, I didn't think I could be blamed for it.

Anyway, the female servants of McGuine Viscounty were, of course, included in his planning. Nia had been told this, and she'd agreed to it, so there shouldn't have been any problems. We weren't planning on exposing them to any danger, after all. All we asked them to do was talk about their lives in Sylvario's palace and send letters to their kith and kin. And obviously, those letters didn't have any content that could get them arrested as potential spies.

We were just slowly, safely, and secretly spreading our scheme. I wasn't aware of all of the details either, but I knew that His Highness would never leave any openings.

I thought all this while following the sway of my horse but still keeping an appropriate level of alertness since Laura wouldn't stop giving me looks that seemed to question if I was properly doing my job.

And so, we arrived in the province of Stonegaze and its capital and largest city, Bigden, all without being attacked.

"I see, so this is why His Highness was rushing us," I murmured my true thoughts accidentally.

The town itself had no special features and generally looked like any provincial city, though I did question why it had such low defensive walls for a city near the border.

The real problem lay outside those walls. There were a number of temporary residences lined up, where a ton of people, mostly muscular men, were coming and going. I probably don't even need to tell you that this was where the brigade led by Count Farlon was garrisoned.

Bigden itself had a population of under three thousand, so having a military

twice the size of the actual city right outside its doors was no doubt not very comfortable for the people living there. Of course, parts of the brigade were probably patrolling throughout the province and keeping the peace, but from the looks of it, most of them were in the garrison. I couldn't blame them for wanting to avoid splitting up their forces too much when Sylvario could strike at any minute. But the citizens wouldn't care about that at all.

This was all why I, the new lord, had to come ASAP. As I was a fellow Brigandian, my presence in the city meant that the chance that the brigade would attack or harass the people of Bigden would lower considerably. Of course, logically the people would know that if the brigade hadn't attacked so far, they probably wouldn't ever attack them, but it was feelings, not logic, that was the issue here. So my arrival today probably rid them of that worry. Or, at the very least, softened it a little.

"I'll have to go greet Brigade Commander Farlon first. Damn, there's so much I have to do and we just got here," I grumbled to myself as we entered the city. We hadn't arranged for any welcome parade or anything to be held, so all we got on the way to the lord's manor were just confused gazes from afar.

"Good work, Nia. You aren't hurting anywhere, are you?" I asked, having tied my horse to a nearby post before running over to her carriage to help her out.

"I'm fine. Thank you, Lord Ark," she replied with a smile.

*Cute. No, Ark, get your head back in the game!* With Nia's personality, she probably would have hidden any exhaustion, but from the look of her, it really did seem like she wasn't forcing herself at all. I gave the other servants a lookover too, but they all looked fine as well. I figured I could classify this as a safe arrival.

"Okay, everyone. Good job holding out until now. I sent word ahead for the cleaning to have been done already, so everyone should take their personal belongings to their assigned rooms and take a break for now. If you're really tired, you can take the rest of the day off. All you need to keep in mind is that the real work starts tomorrow."

After I said that, the servants all stretched themselves out before bowing and giving me their confirmation. They might have been tired from the journey, but

they were well trained like that.

As I watched them all go off, I grabbed my own luggage and brought it to my room. I really wanted to carry Nia's stuff for her, but Laura wouldn't allow it. I mean, it was more like I couldn't touch it after the maid mentioned that Nia's underwear was inside. It wasn't like I was going to be helping her unpack, and I would neither see nor touch it directly, so there wasn't any real issue there, but, you know.

Laura had whispered that to me anyway, so Nia had no idea. We probably wouldn't know how to face each other if she did know.

Anyway, I brought my stuff to my own room. Which was right next to Nia's. Yes, finally. Finally! Our rooms were next to each other! But the door connecting them was locked tight.

We'd set things up this way because we knew it would look bad if the lord's and his wife's rooms were separated. It was one thing to do so in our manor in the capital, but the lord's manor was smack-dab in the middle of the region and would also be used as the office of government. There was a nonzero chance that someone might notice our rooms being apart. If that happened, not only would it give a bad impression, but it might also cause Nia problems in her day-to-day life.

And so, our rooms here were connected. Honestly, it was bad for my heart. I was worried that my heart would pound all night and keep me awake. But I was still happy about it. And plus, we were married on paper, so there were absolutely no problems with having our rooms right next to each other! The opposite was the real problem!

I needed to work hard to get rid of that "on paper" bit, personally and professionally...

I arrived at my room, emotions in flux, and I puttered around unpacking and settling luggage before changing out of my easy travel clothes for my formal knight's attire.

I might've given the servants a break, but I couldn't take one myself, and I was still feeling pretty energetic. I'd sent word that we'd be arriving today and that I would be coming to greet Count Farlon already, after all. I needed to get it done



while I could, and as fast as possible.

By the time I was done changing, it seemed that they'd just finished bringing all of Nia's luggage to her room. I used that timing to knock on her door.

"Excuse me, Nia. Could we chat for a moment?"

"Lord Ark? Yes, of course."

Once I got the okay, I opened the door and saw that both Nia and Laura were still in their traveling clothes. They had probably just been about to get changed. I had to applaud my own timing, since I wouldn't have wanted to knock while they were in the middle of changing...

"I just wanted to let you know that I'll be going to greet Count Farlon now."

"Oh, now? We just arrived, and you're already working hard."

When I told her what I was doing, she gave me a little sympathetic nod, even as she was a little bit surprised. We'd gone over the plans beforehand, but since she knew of the awkward relationship between the brigade and me—and more generally, the Special Battalion—she understood why I was going as soon as we had arrived and what effect my doing so would have. In the first place, the brigade's commander was a count, and I was a viscount, one rank under him. Not only that, but he'd kept the peace here for three whole months already, so of course I needed to greet him ASAP.

Had I been the bureaucratic type of viscount, the commander might've given me a day's leeway to rest. But the day a knight tried pulling something like that, they'd be looked down on as weak. Even just taking a little break after arrival might get the same reception.

Plus, with the relationship between the Royal Order of Knights and the Special Battalion as it was, then he was likely to hold the entire battalion in contempt, which was extra not good. Knights were soldiers—physical workers who specialized in violence. The moment they looked down on you, you lost. And scarily enough, in the past, it would be common for knights to even consider killing anyone who dared look down on them. The ideology had softened a bit, but the spirit of it was still there.

As smart as Nia was, I didn't expect her to understand a knight's mentality,

but she still realized what it meant for me to go greet Count Farlon as soon as I arrived.

“Um, should I go with you?”

Which was why she asked something so brave. Cute. But I had to turn down her brave little offer.

“No, tomorrow or later would be fine. From what I’ve heard of Count Farlon from His Highness, it’s more likely you being there would have him angry with me for forcing a lady tired from travel to accompany me.”

“Oh my, really? Very well. I’ll just handle getting the inside of the manor straightened up. Since it’s already been cleaned, the job is already much easier.”

“Understood. Please do.”

Accepting my explanation, Nia went from nodding to making another offer. I would have been just fine with her resting, but I didn’t want to snuff out her enthusiasm. Above all else, it really was helpful that she was actively trying to do things.

“Thank you, Nia. Both I and our citizens are lucky to have such a hard worker as the lord’s wife,” I said, a little bashfully. That was right. She was the wife of the region’s lord. It was an obvious thing, but it made me feel strangely fuzzy to say. Apparently, Nia felt the same.

“Oh, goodness! You’re going to embarrass me, saying things like that,” she said, looking up at me with her face flushed.

Honestly she was so cute I thought my heart would stop. I managed to force it to continue beating, and I put some tension in the muscles of my face that had softened in response to her cuteness. If I hadn’t, then I knew I would’ve looked disgusting.

“While I’d love to make you even more embarrassed, I don’t think I could finish, even after night falls. I’m sorry, but I’ll have to be going.”

“A-All right. See you later.”

Was it my imagination, or did she seem a bit disappointed? I left Nia’s room

hoping I wasn't just seeing things.

After that, I hopped back onto my horse and headed towards where Count Farlon's brigade was garrisoned. Originally, I had planned for Tom to go ahead of me to let them know I was coming, but now I decided to go without him, figuring that since he'd been driving the carriage all day, he'd probably be pretty tired by this point. I didn't know if this was necessarily a *good* idea, but whatever.

Surrounding the garrison was a fence with a simple gate marking the entrance, so I headed there first.

"My apologies for visiting without notice," I said. "I am Viscount Ark McGuine. From today forward I am this territory's lord, and so I came to give my greetings to Count Farlon. I had sent a letter ahead to let him know that I would visit him upon arrival, but..."

"Understood, Viscount McGuine! My apologies, but we must ask you to wait a short time while I confirm!"

"Of course. I came quite suddenly, after all."

When I greeted the soldiers guarding the entrance, one straightened and responded to my announcement while the other ran off. Judging from their movements, they were skilled, with high morale. Just what I'd expect from Count Farlon, who was one of the top knights in the Order of Knights. He trained his soldiers well.

Those were my thoughts while I waited in the room they eventually escorted me to. A short time later, I felt someone approaching and stood, only for the door to open.

"My apologies for making you wait so long."

The person who entered was a well-built man in his early forties, flanked by two knights. He had a beard, sharp eyes, and a good physique, looking for all intents and purposes the ideal of a well-trained knight. But I had to admit that if I had to compare the two, Count Barracuda was more of a warrior type to me. Though from Count Farlon's point of view, his prowess as a commanding officer was probably the more important thing here.

I kept those considerations to myself, instead smiling and giving a small shake of my head in reply. “Oh, no. I didn’t specify a time when I would arrive, and you’re no doubt quite busy yourself.”

“Since our acquisition of this border territory was so recent, there are unfortunately quite a few things I still have to take care of.”

“So Stonegaze is indeed rather unstable,” I replied. “I would appreciate it if you would tell me more in detail, but... Ah, we must introduce ourselves first.”

Count Farlon and I then took turns introducing ourselves to get it out of the way. Of course, we already knew each other, but manners were manners. After introductions, we resumed our previous conversation, moving to our seats, but throughout it all, I noticed the count’s steady demeanor, how he let not one detail slip past his notice. From what I’d seen so far, he was a skilled commander, having experience both on the battlefield and in leadership. Having him cooperate with us would be highly beneficial to our plans.

“First of all, law and order in the town is under control,” the count said. “Though I believe you had probably gathered that during your ride in.”

“That’s right. I didn’t see any signs of unrest,” I said with a nod, recalling the streets we had just passed through. While many had been surprised at our arrival, none of them were hostile to our presence. If there had been unrest, we would have received quite a lot of glares. But if things really were as calm as he claimed, then I had questions.

“So while you’ve been able to keep order, you don’t have enough people reporting things or doing errands for you, am I correct?” I asked.

“Unfortunately, you are. While I said that the public order was under control, that control does not extend to the highways connecting the settlements.”

“I see. I didn’t sense any disorder on the highway we traveled on. So you must be referring to other highways?”

Count Farlon nodded back. Apparently, there had been a number of large-scale bandit attacks on the three interconnecting roads along the regions once considered Sylvanian territory, from groups of thirty bandits or more. Though the brigade was of course sending their knights to deal with these attacks, the

root of the issue had yet to be discovered.

“Not only are they a large group, but it also seems that they’re local and know the terrain well. Every time we give chase they get away from us.”

“And yet public order has been maintained inside the settlements,” I commented. “Which probably means the bandits’ headquarters are most likely located outside of the towns and villages, making them that much harder to find.”

“You’re exactly right. While I would love to send more men out to the mountains to search for them, I can’t afford to split the troops up too much while Sylvario is acting suspicious,” Count Farlon sighed. As one of the heavyweights in the Order of Knights, he probably didn’t want to show any weakness to a member of the Special Battalion like me. But the fact that he was letting me see told me just how much the issue troubled him.

“I understand the situation and how much effort you’re putting into things here. Don’t worry. I’ll be assisting you with public safety from now on.”

“Viscount McGuine... I appreciate your assistance.”

When I held out my hand, he gripped it back. The fact that he actually returned my handshake meant he probably was a decent guy. Things might’ve been what they were politically, but he looked like the sort of guy who did what needed to be done. As for me, there was no way I’d let a bunch of shady bandits run around like they were, so it’d be a good idea to help him snuff them out.

“Oh yes. I have a letter for you from His Highness Prince Alphonse, Count Farlon.”

“From His Highness to me? What in the world...”

“I have no idea. I haven’t seen what it says,” I said, stopping and giving him a grin. Was I getting His Highness’s smile right? Probably not. “All that he told me about it was that what was inside should prove to your benefit.”

“Huh...?”

The look on his face told me that he didn’t understand, but he still took the



letter I held out to him.

After that, we exchanged various bits of intel, and I left the garrison.

“Things might be even more of a pain in the ass than I thought,” I mumbled to myself as I swayed on my horse.

Once I finished meeting the count, I went and greeted a number of knights I was acquainted with. What they had to tell me was much the same as what the count said. In fact, some of them who had directly been involved in run-ins with the brigands told me the situation was actually much worse.

The bandits were most likely intentionally making mischief on the highways. That was the only explanation I could come up with; all the locations they struck were clearly preplanned, with leadership, and they all used the same equipment. All this meant that they almost certainly weren’t just bandits, but Sylvarian spies.

“Then the question is what we should do about them... Hmm...”

Obviously, we needed to do something. It wasn’t just the need to stabilize Stonegaze as a new frontline base; we also wanted to get the prospective mines in the territory up and running as soon as possible, and we just couldn’t do that if there were Sylvarians skulking about. If they found out about them, then they might try to take back the territory and, in doing so, spark another war. And even if they didn’t, we couldn’t risk the safety of the mining experts we had brought into Stonegaze.

What we really needed to do was give the bandits a good beating, but that just wasn’t something we could pull off right now.

First off, we just didn’t have the manpower. The Order of Knights was putting as many as they could to work on it, but it still wasn’t enough. So we’d need not just a few dozen new people, but a few hundred, and we couldn’t just pull that many people out of a hat.

“Gotta send a report to His Highness, huh.”

The Special Battalion might have a few hundred people who could be put to work on this, but since His Highness was working on other fronts too, it was completely likely that he wouldn’t be able to send me anyone. But if I sent a

detailed report of the situation and outlined how urgently we needed the manpower, it most likely would raise the priority of my request a bit.

So that was the first thing I had to do, but just sitting around here waiting for help didn't feel right to me. It was entirely possible that no matter what I said in my report, His Highness would be unable to send anyone. And even if he did, we couldn't be sure how long it'd take the messenger to go from here to the capital and get everything ready for a part of the battalion to be sent here. Though, knowing His Highness, he'd manage somehow.

Anyway, I had to do something here, now. If I didn't, then His Highness would make fun of me when he got here. Relentlessly. That'd be a pain, but more than anything, I was the lord of the territory—I couldn't let things get worse.

“Looks like I'll have to get some advice from Nia.”

I unfortunately had yet to build any connections in this area. If I tried to recruit people now, they'd think I was some kind of dictator. Since I'd just gotten here, that was an impression I wanted to avoid. Asking Nia, who already knew some people here, seemed like the best option, and I was sure Nia would be all for helping. But that opened another can of worms.

If Nia were to go out in this situation, then she ran the chance of coming across some bandits. Even with Laura, Tom, and some knights as guards, there was still a nonzero chance something would happen to her, which was what I was worried about.

“I'll have to talk to her about that too and start moving on this tomorrow.”

Decision made, I urged my horse towards the viscount's residence.



After taking my horse to the stable, I headed straight for Nia's room. Though I felt bad for cutting her rest time short with all this, I wanted to discuss our plan for this sooner rather than later.

Anyway, I knocked on her door, with Laura opening it soon after. She'd probably stayed with Nia despite her mistress telling her to rest. When I walked inside, Nia seemed to have just been finishing her tea. It was good to see her resting, even if only a little bit. Come to think of it, it was likely that Laura had

made her rest. But whatever the case, the smile she gave me didn't look tired at all.

"Welcome home, Lord Ark. I'm sorry that I didn't come to greet you on your return."

"No, you must be tired, and I didn't send word I was coming back anyway."

Our back-and-forth here was referencing one of the rules I'd made about how life here might go. Since I was the region's lord, I'd often be inviting people home with me after meetings, and it would look incredibly rude if there was no one there to greet us when we got back. With that in mind, we'd agreed the rule would be that I'd send someone ahead of time so she'd know to wait by the entrance.

*Though I dunno how that'd work when I'm alone. Maybe I could borrow one of Count Farlon's guys? We'll have to talk about that too.*

"Did you get your greetings all out of the way?"

"Yes, the *greetings* went well."

I still had some reservations about the count, but not enough to think he'd be an actual problem. The other thing, though, was a much bigger issue.

"You emphasized the 'greetings.' I assume that means something else happened?" Nia asked.

"Yes, actually..."

Seeing as Nia seemed to understand what I was getting at and took it upon herself to point the conversation in that direction, I immediately told her what I heard at the brigade's garrison. She then began to lose herself in thought. Very cutely. *No, stop that, Ark!*

As a former visitor to the region, Nia was somewhat familiar with the geography, so she probably understood the damage the bandits were doing and what effects that would have much better than I did. And it was natural the news of this would hit her hard.

"First of all, I believe that you're correct in thinking that the attackers are familiar with the terrain. The speed at which they retreat is one thing, but the

fact that they're targeting these specific roads is even worse."

"So you think that their objective is to disrupt the flow of supplies?" I asked after thinking a bit, getting a nod back from Nia. *Good, I wasn't off.*

As I thought that to myself, Nia explained to me that the three regions in McGuine Viscounty—Stonegaze, Stonehunt, and Diamoncut—each grew different crops. The regions would share with each other to fill in what they lacked, and the people were entirely dependent on this exchange.

"Of course, people won't be starving at this very moment, but..." she said, trailing off.

"It'll get worse the longer it keeps going. Hold on. Shouldn't people know all about it already, then?" I questioned.

"Yes, they would. But it wouldn't be something a recently arrived Brigandian noble would usually know about. Our enemy's plan is just as you're guessing, Lord Ark," Nia answered, smiling at me as she nodded.

*Yay!* But my glee aside, her nod meant that I was right.

"A recent appointee to the area would most likely delay acting on this, since in the short-term, it doesn't seem to have much effect," I explained. "But from the public's point of view, this is just the beginning—they know it will get worse the longer it goes on, and so they would want it dealt with immediately. They might even be outraged if they sense their lord isn't doing anything about it. It's a cunning scheme meant to target the difference in what we know."

"Most likely," Nia confirmed. "And it's currently autumn, when people normally start their winter preparations. Not being able to get enough of what they need makes this a life-or-death issue."

"Ah! And as the new lord, I'd be getting leftovers from what the Brigandian royal family sends for the brigade, so the fact that we personally wouldn't suffer from this would only make things worse."

"Their goal might just be to cause discord between Stonegaze and other areas."

After saying all of that, Nia heaved a little sigh. She seemed conflicted; both

disgusted and worried. She seemed to have something she wanted to say, so I waited, and a short moment later she spoke again.

“Their methods are unfortunately effective. They care not for the problems and damages they may inflict upon the familiar. Such a methodology is familiar to me: This is the work of Balthazar, the second prince of Sylvario.”

“The second prince, Balthazar... That’s the brother who you were always cleaning up messes for, wasn’t it?” I asked, recognizing the name. She gave me a wry smile back.

Balthazar was competing with Elmer, the first prince, to become heir to the throne, but the fact that he was both younger and the son of the king’s concubine put him at a disadvantage. His ambition was often self-destructive.

“I see,” Nia said, thoughtful. “Stealing back Stonegaze would be a big accomplishment for him. It’s why he’s causing so much exhaustion and disorder without a thought for the people. While I can see a strategy with some elements of what he’s doing, it’s hard for me to fully accept that he’s capable of doing such a thing to the people who were living in his kingdom just months ago. But this is exactly what he would do.”

Her words didn’t even have a sliver of familial feelings in them. Being the son of the king’s concubine would make the second prince Nia’s biological brother. I’d heard about their relationship, but I realized once more that the fact that she spoke of him like this meant that they weren’t at all familial. Plus, the fact that she wasn’t referring to him as “His Highness” meant that now that our wedding ceremony was over with and she was married to a Brigandian noble, he was now just someone from an enemy kingdom.

It encouraged me to hear this, even if it made me also feel a little conflicted. But if Nia had made up her mind about it, then it wasn’t something I should quibble about. That wasn’t what needed to be done right now.

“So if we know who we’re dealing with, then is there anything we can do against it?” I asked her, the new lord of territory speaking to his advisor. She gave me a firm nod.

“Of course. It will require some preparations, but we can definitely put an end to this.”



Her smile sent chills down my spine. She really was a dependable wife. Realizing this made me emotional all over again, but Nia was already plowing ahead.

“But the things we’ll need to do now aren’t anything especially flashy. First, we’ll need to visit both Stonehunt and Diamoncut to let them know that we’re aware of the issue and promise them that we’ll solve it. To put it simply, we need to reassure them that their concerns aren’t being ignored.”

“I see. It’s simple for a first move, but it’s something that tends to get forgotten about. In cases like ours, especially, we could have gotten so caught up in solving the problem that we’d forget to give the people an explanation.” I nodded in response to Nia’s idea. That was exactly what the second prince was making light of and what I, as the territory’s lord, must never forget.

From what Nia had told me, this area had been neglected even when it was part of Sylvario. The kingdom might’ve had a great economy, but its main earner was the capital’s port and its trade. People were shortsighted at the best of times, so it wasn’t a surprise that when they were pulling in boatloads of money right where they stood, they’d forget to look over the countryside. And when the countryside asked for help, they’d barely gotten a glance, only getting attention when the second prince would intervene (on a whim) and thus make a mess and act like it never happened. The fact that the fourth princess herself would travel all the way there to help them was bound to make the citizens think of her as special.

“Could it be,” I said, the idea visualizing itself in my mind, “that you’re thinking of doing the same thing that Princess Sonia would do, as the wife of a viscount?”

“Yes. Things being as they are, I was thinking that a change in priorities would be permissible, Lord Ark.”

“That’s true. It would stabilize things in the area as well.”

Nia gave me an impish smile. *So cute. Wait, stop, Ark!*

The reason we’d rushed to get our wedding ceremony done and out of the way was so that we could stabilize and govern this newly Brigandian territory as quickly as possible. We had prioritized building a partnership with Farlon and

his brigade so we could create a governing body for Stonegaze, but it seemed it would be best to change tactics now. We couldn't let the situation get to a point where a rebellion could happen at any time, after all.

"Documents relating to the region's finances and taxes were left relatively sorted, so I'm fairly sure that if we got some civil servants sent down here, we'd be able to have things running at the bare minimum," Nia added.

"Then let's include that request in our report to His Highness. That would probably be quite a bit easier for him to send than a few hundred knights from the Special Battalion," I agreed.

"I would also appreciate it if you could ask him to send a dozen or so knights as guards at the same time, preferably from the Special Battalion. It would be even better if they could stay here for a short while afterwards."

"I don't see that being a problem at all. His Highness always works to keep some spare men at the ready."

At the very least, he probably had a single platoon or so kicking around, so ten shouldn't be an issue. Probably couldn't get the entire platoon, though, since they'd need time off.

*But man, look at us, being so decisive.* "I'm glad I consulted you, Nia. If I was alone, then I would have probably been stuck trying to decide what to do."

"I'm glad you think that way. But there were things that I wouldn't have known if you yourself hadn't acted already, and without your connection to His Highness Prince Alphonse, I wouldn't have been able to do much of anything," Nia replied to my honest words, smiling bashfully.

*Ahh, this is kinda nice. It's soothing. Like, yeah, we're having a meeting, but the vibes are so different than the ones I'd have with the Special Battalion.*

"I guess, from a noble standpoint, this is a proper conversation for married couples."

The words had slipped out of my mouth without me realizing. For nobility, political marriages were the norm. Conversations between couples, then, were mostly businesslike, and even if they weren't, at the very least they spoke to each other just to talk out big decisions. Probably. I mean, there were

apparently lords who decided everything without consulting their wives and wives who weren't interested in governing, but most of those married couples' relationships were on thin ice, which made me want to learn from them what *not* to do. I was grateful that Nia was the ideal advisor.

"Really, I'm so glad to have you, Nia. I believe that from the bottom of my heart."

"Huh, wha, what are you saying all of a sudden?!"

When I said what I did in complete earnest, she got embarrassed. Saying it might've made sense to me considering it had been on my mind, but from her perspective, it had probably come out of left field. But the genie was already out of the bottle, so...

"I truly do think that," I said. "Even though I sprang all this talk of governance on you, you don't look upset in the least. In fact, you're actively suggesting things."

"B-But that's because it aligns with my own goals..."

"But it doesn't feel like you're doing it all out of self-interest. Or am I wrong?"

"Y-You aren't wrong, but..."

The more I spoke, the more she got flustered. *So cute*. The whole situation seemed to be a rare one, and Nia was cute, so I felt like I could keep on pushing.

"I sincerely hope that we can keep on having days like this and become a true married couple."

"Lord Ark..."

As she blushed, I took her hand, and was about to kiss it when...

"Nnmمم! Cough, cough, cough!"

Just as I was about to make my move, I heard Laura clearing her throat and tore my hands away.

*That's right. Laura's here too. I got so carried away that I forgot about her. Though the fact that she could make herself unnoticeable shows just how skilled she is as a servant.*

“A-Ahh, sorry, there are more things we need to decide, aren’t there?! Um, oh yeah, while the report is on the way to His Highness, we should make arrangements with the mayors in each of the regions!”

“Y-Yes, you’re right! That will let them know that we’re not planning on neglecting them!”

With the mood thoroughly crushed, we reopened our discussion with clear embarrassment. I don’t think we could be blamed for talking through it a bit fast. But we really did need to decide what we’d do the next day, so it was a good thing, in a way. At least from Viscount McGuine’s perspective, unlike just Ark’s. This was probably how territory lords started thinking of themselves. Probably not, but...!

“We’ll have to ask for Count Farlon’s assistance tomorrow as soon as possible. Do you think Tom would be able to carry a message?”

We’d gotten here after noon, and several hours had since passed. The sun was going down pretty quickly, but if he was fast, he’d probably return by nightfall. Thinking of all that, I asked Nia, and she nodded. “While I feel a tad sorry for him, since he was steering the horses the whole way here, you would have to go if he couldn’t, wouldn’t you? That would be bad for your image, having the head of the house himself go on an errand.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I feel bad for asking, but I’ll have him do it.”

Nia looked guilty. Honestly, I didn’t want to make Tom go out when he was tired either, but I knew I had no choice. I’d become a laughingstock if I went out delivering messages for myself as the lord of the territory. Plus, seeing as how it was getting dark, he was about the only person I could ask to do it. The old gardener had a bad knee, after all.

If I were a normal knight, I would’ve just gone and gotten it out of the way, but since I was the head of our house, there were a lot of hoops I had to jump through. It’d be like this more and more often, so I just needed to get used to it.

“I’ll head back to my room to write the letter for Tom to deliver. Ah, you there, can you call him to my room? Let him know he can take his time,” I said, asking a maid to pass along the message.

For example, this was one of the things I'd need to get used to. I might've wanted to just bring the letter straight to him once I finished writing it, but now it was best for me to call servants for my own errands. Plus, instead of me, now a whole other person had to be used for the calling. It was a pain in the ass. But despite the pain, if I acted like my usual self out here, I'd only be ridiculed, especially by the nobility.

In the world of the nobility, the moment someone looked down upon you, you were well and truly lost; no one would listen to someone they considered beneath them, and in the same breath, they could push unreasonably terrible conditions upon them without a care in the world. It was for that reason that I needed to consciously act like a proper head of a noble house, so no one would do that to me. Our servants all knew that, seeing as they'd worked in a royal palace before. So I didn't have to worry about offending them. I would just have to get used to it. I wasn't used to it, but I had to adjust eventually.

Sighing, I made a head-of-house-like expression. "With that said, I'll be returning to my room. My apologies for intruding on you so suddenly."

"Oh, don't worry about that. I'm glad you came to discuss it all with me. And, um... We're married, so we've got to support each other, don't we?"

The bashful smile and cute words were a direct hit to my senses. I clutched my chest. *Damn. The cuteness could've killed me... I thought my heart was gonna stop.*

"L-Lord Ark?" Nia asked, looking at me confusedly.

Ah, yeah. She had no clue what she'd just done. Wait, she wouldn't have done something like that on purpose, would she? Her being completely oblivious was honestly kind of worse, but a part of me hoped she'd stay this way.

"Oh, it's nothing," I said, in a rush. "I'm fine! See you later!" I escaped from her room with harried, jerky steps. I returned to my room to write the letter as planned, but my hands shook so much I had to redo it a couple times.

But I finished eventually and got Tom to deliver it. He later brought back a message from Count Farlon saying he'd make time for us. So the next day, Nia and I visited the garrison, but...

“I guess you’re the reason our reception was different, Nia.”

I hoped I’d be forgiven for the muttered comment. After all, we were alone when I said it.

Yesterday, I’d met with the count in a tent near the garrison’s entrance. Today, we were in the parlor of their lodgings. It might’ve been a simple temporary construction, but it had actual walls and doors, so meeting him here felt quite different from how I’d met him the day before. But I knew what the brigade was working against, so I wouldn’t openly complain about such a thing.

“I believe we should take this as the count understanding the gravity of the situation,” Nia said. “Believing so will make proceedings run more smoothly, at any rate.”

“No arguing with that, since it’s completely true, isn’t it? I want things to go well with Count Farlon.”

Nia’s jokingly serious quip got a friendly reply back from me. I really wasn’t that bothered about the situation. Actually, I was more happy that she actually seemed to guess that I was just kidding. It felt like we were understanding each other more than we did back when we first met, though in a lot of ways, both of us were still holding back from each other. But that was better than completely not caring what the other thought.

“Whoops, looks like the count is coming,” I said, hearing footsteps heading our way.

“Huh? Ah, yes, you’re right!”

Nia looked confused for a moment before nodding and standing up. I was a little glad that she trusted my senses. It was with that thought in mind that I stood too. We were meeting someone of a higher rank, after all.

“My apologies. Were you waiting long?” Count Farlon asked.

“Oh, not at all,” I said, taking care to make sure my tone didn’t sound like I was adding any notion of “compared to yesterday, at least!” at the end. If we were trying to keep each other in check, it’d be one thing, but we had no intention of that today. It seemed that he understood me, because he looked a little relieved. Judging from the atmosphere, it would probably be okay to get



moving things along.

“Before we speak, allow me to introduce you to my wife. This is Nia.”

“I am Viscount McGuine’s wife, Nia. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

When I introduced her, she gave the count a neat curtsy. I didn’t quite know what was different about it compared to other curtsies, but it was so polite and unshowy that it astonished me for a couple of reasons. To put it shortly, she didn’t quite move as a royal would, but in a way suitably humble for the wife of a viscount. She still maintained an air of respect that communicated how well-versed she was in greeting nobility. I knew she’d been taught like that, but to think she was *this* good at it...

It seemed like Count Farlon felt the same way, because he looked impressed. “I thank you for your polite greeting. I am Farlon, the commander of this brigade.”

From the moment he walked in, the count’s vibes had been different than they were the day before, and they were getting even softer. It wasn’t that Nia’s beauty had softened him, but like he had somehow decided over the course of this brief interaction that we were worth cooperating with.

I’d previously mentioned how fatal it was for a noble to look down on you, but the opposite was also true; being judged worthy granted power. Whether or not you had good manners or were educated were among the social metrics for nobles, and you’d often decide how you’d act based on them.

Count Farlon might’ve been a member of the Order of Knights, but he wasn’t completely boorish, and he seemed to possess a sense of discernment. As a count palatine with no territory of his own, he probably stood between the higher ranks of nobility and the Order of Knights, which would make such sharpness a necessary skill.

He *really* was someone I should get on my side.

Once all of the greetings were out of the way and we had each sat down in our chairs, I cut to the chase.

“As I explained briefly in my letter, we’ve come to you today to discuss how we might deal with the bandits. To be specific, I’d like to first borrow a few

knights to act as messengers.”

“I see,” Count Farlon replied. “That shouldn’t be a problem. After all, while we wouldn’t know how long it would take to search for the brigands, for example, a mere errand wouldn’t take more than two days total.”

I nodded in understanding at what the count said. A knight on horseback could get to Stonehunt’s and Diamoncut’s central towns in a few hours. If they stayed the night to let their horses get a good rest, then they’d be back the next day. In contrast, I didn’t even want to think about how long it’d take any knights we requested from the capital to get here. And on top of that, if we requested help from the capital, the brigade here would lose face. My requesting aid was probably a big help for Count Farlon when he’d been stuck trying to figure out what to do next.

“And after that...” I began, before explaining the next step.

It was, of course, necessary to get some administrative officials sent to us, and it wouldn’t be a problem to have some of the Special Battalion knights come along as guards. The way we were doing it, it wouldn’t harm the brigade’s honor, even if those knights stayed afterwards to help with my stuff. There were no problems with any of that, but there was still one hiccup.

“But bringing the viscountess along with you...” Count Farlon said, trailing off, his disapproval evident.

Yeah, that was a perfectly normal response. But we’d imagined he would say that, so I gave him the answer Nia and I had come up with during our meeting last night.

“Actually, Nia has visited the towns around here before,” I explained. “She has some acquaintances in the area, so we thought that things might move faster if she introduced me to them.”

“What? That’s...” the count exclaimed, before collecting himself. “Then it does seem as if it would be wise to accept her help.”

The count might’ve been surprised by my statement, but that wasn’t odd. The average noblewoman would never go to towns and villages near the border unless they were part of their own family’s territory. To get around that

expectation, we were using the cover story that she was the daughter of a scholar.

The guy who thought that story up was a genius, and that was why we couldn't fall short of his expectations, nor did we even want to.

"My wife herself has asked to come along," I added. "It doesn't sit right for her to do nothing while people she knows suffer."

"And, while I am ashamed to say it, I have only just become a noble through our marriage. I believe that I've been given this chance to show my readiness to be noble through my actions," Nia said, following up my statement with such dignified strength in her soft voice that it shocked Count Farlon into silence.

She was a former princess, after all, and a true one who worked for her people, at that. The noble air that she could take on (when she felt like it) was far beyond that of a viscount's wife. Which was exactly why it shouldn't be overused, but in this case, it had an immediate impact.

"Goodness... Madam, your heart truly is that of a lady," Count Farlon said. He wasn't pretending; Nia had genuinely moved him with her words.

For knights, ladies were to be respected at all times. While knights beaten into shape on the battlefield might not take that very seriously, a count palatine knight like Count Farlon would often be in situations where the teachings were necessary. The rule largely pertained to political marriages and politics in general.

The ability to act not unlike a knight from the stories was actually a skill those of us in public-facing positions needed. The presence of a knight—someone to be respected and admired—helped keep the common people in check, and it could work to inspire them to become knights themselves, or at the very least, soldiers.

Oh, but Nia truly was worthy of being called a lady.

Seeing his reaction, Nia gave the count a bashful smile.

*It's okay, I'm not jealous. I'm fine. I'm not that petty.*

"Thank you. It's an honor to have a true knight such as yourself say that to

me.”

*It's okay, I'm not jealous. I'm fine. Nia thinks I'm a true knight too. I'm FINE. Nia is going to have to interact with a lot more knights and higher nobles from now on. If I get worked up over every bit of social etiquette, then I'll never survive.*

“The honor is mine, my lady,” Count Farlon said, his expression saying exactly the same thing as his mouth. As you can see, it was super effective.

My heart was full of admiration for Nia and ugly jealousy and possessiveness, but I held on to my restraint. I needed to handle my feelings on my own. Work and emotions were two different things. I mean, if I couldn't even handle that, then I couldn't be Nia's husband. She was just that wonderful of a woman.

After that, everything went swimmingly. Our cooperation on this case was so positive it was ideal.

Having safely finished our meeting with Count Farlon, we headed back to the lord's manor no worse for wear. We then decided to take a little break in the parlor.

“You really were a great help, Nia,” I said, bowing my head a little as we waited for our tea to be prepared.

I had managed to sort my feelings out by the time we arrived home. Splitting up—me on my horse and Nia in the carriage—had been a good idea; the rhythms of horseback riding helped me cool my head.

If I'd been inside the carriage with Nia, my tone of voice or expression would have probably given something away. I was (unfortunately) pretty sure that she'd realized how little romantic experience I had, but letting her see me get emotional with jealousy was something else entirely.

*But Nia is generous, so maybe it would've been fine? Maybe one day, I thought while on horseback, we can have the kind of relationship where we could talk about things like this.*

Now face-to-face with her, I'd cooled off, and from the expression on her face, it looked like I was doing a good job of keeping myself in check.

“Oh, I didn’t do anything. It was all just because Count Farlon was willing to hear us out,” Nia said. “But I’m glad that I could be of some use.”

That was why Nia’s response didn’t seem like she was worried about me. She might’ve been humble about it, but in the end she accepted my praise. The way she did it made me feel satisfied too. The fact that she was so adept at negotiations like the one we’d just had was probably because of how experienced she was interpersonally. A hint of jealousy flashed through my mind for an instant, but it faded just as fast, seeing as it was against multiple people I didn’t know. What was more important was the fact that her skills helped us here.

“Really, the coming days will be your time to shine,” I said. “Especially in the beginning, you’ll be the main contact for the mayors and such in the areas we’re headed to.”

“Yes, of course. That was my intention from the beginning, after all,” she confirmed, tone absolutely firm despite the fact that we had to shift our original plans.

Before we’d arrived, the plan had been that I would take charge of stabilizing domestic politics, while Nia would go around the region networking with various community leaders and asking for their assistance in governing. But with the situation as it was now, it was honestly too dangerous for her and her servants to go alone, which was why I was now going to accompany her. This would soothe my worries, and it would also do more to show local leaders my authority.

But that wasn’t all.

“Do you think *they’ll* bite?” I asked.

“Most likely. If the second prince is the one behind everything, then he’ll want to show off his achievements as soon as possible. And, um, I feel bad for saying this, but you’re the perfect bait,” she answered with a nod.

We were talking about the group masquerading as bandits and haunting the area. The likely culprit behind them was the second prince of the Kingdom of Sylvario, Balthazar, who doggedly chased clout in his desire to usurp the first prince. If we were to give him a chance not only to capture but even to strike

down someone like me—a man with a terrifying reputation earned straight from the battlefield—at a time when it would grant him the best opportunity to regain the territory his kingdom had lost, then he was nearly guaranteed to try to get at me.

“They run away every time we chase them, but with me out there, it’ll be a different story. If they come at us, then it shouldn’t be that hard to catch one or two of them.”

“It will depend on just how many men they have. From what we’ve heard so far, they likely have thirty men at the most. Considering how few Special Battalion troops will probably be dispatched to us, it will be dangerous, but...”

The look Nia gave me after my carefree statement was incredibly apologetic. Of course it was. We’d probably only have about ten people dispatched to us, when the “bandits” would have three times that. Even with Laura, Tom, and me, the odds were stacked against us. Even a well-trained knight would struggle against so many enemies.

Or at least, normal knights would.

“I mean, the Special Battalion folks are specifically trained for situations like this,” I added.

“I guess that’s true,” she said, giving me a wry smile. She was probably remembering the morning training I was doing before we came out here.

The reason I’d trained to take on multiple enemies at once was for scenarios exactly like this one, and, of course, I’d trained the company I’d led in much the same way. While none of them were as good as I was, they had a ton more experience fighting multiple enemies than the average knight. It was necessary training; we were often dispatched in small, elite groups, and it seemed that this time around would be more of the same. “But even saying that, we haven’t actually seen the ‘bandits’ fight, so we shouldn’t take them too lightly. From the brigade’s reports, it seems they’re used to actual combat, so their judgment shouldn’t be that far off,” I said.

“We have no choice but to take their word for it. Really, I would have wanted to have a little more investigating done before we made any moves, but it’ll be winter soon enough, and we can’t afford to wait.”

“We might end up having the citizens of Stonehunt and Diamoncut suspicious of us if we did. Declaring that we would handle things immediately and then proceeding to sit on our hands would only invite distrust.”

“That’s true. They probably want to gauge your performance as the territory lord, and words without action here would only undermine your authority.”

I had to nod at Nia’s words. I mentioned this before, but the citizens didn’t really care which country controlled their region. The thing they did care about was their mayors, maybe the territory’s lord. I don’t think I need to spell out what they’d think if a lord showed up making all sorts of promises while actually just sitting on their ass.

What was even worse was the fact that we’d risk losing all of Nia’s connections if that happened. People didn’t care if something they weren’t hoping for never happened, but if you betrayed their expectations, they’d keep that grudge.

“On the other hand, if we can successfully convey our goodwill through our actions, it will only benefit us in the long run. If we can eradicate the bandits and put a damper on Sylvario’s plots while getting the trust of the citizens to boot, just by putting ourselves at risk, then there’s no way we wouldn’t do it,” I said, counting the reasons.

“Though I feel a bit bad that the risks are just as big as the reward,” Nia commented apologetically.

*It’s really not that big of a deal.* “From my perspective, it’s not very high-risk at all. You’re the only one I’m worried about.”

“For goodness sake, please, worry about yourself a little bit!” she cried, unusually pouty.

*Cute. Wait, stop that, Ark! Or wait, don’t. It might be my fault for only thinking about it from my perspective.*

“I’m sorry for worrying you. From where I see it, going up against three times the number of enemies is business as usual for me, so I’m not that bothered by it,” I apologized.

“I mean, that in itself is probably an issue, but truly, your work is difficult, isn’t



it?”

In Nia’s eyes was an incredible sense of pity. *Damn, once I find myself really enjoying being looked at like this, it’s over.*

“But I never would have expected His Highness Prince Alphonse to send you out on missions like that. I thought he would give you enough men to do what you needed to do.”

“Ahh, I see. He *does* send out enough, though.”

“Huh?”

I was quick to nod at her comment. His Highness did, in fact, give us enough knights to do the job, though sometimes barely. Most of those times, I’d get sent out. But Nia didn’t seem to understand what I was saying, and she asked me to repeat it. And I can’t say I blamed her.

“His Highness does indeed send us out with enough men to do the job.”

“Huh? But you just said that you’re often outnumbered three to one, didn’t you?”

“Yep. But we always get it done. That’s why I’m still here, after all.”

“Even if that’s true, isn’t such a thing quite unbelievable?”

She seemed quite confused, but it made sense once you thought about it some more. Books on warfare often advised to have a minimum of three times the numbers of soldiers stationed there to take a heavily guarded fort or castle, after all. So basically, you were supposed to have three times the troops to beat an enemy with that much of an advantage.

The reason she was surprised was because she understood that the Special Battalion was an attack unit assembled to put His Highness’s tactics to work, even if we were often outmanned against our enemies. We’d never been sent to attack a castle head-on, though, of course. Even for field battles, it’d be stupid to run headlong at a group of enemies three times the size. Normally, that is.

That was why I was pretty sure she’d just have to see it for herself; words just wouldn’t cut it.

“I think in this case, it would be easier for you to just see us in action.”

“I see. If you say so, Lord Ark.”

When I said that, she nodded immediately. She was smart, so she probably knew exactly what I was thinking. At the very least, she didn't think I was joking.

“But really, I'd prefer not to have to see it at all,” she quipped, her smile a little strained.

## Chapter 4: The People of Stonegaze Province

About a week after our conversation, the men I had requested His Highness send finally arrived in Stonegaze.

Gale was not among them, of course. His promotion to company commander probably made him too busy to travel, so there was nothing we could do about it.

Anyway, after the civil servants got here, showing them what we needed them to do work-wise went amazingly smoothly. This was mainly because Nia had compiled a manual of instructions, so they had what, when, and how to do things all in one place. They'd all been chosen by His Highness, so they were all skilled, and in a blink of an eye they were comfortably handling their duties. All we had to do afterwards was decide who would be in charge of what.

I helped with it too, okay?

While we were waiting for their arrival, we managed to get in contact with community leaders in both Stonehunt and Diamoncut. It seemed they were starting to worry about the situation, so us reaching out gave them a little relief. The only potential problem now was that their worry would worsen if we didn't go.

And so, despite only having been in the province for hardly a week, we quickly set off to travel around the territory.

"I see. They were right to say that something felt off," I murmured to myself quietly on horseback, almost immediately after we set off from Bigden, nominally considered the territory's capital.

We were traveling on the main highways connecting the regions, but they were deserted. There was barely anyone traveling the roads, not even merchants.

"If things are this bad, then the impact it's having on goods distribution must be substantial," Nia agreed, having opened the window of the carriage beside

me to look out. I would've made my usual internal "cute" comment, but the grave look on her face kept my feelings in check. Unlike me, she had acquaintances ahead in Stonehunt and Diamoncut, so of course she'd be this worried.

That was why I nodded, giving her a serious look of my own.

"If we'd just stayed cooped up in Bigden, then we wouldn't have been able to understand just how grave the situation is," I said.

"Exactly... Bigden still has plenty of goods coming in, after all."

Nia was correct. The city was the gateway to other provinces, and since they also got goods that way, they still had energy to spare. If we'd assumed the situation in Bigden reflected the status of other regions, then things might have deteriorated to a fatal degree. It was enough to send a chill down my spine.

"I'm glad we were able to leave before winter. It was a good thing that we rushed our wedding ceremony a tad."

"If we had ended up being too late, I would never have forgiven myself," Nia sighed, clearly relieved as she glanced around inside the carriage. We had packed some things on our trip that would probably help us during our visits.

Most of the mayors and major community members she knew were, of course, getting on in years. If winter had arrived while they still hadn't solved their supply issue, then it was easy to guess that the worst-case scenario would have happened. There were also infants and toddlers without much stamina who would be in danger too.

This was something I had to face not only as a concerned citizen, but as part of my responsibility as the lord of the region. You could say that the fact that we were able to stop that worst-case scenario from happening was better than nothing, but merely preventing the worst from happening wasn't enough in this case. Life was truly harsh.

*We have to stop the Sylvarians' plot, no matter what.*

"It was a good thing that you were able to get in touch with your acquaintances. It'll make it easier to move around when we get there," I commented.

“Yes, I’m so glad that they were safe. It means I can get to work without worries.” She nodded in response.

Apparently, as Princess Sonia, she’d resolved an issue that required the cooperation of all three regions. And it turned out that one of the central figures she’d dealt with was in Bigden, which allowed us to secretly get in touch with the mayors in Stonehunt and Diamoncut to let them know about Nia.

We still wanted to keep Nia’s secret under wraps, of course, but since the two mayors were in her debt, we were probably okay here. Seeing as how Sylvario had neglected them all this time and even now was merely using them to advance their own plot, it was safe to assume that any loyalty they’d once had to their kingdom had well and truly died out. We probably would’ve looked a bit closer at any of her contacts if the province was still part of Sylvario, but we did what we had to do since we didn’t have the luxury of time.

“Without worry, huh... I’m sorry to say this, but you’ll have to be on the defensive, both on the road and in town. The fake bandits probably have some lackeys among the general population.”

“So you’re thinking that as well. Them having informants among the populace would alert them to any and all supply movement. I’ll be careful not to let anything slip.”

“I think I should be more worried about that than you. If we were only talking about one person, then I would be able to chase them down, but from what we’ve heard, the bandits probably have multiple people placed.”

“Yes. *The culprit* is capable of that much, at least.”

During our conversation, the two of us made sure not to mention the actual name of “the culprit.” It probably would’ve been all right if the knights accompanying us as guards overheard us, since they were all members of the Special Battalion, but it would definitely be a better idea to start being careful early on.

But the more I heard about “the culprit,” the more weirded out I was by Sylvario’s second prince, Balthazar.

“Is it just me, or are they playing like they’re some master tactician great at

ruses?”

“Um... I can't really deny that.”

When I voiced my honest impressions, Nia gave me a strained smile but didn't refute them. He might've been her blood-related older brother, but from her perspective, he was her abuser. Nia would be completely justified to bad-mouth him, but she was far too nice to ever do something like that. But even so, the fact that she was able to view him as just another opponent clearly demonstrated her worth.

“They're shortsighted, true. It *should* just be one piece of the puzzle, something contributing towards a larger objective, but they end up mistaking the success of their scheme as achieving the goal itself,” she continued.

“I see. So their weak spot is getting carried away. If that's the case, would they be the type to push through with a strategy even if it doesn't work, simply because they believe it should?”

“Yes, exactly. And that tendency of theirs meant that I always had to go around picking up their messes...” Nia sighed.

I, too, had experience fixing my higher-up's mistakes, so I knew just how much of a pain in the ass it was. If something went well, it was your boss's achievement. If something went bad, it was your responsibility. Plus, any suggestion of a plan B had to be done with the utmost delicacy.

*Huh? Wait, then...*

“Nia. Would they have someone to clean up after them now?”

“They probably have *someone*, but it would be a different case than before. The person would have fewer powers, after all.”

Her answer was just as I had expected. No matter how mistreated she had been, Princess Sonia had still been a princess. If a normal noble tried to do what she did, they wouldn't get far, simply because their station wouldn't let them.

“The culprit might get pretty cranky, then?”

“Probably very much so.”

“And if we were to make even more of their plans fail, then the likelihood that

they'd get impatient and make a move would increase."

"Exactly."

Nia gave me a bright smile—one that would give His Highness a run for his money.

If we were able to bring Balthazar down there, it would be a massive coup in our overall plan to conquer Sylvario. But the questions remained. Did our opponent truly understand what was at stake? And regardless of whether they did, were we prepared to take them down, here and now?

"If we want to deal them a really painful blow, then our visit now needs to lead to some results."

"Yes, let's focus on that."

Decision made, the two of us nodded at each other. When my eyes went back to the road, I could see the town we were headed to was close. A lot more time had passed while we chatted than I'd thought.

*Let's see how much help we can get,* I thought to myself, refocusing my mind.



And so, we arrived in Stonehunt's town, but...

"Ohhh! To think I would meet you once again!"

We might've already told them why we were coming, but even so, our meeting with the mayor went super smoothly.

We were currently in the mayor of Stonehunt's home, inside his parlor. The mayor was pretty elderly and apparently his rank was actually of a baronet (in between a commoner and a noble). He also had quite the fortune, because his residence was befitting of his station. He seemed to be someone who wouldn't bring shame to his position, but there was one thing that caught in my brain: His home wasn't well taken care of.

"I see, so that all happened afterwards," Nia murmured solemnly.

"Yes. After your visit, Sylvario's neglect of the territory became even worse..." the mayor continued, pain in his voice and tears in his eyes.



As a result of Nia's last visit, the second prince had made various improvements to the territories. But once the war began, all support from the capital stopped, and the territory's former lord started conscripting soldiers due to their proximity to the battlefields and using provisional taxes to steal from the region. These losses, plus the province's transfer to Brigandia, made it easy to see why the mayor thought they had been simply thrown away.

"With all they did to us, I had thought that they were wringing us dry to discard us, like a lizard would its tail..."

"I... I'm sorry, I can't even say that you're mistaken."

Nia had begun to try to comfort him, but she hesitated. I gave her a worried glance, but internally, I was impressed.

Nia's hesitation had two meanings. One was emphasizing that Sylvario and the nobles within were so bad that even someone as kind as her couldn't deny it. The other was to make a show of trying to comfort him, to show that she cared. And when she did...

"Ohh! My goodness, you truly care for us!" the mayor cried, touched. With that sentence, he was probably thinking that it was a good thing that Sylvario had abandoned them and that Brigandia would be better to them. He was also probably relieved to know that despite the change in Princess Sonia's appearance, she hadn't changed inside.

The exchange had actually been imagined and planned out beforehand. Nia had surmised that they probably had been neglected. That would mean that when we met them, they'd voice at least a few complaints to us about Sylvario and their former lord. That would give us, their new territory lord, an opportunity. And a fundamental tactic in all war was to take hold of opportunities.

"It worried me so to hear the province had been ceded. And, ah, speaking of worries—you've been dealing with an epidemic, correct? We've brought medicine with us, just in case."

When Nia said that, the mayor's eyes widened for a moment before he started crying in earnest.

“Goodness! Th-Thank you so much! It hasn’t been spreading much so far this year, but things will get tougher once the cold sets in. Our reserves have been troubling us as of late.”

It turns out that the area was struggling with an endemic disease. The spread worsened terribly in the winter, but the citizens were able to slow it considerably through medicine. And, as you might have guessed, Princess Sonia had had a hand in giving them a stable supply, and the bandit situation had made it harder for them to procure the medication.

And, for our visit, Nia had packed the carriage up with said medication. The spot where I would have been sitting was empty, after all, and unlike foodstuffs, enough medicine to treat the entire town didn’t take up much space. If our visit had been any later, we would’ve had to bring food for them too, but the speed at which we’d gotten out here meant the medicine would be enough.

Whatever the case, it was the best souvenir we could bring to show the town that Princess Sonia hadn’t forgotten them.

“I’m so glad we made it in time. When I heard about the situation, the first thing I worried about was the medication.”

“Ah, Princess—no, Viscountess McGuine, you are too compassionate!” The mayor got up from his seat, kneeling before Nia and bowing his head.

*Whoops, did this work a little too well? I mean, it’ll be handy for things from now on. This means at least Stonehunt will completely accept our leadership. Go Nia.*

And it wasn’t just that our *strategy* had worked. The plan had come about because Nia truly did care about Stonehunt from the bottom of her heart, and she was willing to let it be known. You could say that her calculations and empathy coexisted within her, neither of them canceling out the other.

Honestly, it kinda resembled a certain prince, though the ratios in their hearts were different.

Any way you spun it, she’d stolen the mayor’s heart. And just as I was feeling relief about that, Nia stood, holding out a hand towards the man.

“Please, raise your head, Mayor. The reason we were able to make it here in time is because you managed to protect the town this long. That is something you should be proud of.”

“My goodness... You are so, so kind...”

The mayor started outright sobbing. That was the finishing blow.

But really, he had done well. He’d kept the town stable, even with a war going on nearby and without enough support from the capital or the former lord. I’d mentioned that his residence wasn’t well taken care of, but you could say that that was about the only thing in such a state.

No matter how you thought of it, the fact that the mayor had kept public order so stable was proof of his skills. And of course the guy would cry the moment all his hard work was acknowledged. It was such an emotional moment, in fact, that I briefly wondered if it was even appropriate for me to be here witnessing it.

“And I’m not really the compassionate one here. The entire reason I was able to come here today was because my husband, Viscount McGuine, was concerned as well,” Nia added a few words, quite nicely. I mean, we’d actually planned out when things would be mentioned, but still—having her say that in a tone that showed her thinking back on everything that happened, with a blush on her face at that, hit way too hard!

Ah, I could sense Laura making her trademark “sugared ginger stuffed into her mouth” sort of expression at me from behind.

The mayor was a bit stunned to hear Nia suddenly bragging about me, and he turned my way, face frozen. Then he stared for a bit, before...

“I-I see! So you are the one who Her Hi—Prin—this wonderful lady...!”

Seemingly having realized what happened, he turned his whole body my way and bowed with such momentum that he might’ve smashed his head onto the floor, basically prostrating himself before me. Also, the multiple attempts at referring to Nia were probably him stopping himself from saying “Her Highness Princess Sonia.”

He’d already called her Princess once so far, but that could be excused since it

was common enough for noblewomen to be called princesses in their own territory. But even though we were in a parlor-like room, it'd be bad to call her Princess Sonia. He must've known that and held back his words before they came out of his mouth.

*Okay, good to know we can rely on him for his understanding too.*

The fact that I was able to think that calmly made me feel like I was on my way to becoming a proper noble.

"Yes, you could say it was chance, or fate. And I'll be glad to help this town. I'm looking forward to working with you from now on," I said.

"Ye-Yes! Of course! I'll whip these old bones of mine into shape and give my all to you!"

When I gave him a very calm, lordlike confirmation, he answered like that, still on the ground. *Damn, I'm still not used to this... Or, well, maybe I don't need to be used to this exactly.* "Please, stand. Or maybe sit instead. Now we must discuss the future."

"Yes, understood!"

The mayor's head shot up, and he cheerily sat back down back in his chair in a motion that still showed his gratitude.

"Then we should talk about what will happen from now on. First of all, as countermeasures against the bandits..."

Having gotten my groove back, I brought up the things I had decided to talk to the mayor about with Nia. But once we started talking, it just kept on going. The mayor seemed to have a lot of fears, worries, and concerns. And having a territory lord who seemed like he'd hear him out meant that he had tons to talk about.

The entire conversation, from the greeting to this moment, was to condition him to feel like that. It made me think again about how it was who was talking and who was listening that was more important than *what* was being discussed.

I felt a little conflicted about how Nia understood that despite her age, but in truth, it hurt my heart to think about how the servants in the Sylvarian royal

palace most likely changed their tune depending on who was speaking to them. But the smarts she had to pick up on that, and the strength to get out of there, were what made Nia who she was now. I couldn't thank Laura and Tom enough for helping her.

And I was probably imagining the creeped-out look Laura was giving me as I thought that.

The fact that I had the time to wax poetic about all of that stuff was, of course, because Nia was so good at giving an audience that I didn't even need to talk.

"Ah, your heart hasn't changed a bit, my lady. If a saintess existed in this world, then I am sure that it would be you," the mayor said, his feelings towards Nia reaching religious levels.

*Wait.* What he said caught my sixth sense.

A Saintess. A title for a pure woman who'd been blessed by God, the likes of which hadn't appeared in ages and was considered a thing of legends. But the description of "blessed by God" made me remember our wedding ceremony, when we'd taken sips of the consecrated wine. It had clearly been filled with some sort of holy power, to the point where even the priest had been shocked. And if being a Saintess had nothing to do with being able to use magic or cause miracles, and was just a term for a woman blessed by God, then...

*Nah, it couldn't be. Or could it?*

I glanced over at Nia, who was very seriously listening to the mayor's grievances without even a blip in her composure. Knowing her, the thought had probably never crossed her mind that she could be a Saintess. But for some reason, it stayed in my mind. I knew I might've been a bit biased, though.

I made a note to myself to study up on the topic once everything calmed down. They only existed in legends, so my lack of interest in them before meant that I didn't know a thing about them. But any documents regarding them would probably only exist in the capital...

"Thanks to the two of you, the weight on my heart has disappeared. Please, do as you see fit. And, as the representative of this town, I swear my loyalty to

Lord McGuine, from the bottom of my heart.”

It seemed that while I was thinking to myself, the mayor had said everything he wanted to say. His newfound fealty was practically a physical thing, coming off of him in waves as he bowed his head to us. I forgot about the whole possibility of Nia being a Saintess, as we had now finished almost everything we needed to do in this town.

“I’m grateful for that fealty of yours. If I could, I’d like to also speak with the other villagers.”

“I see. If this suits you, the prominent members of the community are preparing the banquet, and you are welcome to attend and speak to them there.” The mayor answered my request with the smile of a friendly old man.

He might not have worshipped me like he did Nia, but it seemed I’d gained his trust. It also seemed that he had a lot of influence in town, so the townspeople would trust him if he said we were okay. I’d probably be able to make great strides in obtaining public favor if he were to vouch for me at the banquet.

Aaand it’d be nice if our other objective would go well too.

“I’ve prepared a guest room for you both, so please, relax there until the preparations for the banquet are complete.”

“Thank you. We’ll take you up on that offer.”

Seeing as the sun was starting to go down, we decided to spend the night here before heading to Diamoncut tomorrow. This was why the mayor had a room ready for us to stay in. We’d have to impose a bit, but the town didn’t have anywhere else nobles like us could stay, so we couldn’t do anything about it from a security perspective. And, due to the security and number of rooms in the residence, Nia and I would be sharing the room.

Normally, my heart rate would’ve spiked just from hearing that, but as I said, it was for security reasons. This meant that Laura, Tom, and the knights would also be in the room with us, so there wouldn’t be a chance for any funny business. I mean, yeah. This wasn’t the sort of situation I’d get myself over the moon for, anyway.

After a little rest, we arrived at the banquet being held in what you could

describe as the town's assembly hall. Laura and Tom had, of course, headed up the investigation of the place beforehand, so since they didn't find any hidden baddies skulking around, the banquet went ahead without any issue.

"Thank you all for gathering, despite how busy you must be. You can live in relief, knowing that 'the Black Wolf' is watching out for you! Cheers!"

As I took the lead in starting a toast, everyone raised their glasses and beer steins excitedly. Before, "the Black Wolf" had been something for them to fear, but it seemed that the feeling had changed; now, the people were relieved and glad to hear my name. They trusted that I was on their side.

This wasn't quite something I'd naturally do, but I was glad I'd come to this town directly. If I hadn't, I wouldn't have been able to see the citizens' faces, after all.

And just like that, we finished our visit to Stonehunt without a hitch, things going better than expected. The next day, we left for Diamoncut and arrived three days later, safely and without being attacked even once.

In Diamoncut, Nia's charisma exploded, resulting in our meeting with the mayor ending with him swearing his allegiance. We gave them their medicine just like we did in Stonehunt, along with some herbs and stuff that the other region had asked us to bring, and they were pretty thrilled. It looked like the herbs were a key ingredient they used to preserve their food, so it would've been awful if they'd gone without them. I kept getting painfully reminded of how bad things could've gotten if we'd been late, and each time I felt a little relieved.

After that, we had the same sort of little banquet and stayed the night in Diamoncut. After all our business had been concluded, we went to the rooms they'd prepared for us to take a break. Once inside, we schooled our expressions to something more grim.

"So the real game starts tomorrow, huh?" I said to Nia, who gave me a serious look and a nod back.

We'd met with both the mayors, given them what they needed to get by for now, and gotten a clearer grasp of the situation. We'd gotten the public part of our planned finished, but that wasn't the main goal here.

“Just like in Stonehunt, there was a man who slipped out in the middle of the banquet. I followed him in secret, and he was outside, talking to some sketchy-looking guy,” Tom reported.

“He was most likely an informant working with the bandits. I’ve quietly informed the mayor to have him taken into custody once everything is finished,” Nia added.

It was for this express reason that we’d even attended the little banquets each town organized for us. At these sorts of events, the mayor would not only tell the townspeople why we came, but also what we would be doing afterwards. They’d tell everyone attending that we would be staying the nights in both Stonehunt and Diamoncut before heading back to Stonegaze. And so the real question was, what would the bandits do with this information?

“Since they didn’t pull anything on the way to Diamoncut, they’d probably asked for orders but had not gotten a reply back yet,” I guessed. “Looks like there’s definitely someone above them calling the shots.”

If they’d been actual bandits with a base nearby, they would have immediately made contact with us and attacked after figuring out who we were. After all, we were a regional lord and his wife who’d probably go for a high ransom, and on top of that, we were traveling with a carriage full of valuables *and* without a lot of security. There wouldn’t have been any logical reason to go ahead and wait until we were back on the highway to Stonegaze—where the brigade was based—to attack us.

Or that was my theory, anyway. Nia seemed to agree.

“If *he*’s the mastermind behind all of this, then he probably isn’t nearby,” Nia surmised. “If they were communicating with him by carrier pigeon, then it would take four days or so for it to make a round trip. It’s more likely that they’re either communicating with him directly, or with someone with a certain amount of discretionary power located within a few days’ travel on foot.”

“Between the two, I’d prefer the latter. We’d be able to capture that person and the bandits at the same time,” I said.

People like that tended to flee pretty quickly, though, so capturing them might be a pain. What’s more, if we weren’t able to get some physical proof



that they were in cahoots with the second prince, then we wouldn't be able to directly investigate. From what I'd heard of the guy's personality, he probably wouldn't have left any evidence. Annoyingly enough, he seemed to be the type to make absolutely sure to emerge unscathed if a plan of his were to go south.

"Let's do everything we can to strive for a capture," Nia said. "First, we'll make sure to counterattack them if they attack. Even just that will crush their schemes."

"That's true. They can't do much if they lose the pawns they were using to make messes here."

The second prince's aim was to sow discord in the region. His goal afterwards would be to attack while the new regional lord was busy dealing with the chaos, and steal the province back from under the lord's nose. But if the proxies he was currently using to cause trouble disappeared, all his efforts would be for nothing.

He might try to force his way in if that happened, but we had more than enough firepower to intercept. I didn't think we would lose if it came to that.

"Nia, do you have any idea where they might try attacking us?" I asked.

"Yes, I've thought of a few places where thirty-odd people could hide, or where they would be able to spread out. I'll share all of them with you."

Nia's response was effortless. Her explanations were also easy to visualize, possibly because she'd actually been there. Nia was definitely the best advisor I could have ever hoped to get.

"Now we should be able to handle things no matter where they decide to attack us. We won't let up our guard, though," I said, impressed, as the knights with us agreed. Really, if we still couldn't handle things after this much prep, the blame would solely land on our shoulders.

"Yes. My apologies, but I'll leave the counterattack to you... I'm sure you'll protect me, won't you?" Nia said, giving me a cheeky wink.

My hand shot up automatically in response to having been so unerringly shot through the chest. *Of course* I'd protect her!

The best advisor I'd ever had had gotten everything prepared for us, so we, the strongest knights, had no choice but to prove ourselves.

"Of course. I won't let them lay a finger on you," I declared, full of confidence.



And so, having planned everything out, strategy included, we departed for Stonegaze the next morning.

Day one went by without incident. They probably held off on an attack since we were still relatively close to Diamoncut at that point and could have feasibly called for reinforcements from this distance.

An attack the next day, therefore, was highly likely. By that time, we'd be farther from both Diamoncut and Stonehunt, so it would be harder for anyone to either notice or send help.

And it seemed my suspicions were right on the money.

"Everyone, stop!"

At my command, Tom started slowing the carriage down—unlike a single horse, a carriage wasn't able to come to a sudden stop... The accompanying knights slowed their speed to match him.

"So they really are here, Lord Ark?" Nia asked.

"Yeah. Nia, stay inside the carriage with Laura and keep the window closed tight," I answered, urging my horse ahead of the position that was my usual spot slightly behind the carriage.

Nia nodded, closing the window. She looked a little nervous, but that was all. Even if she had experienced being attacked before, she was quite calm for someone who was about to witness a battle larger than any she'd faced before.

"I can't show her my bad side, can I?" I couldn't help but ask.

"Pretty unusual for you to try to act cool, isn't it, Commander?"

"Shut up, that's not what I'm doing."

One of the knights in front of the carriage teased me, and I quipped back with a laugh. They were men from the company I'd led back in the Special Battalion,

so we were pretty casual with each other. That made things a lot easier. *But I should probably say something, shouldn't I?*

"I'm not your commander anymore, y'know," I said. "Call me Viscount McGuine."

"Yes, my apologies, Your Excellency Viscount McGuine!"

"Okay, you've got some guts!" I exclaimed. "I'll make sure to put you through the wringer later!"

"Urk, go easy on me!"

I kept on moving forward as we joked at each other, while the knights formed a barrier around the carriage. This was all part of the plan.

Once I was a bit farther ahead, I got off my horse. While being on horseback was technically the better offensive position, our horses weren't currently armored, so they'd get injured pretty easily in this fight. It'd be one thing to choose not to use the horses in a proper battle, but I didn't want to risk it against some fake bandits like this.

Then, I unhooked my weapon from the saddle: a stick roughly three meters long. It was the exact same cane I'd used when training with Laura and Tom. There were two reasons I'd decided not to bring my wolf tooth cudgel with me. One was that I just didn't want to spook the villagers with something so scary looking. The second reason was that I'd prefer to capture these guys alive.

There was actually a third reason too, but I'd leave it at two for now.

Holding my cane over my shoulder, I sauntered even farther forward.

"Hey, we already know you're there, so why don't you just come out already? Isn't it gonna be harder for you to fight if you're playing hide-and-seek?"

I could feel their confusion at my words. I couldn't blame them. The part of highway we were on was lined with trees and boulders that hindered visibility, and it was one of the places Nia had said would be ideal for an ambush. The bandits hid themselves thinking we'd never notice them, but not only had we stopped way before getting there, I was also addressing them directly. They were probably wondering what exactly was going on.

But it seemed that their confusion was keeping them from making up their minds.

“Want me to guess how many men you’ve got?” I continued, taunting. “Let’s see. Five behind that boulder, four behind this one. Each of the three boulders behind us is hiding three guys each. There’s one on that tree, and one on this. Archers, maybe? Then, you’ve got two more men underneath each of the trees.”

I used my cane to point at every hiding spot I called out, and with each reveal they seemed to become more and more bewildered. None of them were actually peeking out to look at me, but they could probably tell where I was pointing from the direction of my voice.

I didn’t want to brag, but I was pretty sure there weren’t a lot of people who could accurately tell where and how many people were around by just their aura.

*It’d be nice if Count Barracuda and I could compete over something like this. I’m sure he’d be pretty damn good at it too.*

“What, are you guys new to ambushing people? You can’t possibly be this shitty at hiding otherwise. There’s footprints near the rocks you didn’t even bother to erase, and whoever’s up in the trees is moving the branches they’re shaking so much.”

I mean, their footprints weren’t *that* deep, and the branches were only shaking a tiny bit, but they couldn’t get past me. Most of the men in the Special Battalion would’ve noticed too. These guys were just that sloppy with their hiding places.

They probably would’ve been fine against the average caravan, but they were up against the wrong people. Or were Sylvarian knights bad enough that even this would fool them?

“If you’ve got that many men here, then you must know who I am, right? Or could it be that you’re making light of Ark McGuine, the infamous ‘Black Wolf’?”

*I ended up calling myself infamous.*

They didn’t flip out upon hearing my name, so they already knew who I was.

But for them to still be like this... *Oh, I get it.*

“Hey hey, they didn’t feed you that crap about how the ‘Black Wolf’ was a dumbass who could only go wild on the battlefield, did they? I pity you. Unfortunately for you guys, this wolf has got a good nose,” I bragged, making a show of flicking my nose with a finger.

Was I playing it up too much? Was that why they’d teased me before? But it was true that I had a good nose, both literally and figuratively. But let’s leave aside the fact that it was how I’d found Nia.

“I mean, if you wanna fight while you’re still hiding, go ahead. All it’d mean is that we’d just have to attack each spot.”

I made a very showy step forward, and their auras quivered even more than before. It didn’t even warrant saying that hiding wouldn’t make fighting easy for them. If we attacked them where they were, then it’d be a waste of their numbers.

Their commander or leader or whatever understood that much. After the commander sent some sort of signal, the men came out from behind the rocks. And just as we’d heard, while they were all wearing different clothes, the swords in their hands were all the same. To be blunt, their weapons looked just like the ones the Sylvarian military had used during the war, and that was a solid confirmation that these men were employed by Sylvario.

“You there,” said a man who looked to be the bandit leader, looking flummoxed. “What in the world are you thinking?”

*What kind of question is that?* “That I’m gonna beat you guys down and capture you?”

“And that’s why you came forward...? Wait, do you think that you could *win this*? You’re not going to beg us to spare your wife and subordinates, and offer yourself in trade? Not at all?”

Oh, so *that* was why they were confused. They’d foreseen that I would notice them and hypothesized that I’d come forward alone. The goal for Balthazar, Sylvario’s second prince, in all this scheming was to take back this province. With that in mind, it wasn’t completely out of the question for them to have

planned to take me hostage and use me as a bargaining chip in future negotiations or plans.

But if they'd done that, His Highness Prince Alphonse would've thought up a good excuse to restart the war. Odds were that they hadn't even considered that happening at all.

So that was why when I came out and challenged them instead, they wondered what the hell I was doing. *You Sylvarians are still so green.*

"Why would I go and do something as useless as that?" I said, exasperated as I looked them over.

The ones in front of me were the ones who'd been behind the rocks, making up eighteen. The bowmen in the trees, plus their two guards each, were still in place. In total, there were twenty-four men present, less than the thirty projected.

"You don't have nearly enough men to stop me," I said, giving them a grin so wild even I felt it.

With the enemy leader still stunned, still not understanding the kind of fight I was raring to have, I shot forward. The only thing I was thinking of was to go straight and knock 'em out. Just that. And because I was only thinking that, I was fast. As I suddenly picked up speed, the bandits standing in front came within range of my cane in an instant.

"Wha?! B-Block—"

Seemingly having finally come back to his senses, the leader cried out an order, but it was too late. Plus, it was a *bad* order. The men he was giving it to probably hadn't expected anything but "attack" and when to do it. That was why he should've said "charge" or "now" instead. Really, saying anything different in this situation was a bad call.

And for him to order a block? First off, their total confusion at how I was able to see through their ambush would have made them poorly prepared for a block. The leader giving his men an order to defend when they'd all been preparing to attack was seriously inept of him. All he'd do was just confuse the men in front, and just as I thought, his order ended in the poor dude standing

right in front of me receiving a direct hit.

“Yeaaaargh, take this!”

In my forward momentum, I stabbed my cane in front of me. I had stepped forward, digging both my feet into the ground, and used gravity to turn and swing my body with every muscle fully activated. All the power from pushing against the ground went to my back, to my arms, and finally, to the cane in my hand.

And all that weight transformed into power to knock the guy away.

“GUAAAAAARGH?!”

Screaming, the guy flew about three meters, hitting two other men past him to bring them all crashing onto the ground, twitching. From the looks of it, they weren't dead.

This was the third reason I hadn't brought my cudgel: I needed my cane if I wanted to blow away my enemies.

If I tried something like this with a spear, I wouldn't so much as blow my enemies away as I would skewer them, and if I did that, even I wouldn't be able to pull the thing out, so I'd lose my weapon. With my cane, I could change the way I used it to knock my enemies away or damage their insides. I mean, I could do the same with my cudgel, but the weight of the cudgel would make it easier to break bones, and it'd probably sink into the enemy instead of whack them away.

But sending them flying wasn't my goal. I wasn't playing around, after all.

“Huh? Wha, hah?”

Their leader was bewildered, not understanding what had just happened in front of him. He wasn't the only one. The other “bandits” were just as confused. Seeing as no one had shot at me from the trees, it looked like I'd unnerved everyone who saw. I used that time to swing my cane again, and in just an instant, another one, two, three enemies were swept away.

“Okay, who's next?” I asked, baring my canines as I grinned, like a wolf showing its fangs.

I must've looked pretty damn scary, because these grown adults—guys experienced with rough, dirty, violent work if they were hired for something like this—had frozen in place. When I took a step forward, they took two steps back. Not a single one had the guts to come at me. I couldn't blame them. It was just human instinct working.

And that was the secret behind the Special Battalion's ability to win while outnumbered.

First off, there was the general rule that when a group lost ten percent of their forces in a battle, their attack capabilities took a massive hit, and when thirty percent were taken out, they'd usually be devastated, maybe even treating it as complete annihilation. This was due to the fact that at such loss not only would they not be able to count on their unit's battle power anymore, but the remaining soldiers making up the unit wouldn't be able to keep up morale.

To put it bluntly, fear could break their spirits in a way simply killing them wouldn't. It was even easier to break the spirits of people who'd thought they had the upper hand and underestimated us. They wouldn't have ever expected to lose, after all, so they wouldn't have been prepared for the possibility that they could actually die.

And what would happen when they'd suddenly realize they were near death's door? What would they do when faced with the unbelievable fact that they'd just seen a human blown three meters away like it was nothing, while quite clearly being told they were next?

“E-Eeek?!”

My threats had finally sunken in for one man, who screamed and lost his balance. That scream triggered other screamers, or people just point-blank running away from us, so scared they showed their backs to us as they ran.

Having the possibility of death shoved in your face when you weren't ready would, of course, scare any human. And fear was contagious. Without a particularly skilled leader to keep them focused, that contagious fear could cause an entire unit to spiral out of control. And when that happened, numbers meant absolutely nothing. All that was left for us to do was to cut down the



ones left stunned or running.

And *that* was the Special Battalion's methodology.

"Charge!"

The order didn't come from the enemy. It came from me. And at my order, the knights who'd been in hiding attacked the "bandits" running away. They were the other knights sent from the Special Battalion. The three accompanying me out in the open were a front, with the other knights following us from a reasonable distance while keeping themselves hidden.

And so, our strategy had been for me to lure them all out, charge at them, and therefore crush their morale, perfectly priming them for the other knights to come in and cut them down.

"Wh-Wh-What, what in the world... Is this how the 'Black Wolf' hunts?!" the "bandit" leader cried, trembling. While he'd stood there, stunned, we'd split their group in an instant, and before he had a chance to get his head around things, his men had started to flee. He hadn't had the time to get them under control. Poor guy.

And after taking a few more down, I stood in front of that pitiable man.

"What, you didn't know? Wolves hunt in packs."

"In packs... The 'Black Wolf's' pack... You mean the Special Battalion!"

"Yup." As the leader finally figured it out, I smashed him in the head and knocked him out—or at least, I was pretty sure I had just knocked him out.

"Took him long enough to notice. Though the whole point was to not let him," I said, a wry smile on my lips.

This was one of the reasons I didn't try to stop the "Black Wolf" nickname from spreading. With that kind of reputation being public knowledge, we could have someone like me stand out alone—sometimes acting as bait, sometimes as charge commander—able to adapt to different situations before we finally hunted as a group.

And I came out of this battle strategy safe and sound today too. The knights sent from the Special Battalion were used to that, and they didn't let a single

“bandit” get away, either knocking them out or cutting them down. They’d also pulled the archers out of the trees they were hiding in at some point.

*It’s really thanks to the guys’ skills that I get to take it easy.*

“Okay. Let’s get the rest of it done, then.”

Having confirmed that we were basically done with fighting, I started tying up the “bandits” knocked out on the ground.

## Chapter 5: The Lord of Power and the Wife of Wisdom

And so, seeing as we'd been able to capture the majority of the group masquerading as bandits, we sent one person ahead to Stonegaze and had them send some escorts to take the men into custody. We were able to do this because, unlike a carriage, a single man on horseback could travel pretty damn quickly when needed to.

This all had, of course, been arranged with Count Farlon ahead of time. Otherwise, there wouldn't have been any chance they'd send enough carts to bring twenty-ish people back so easily.

"I'm glad you've returned safely... And what a skillful job," the count said when he met us back in town, happy it went well. But his expression was a little bit conflicted. I mean, yeah, the whole plan was done by men from the Special Battalion, with the brigade only being asked to do the cleanup.

"Oh, no, it was all thanks to the brigade being garrisoned here that I was able to act as bait," I said, hyping them up and getting a little bit more of a smile out of him. For someone in his position, and most likely also his personality, staying back at home was probably unbearable for him.

"We kept as many alive as possible, but do you think they'll spit anything out?" I asked him once all of the greetings were out of the way. Seeing as we needed both space and people to question such a big group, I had asked the brigade to handle it for now.

"I don't know if they will have any useful information. It seems that the ones most likely to talk don't know much at all."

"So you think that way too."

Count Farlon had answered with little change in expression, so I nodded back. He must've been used to this sort of case too.

Spies infiltrating other nations were, of course, likely to be caught. This was

why there were typically two types of spies: underlings who didn't know much, and higher-ups who knew things but were drilled not to spit them out. In this case, the guys who'd freaked out and run were probably all underlings, while the leader who'd held his ground was a superior. There was also a chance that the archers who had been in the trees were in on things too.

"Whatever the case, the Kingdom of Sylvario will probably never admit they sent spies, so it doesn't really matter if they talk or not, as long as we get some pretext to work with," I said, fairly unbothered.

"That's a bit... No, His Highness Prince Alphonse might be able to do it, but..."

Count Farlon gave me a forced smile back. It seemed that even the Order of Knights were familiar with His Highness's wiles. Since we'd sent word back to the capital that we'd caught them, we'd probably be getting some sort of orders back soon enough.

"It will most likely take a few days to receive orders from His Highness, so please go ahead with the interrogations for now," I requested.

"Understood. I shall do my best to bring you some good news," the count replied, giving me a firm nod.



*A few days later...*

"They say they *weren't* sent by Sylvario?"

I had come to the brigade garrison after getting a report that they'd got some intel out of the prisoners, but what I was told in the drawing room as soon as I arrived was so unexpected that I ended up repeating it. Count Farlon, who was sitting across from me, had a sour, dubious look on his face.

"Yes. To be specific, they say that they weren't from the Sylvarian military, but were private soldiers employed by a merchant named Gorthuk."

"That's a strange story. Gorthuk is that Sylvarian trader, isn't he?" When I asked for confirmation, I immediately got a nod back.

Gorthuk was a prominent merchant in the Kingdom of Sylvario. He dealt in military supplies like food and arms to the point where he could be called a

purveyor to the royal family. These men, hired by Gorthuk, had slipped inside the province and were making a right mess of things.

“No matter how you think about it, he must be a middleman,” I commented.

“Almost undoubtedly. But we don’t have definite proof.”

“And that’s because the guy who most likely knows something is keeping his mouth shut.”

“Precisely,” Count Farlon confirmed, heaving a sigh. He probably wanted to catch the Sylvarians out. He was a serious guy.

“But just knowing that they were hired by Gorthuk is plenty,” I said lightly.

“Huh?”

Count Farlon looked shocked. I mean, yeah, if one was serious and upright like the count was, that’d be the appropriate response.

“As long as we get a little thread linking them to Sylvario, that’s enough,” I explained. “His Highness is just going to thicken that thread up with half-truths.”

“No, that’s just... Huh? You’re serious?”

He’d tried to play off my statement, but from my face, he was eventually clued in to the fact that I was serious. His Highness was just the sort of person who’d do something like that easily. Actually, I was too, at least in this case.

“We’d actually been doing some investigating into Gorthuk too. He’d been contracted to provide a fair bit of the materials in the war, after all.”

“Oh? So there’s something real here after all?”

Count Farlon’s expression changed when I told him that. There were tons of merchants who would participate in wars, but none of the ones who would help out with plots like this were good guys, especially ones who were so directly involved.

“War means money. There’s a possibility he’s been hooked on it.”

“I see, which is why he lent his own men.”

“The lives of hired help don’t mean much to greedy people, after all.”

As awful as it was, mercenaries and sell-swords were often treated as disposable. And since they were treated as such, they would usually blab pretty easily. With that logic, one could argue that the information one may get from someone trained to keep their mouth shut would most likely have real value.

“So that means that if we get the guy who isn’t talking to speak, then we might learn something interesting,” the count said.

“Yes, it’s just as you’re thinking,” I confirmed. “If it’s quite all right, would you allow me to assist?”

“Really? You would show me the Special Battalion’s interrogation techniques?”

When I put the offer out there, the count seemed quite interested.

Yeah, we were interrogating, not torturing. Probably. Mostly.

“May I study them?” the count asked.

“I’m not sure if they would be of any help to you, but of course.”

The two of us then smiled at each other in a way I could never show Nia.



And so, I arrived at the cell holding the leader of the “bandits.”

“Hey. You’re still looking pretty good.”

“Hmph. What do you want, ‘Black Wolf’?” The leader glared at me, hands and feet bound with chains. It looked like his spirit hadn’t broken, but face-wise he wasn’t looking good, not after a few days without food or drink.

*Now is the right time to approach him.*

“Oh, I came to give our pitiful prisoner a final kindness.”

“What? What are you plotting?”

Instead of answering, I signaled to the knight behind me, who took the lid off of the silver pot in his hands. The moment he did, the appetizing scent of the soup within began wafting through the cell.

“You knew we were nobility when you attacked, which means you’ll all be

hanged sometime soon. I figured I'd give you something good to eat before you go."

"Are you seriously trying to butter me up with a stupid method like that?"

*No way I'd do something that soft*, I thought as I scooped up a spoonful of soup. The man tried to close his mouth tight when he saw that, but I ordered the knight to grab his chin and force it back open.

"Don't worry, it's not poisoned. It's normal, easy-on-the-stomach delicious soup," I said, stuffing the spoon inside of his mouth. The moment I pulled it back out, the knight forced the man's mouth shut again.

He struggled for a moment but stopped immediately after, looking a bit surprised. I saw his throat move as he swallowed.

"I-It really was normal soup...?"

"Yep, perfectly normal soup."

"Oh... Okay?" He nodded back, looking confused before a growl rang out. It was his stomach, and he grimaced in shame when he realized what it was.

"It's understandable that your stomach is growling right now." I nodded, an understanding look on my face.

But that was it.

"Hey," he started.

"What?" I asked back, feigning ignorance.

"No... Huh?"

The man was confused, but he didn't say anything else. But I knew what was going through his mind.

"We're done here."

"What?!"

With those three words from me, the man understood what I was saying.

Yes, I gave him one spoonful of yummy soup that was easy on the stomach. The soup was also made with herbs that would invigorate a stomach that hadn't

eaten in a few days.

Humans were surprisingly good at restricting themselves from things they were never given. A common method of escape during capture was to slowly waste away with your mouth clamped shut. I mean, it wasn't a real escape, but more of an emotional one.

Given all that, what would happen, then, if you were given just a *taste* of what you needed? Simple: Your body, which had been on the verge of giving up, would start to desire sustenance all over again.

"If you tell us what we want to hear, I could probably let you have a bit more."

"Wh—you *bastard*!"

Despite the man's resentful screeching, I stayed totally unruffled. I definitely couldn't let Nia see me doing something like this.

And I probably didn't even need to say this, but it was His Highness Prince Alphonse who devised this torture method—I mean, this interrogation technique. I was pretty sure he was actually the devil.

"Ahh, soup's getting cold. Guess I'll send it back..."

"Wha, whaaaaa?!"

And here I was, one of the devil's lackeys, putting the technique to use. When I died, I was definitely going to hell.

I thought all that while I put this man through the cognitive wringer, and I eventually got him to tell me quite a few things I wanted to hear.



"So Second Prince Balthazar is colluding with Gorthuk..."

Once I was finished sharing all of the information I'd gotten out of the interrogation with Nia, she trailed off, looking troubled. A prince having connections with an arms merchant wasn't that unusual, but it was a whole different story when that merchant actively schemed to make trouble in other countries.



“Gorthuk has been the subject of dubious rumors even before all this happened. He would trigger problems here and there, causing squabbles that would allow him to sell his wares for easy money.”

“Yeah, that’s way past ‘dubious.’ He was acting as a merchant of death,” I commented after Nia’s explanation, frowning.

In war, not only did you need a massive number of people, but you also needed enough food to make sure that those people didn’t starve, as well as enough bedding, tents, and burnable fuel to make sure they didn’t freeze. And even though the nation was the one consuming it all, it wasn’t as if they were getting it for free. Aside from a few exceptions, the country paid for all of this stuff. If you knew just how much cash Sylvario was raking in from trade, you’d know that they would have very little reason to be stingy. If anything, pouring their funds into war supplies could be an actual strategy of theirs.

*Wait.*

“Balthazar, who wants to rack up achievements by solving conflicts, has teamed up with Gorthuk, who profits off of them. In fact, it’s possible that they’re causing conflicts *just* to profit, isn’t it? And if Balthazar was getting some sort of kickback from Gorthuk for it...” I puzzled out.

“I can’t deny that there is a chance that the second prince is using Gorthuk not only in his quest for the throne, but to enrich himself. Though I don’t want to think he’s sunk that low,” Nia said, letting out a small sigh. She’d come to the same conclusion I did. And if our hypothesis was true, then this would mean that a member of the Sylvarian royal family was embezzling from the national coffers. Once money entered the national treasury, members of the royal family were unable to spend that money as they might have wanted to. Most countries drew up proper budgets for their royal families that were put into place after being agreed upon by the council of nobles. Even as the second prince, Balthazar had limits on what he could spend freely.

But on a separate note, it was generally known that military affairs were grossly expensive, and they would become only more so as unexpected circumstances would require an almost literal pouring of more funds from contingency budgets. Which—and this I was realizing quite rapidly—they had

caught on to.

And so they spend money without regard to cost in order to solve a conflict. Gorthuk would sell his military supplies and receive money that way. Balthazar, who made that possible, would get whatever percentage of the profits back. If the prince was using that method to filter cash from the national treasury, it would be difficult for anyone to notice or stop.

If they really *were* doing all of that, then that would mean they'd have set up a system to line their pockets with the citizens' hard-earned tax money all the while making those same people suffer—and die—unnecessarily. Even if Nia had lost any familial feelings for Balthazar long ago, she must not have wanted to believe that someone she was related to by blood could do something that abhorrent. I understood that. What's more, that person was a member of the royal family, someone who should, above all, steward and guide the people. But utterly heartless people could be found anywhere.

"The ceasefire treaty restricted the royal family's personal budget quite a bit, but at the time, Balthazar had barely objected," I commented.

"I would hazard a guess that either he had enough savings that restrictions on his budget wouldn't be an issue, or that he didn't care, since he had...*alternative* streams of income."

I gave her a little nod of agreement, and she sighed again. While we were only working on circumstantial evidence, if I put all this together with what I knew of Balthazar's personality and everything he'd done so far, then I felt there was probably a ninety percent chance we were correct. Hell, it would even make me understand what he'd done.

"If we're right, that would explain why he'd employ such a forceful scheme to take back the territory Sylvario ceded," Nia continued. "The large-scale battle it would trigger would be on entirely another scale to a little regional squabble, and so it would naturally cause Gorthuk to get involved and practically rake in the profit. Balthazar would then receive unimaginable profits too, plus he'd gain a significant advantage in the fight for the throne."

"Yes. I don't think it could be helped that he believed this method would help him kill two birds with one stone, so to speak."

He was nasty. Not the worst, but completely disgusting. I could tell from the look on Nia's face that she was thinking the same thing. I wasn't going to say the guy should, as a royal, only selflessly devote himself to the kingdom. Be it a royal or a plain noble, they could go ahead and make as much profit as they wanted, fairly.

But this was *wrong*. This was just wrong.

"There are things you should do and things you just shouldn't," I said. "Does Balthazar even realize that?"

"Unfortunately, he's always had that side to him. Though I would say that it's probably just gotten significantly worse. Or no, we aren't sure of it yet, so we can't make conclusions," Nia said, giving her head a little shake to put on the brakes.

Hearing Nia verbally restrain herself made me realize that the whole thing was getting me pretty heated too, so I let out a gust of breath at once, a hard exhale. With my kind of background, I wasn't about to start championing justice or anything, but some things still just pissed me off. But anger clouded your judgment, especially the type of broiling anger that could make you lose it entirely.

*Calm down, calm down*, I told myself, dropping my anger into my stomach. Once I was calmer, I took another hard exhale, more or less clearing my head.

"But still, the situation is highly suspicious," I concluded, "since we have no evidence to rule it out."

At the end of all our conjecture, that was most true, and Nia nodded in agreement. For a moment, we were both silent, before Nia lifted her head.

"What we need to think about right now is not what sort of person Balthazar *is*, but what we'll do if our hypothesis proves true or false."

"I see. You're right."

She seemed to have come to terms with things, and I nodded back. The important thing at the moment was to figure out what we were going to do next. Of course, if things went down the way we thought, then things might end with us investigating Balthazar, but this wasn't the time. It wasn't something we

should be thinking about right now.

“First of all, we need to figure out just how soon they’ll realize that their plans to sabotage our supply chain have failed. Then, we need to figure out what they’ll do about that, and in turn what we’ll do about *them*. Either that or decide if we’re going to strike them before that,” Nia began.

“We already know what we’re doing, though, don’t we?” I said. “We’ll figure out how much time we have until they learn what happened, and then how we’re going to use that time, right? I’m sure they aren’t going to just give up, after all.”

“Yes. Even if our hypothesis is wrong, I doubt they would give up on trying to take the territory back.”

“For now, we know that Gorthuk is definitely going to find out within the next few days, since he’s apparently near the border. After that, he would probably have to send word to Balthazar and ask for further orders, but...” I said before trailing off.

What was Balthazar going to do when he learned what happened? What was *Gorthuk* going to do, seeing as he probably knew how Balthazar might react?

“Hold on, is Gorthuk even going to be honest about what happened? From what I’ve heard about Balthazar, he sounds like he would flip his lid and get totally out of control if he learned that he’d failed.”

“Now that you mention it, that’s true. He would definitely shift the blame off of himself and give Gorthuk a tongue-lashing. And, unfortunately for Gorthuk, he wouldn’t be able to go against him, even if it was irrational.”

“And we know what someone crafty would do if that was the case. Most of them would try to gloss over their failure somehow. Which would mean that Gorthuk would be thinking...” I trailed off again, mulling it over.

I knew that Gorthuk was selfish, and that for a merchant to have a reputation, they had to be relatively intelligent. He wouldn’t outright lie and say it went well, since he’d definitely get found out later. If I had to guess, I thought he would probably report that things weren’t going as fast as they hoped in order to buy time, because it was clear that this ploy wasn’t the end of things.

“He’d have enough time for Balthazar to finish hiring mercenaries, probably,” I continued. “That would mean Gorthuk would use that extra time to hire more private troops and retry their scheme. Or, he could send no report at all before doing that. Whatever the case, the chance he tries again is high.”

“Which would mean that the timing of this attempt would change depending on how he decides to react. It unfortunately seems that everything depends on him,” Nia murmured, frowning slightly.

*Cute. Wait, stop that, Ark!*

It was true that if we waited on them, all we could do was just react. That meant that we would have to prepare ourselves for them to come at us at any time, which would necessitate patrols, which would just tire us out physically before doing the same mentally. It would obviously be the much better choice to just go at them on our terms. We’d gone through all the trouble of catching their spies, so it was looking like we might be able to take the initiative instead.

“Then why don’t we try to bait them with something again? They’re greedy, so they’d probably bite.”

“But we’ve already used such top-of-the-line bait with you, Lord Ark...”

I wasn’t going to complain about her calling me bait. I’d said “again” because I was thinking the same. Plus, calling me “top-of-the-line” was sort of a compliment, I suppose, and I’d taken on a similar role a number of times back in the Special Battalion anyway.

“If we were on the battlefield, they would’ve bitten at me being bait a couple of times, but...”

“That may have been because they weren’t able to share information so quickly out on the battlefield... No, wait. I think we might actually have even better bait than you.”

“Nia,” I said slowly. “This better not be you offering yourself up.”

Nia seemed to have had a brilliant idea, so I immediately put my foot down. She was probably just like me, ready to put herself in danger at once if it would help us, which was why I rushed to stop her.

But she shook her head at my reaction. “No, it’s all right. It still isn’t a good time for them to find out about me. I was just thinking that there was even better bait. The only problem is that we would need to ask for His Highness’s permission first...”

“Oh? Looks like things might get pretty large-scale here.”

“Yes. If all goes well, we might even be able to drive Balthazar to move his men sooner. We would need to prepare for that, so I could never do it purely on my own.”

I was relieved to see her talk like that, since it meant that her usual courage had returned. That was why I smiled at her.

“Then let’s hurry up and contact His Highness,” I suggested. “He might even get unreasonably angry with us for not telling him about something so interesting sooner.”

No, he wasn’t the sort of person to say anything unreasonable. He only got that weird with me. Which was fine.

Nia giggled at me. “Then we’ll need to send him a letter as soon as possible. My plan is...”

When I heard what she was thinking, my eyes widened. And then I was absolutely sure of one thing: His Highness would *definitely* go along with this.

## Chapter 6: The “Black Wolf” Opens His Mouth and Waits

*The day after Nia told Ark of her plan...*

“Aha ha ha ha! This is good, this is *great*!”

Inside the office of Prince Alphonse, second prince of the Kingdom of Brigandia, an excited laugh echoed throughout the room. Seeing their master suddenly burst out into laughter, the civil and military officials doing their work around him immediately turned to him, startled. Some of them even clenched their stomachs, as if remembering some past pain.

When the prince made a face like that, it was almost guaranteed to lead to trouble. Not a soul present was ignorant of that, and many were nursing stomachaches because of it. But at the same time, they knew that whatever unreasonable request Alphonse would soon make would almost always lead to something important getting cleaned up, so they could neither run nor deny him. The entire reason they worked there was because of their work ethic and their sense of responsibility.

“What is it, Your Highness? And isn’t that...” one civil official bravely asked, before trailing off. He was usually the first one to do so, seeing as he usually had it better than the military officials, who had to deal with the more physical or material unreasonable requests. Because putting himself out there like this usually ended up with a severe burden being put on him mentally, the military officials would later do things like treat him to booze as a show of gratitude, but whether that would be enough to make, for all intents and purposes, putting one’s neck on the chopping block worth it was still questionable.

Whatever the case, *someone* had to ask.

“Ah, I actually got an urgent message from Ark, asking for permission to execute a plan. Ohh, it’s fun enough that it was Ark of all people to suggest it, but the plan itself is even more entertaining!”

“M-More amusing...? And it’s Lord McGuine suggesting it?”

Alphonse’s explanation came with a wave of the paper in his hand. It was the size that would allow a carrier pigeon to deliver it when the sender needed to make contact urgently, and seeing that, the official was confused. The Ark McGuine that he knew was understanding and smart, but he was the type to follow orders, and he rarely suggested anything himself. The official had also seen him jokingly arguing with the prince on a number of occasions, but seeing as he was more the serious, dependable type, he just couldn’t imagine him suggesting any schemes that would qualify as *entertaining*.

“Your Highness, is it truly from Lord McGuine?”

Alphonse burst out laughing again when he heard that. It wasn’t unreasonable for someone who knew Ark well to doubt that, but after he finished laughing, Alphonse showed the paper again.

“There’s no mistaking it. This is his handwriting. It also doesn’t contain the watchword for when something is wrong, so he wouldn’t have been forced to write it either. The plan was probably from his wife.”

“Ah, the one he married a short time ago. To think she would be someone Your Highness approves of...”

“Yep. I confirmed it when I met her directly, but she’s good. She knows the local situation very well, so it isn’t odd she’d think up something like this.”

“For you to say something like that means there isn’t anything that I should say.”

Alphonse’s response was so confident that the civil official stopped complaining. If the prince, who’d known Ark from their time together in the academy, was saying it, then it must have been true. All that was left for them was to act.

“Apparently they’re sending a letter with the details by horse, so we should get that either tomorrow or the day after. I want to send ‘them’ out with it.”

“There should be no problems with that, but just ‘them’?” the civil official asked for confirmation.



Prince Alphonse gave another amused grin. All he had to do was say one thing, and they'd understand the rest. Most of the people around him were smart. Though you could also say that they *had* to be smart in order for them to be able to work alongside him.

"It would be dangerous for them to be on the road alone, so we'll need to assign them guards. Make me a list of the platoons that I can mobilize. Also, arrange ready transport for the goods they'll need."

The civil official nodded again, and one of the military officials listening immediately began readying the list. Other civil officials exited the office, probably off to check on the goods or arrange transportation.

Seeing his subordinates get to work, Alphonse stood up. "Well then, I should go get permission from my brother, just to be safe."

His smile was very, very amused. And slightly dangerous.



*About a week later, somewhere inside Sylvario's royal palace.*

"Are you *sure* this is true?!"

"Yes, there's no doubt about it!"

A young man, who had been reclining arrogantly just a moment ago, shot to his feet. In front of him was a middle-aged man wringing his hands, answering vigorously. The younger man's high-strung face, framed by the golden hair of the nation's royal family, warped with glee.

"To think that the territory had *mines*. That explains precisely why they wanted it. This is a glorious achievement, Gorthuk!"

"Thank you so very much! I, too, doubted the reports when I first heard them, but when I investigated further, I was able to confirm that mining engineers had arrived in Stonegaze!"

"Hmph. So you did further investigations. Nothing gets past you!"

"Everything was thanks to your guidance and encouragement, Your Highness Prince Balthazar!"

When the middle-aged merchant called Gorthuk toadied up to him, all the much younger Prince Balthazar did was nod in satisfaction.

Had Gorthuk only heard about such things, then he might have been a bit more careful, but he believed everything once he heard about the mining engineers. Said engineers were the “they” that Alphonse had been talking about, but of course, the Sylvarian duo had no way of knowing anything about that. Thanks to this distraction, Balthazar completely forgot to ask about the operations out in Stonegaze, and Gorthuk made sure not to let any of the relief he was feeling show on his face.

The room they were in was deep within the palace, and it was one they frequently used for their secret talks. Balthazar had sent everyone away, so the two of them didn’t bother to hold back their greedy grins.

“If we take back the territory now, then not only will I take the lead in the fight for the crown, but I might be able to claim dominion over the province itself. Then, if I develop the mines myself, I could generate heaps of profit!”

“Exactly! Iron and coal would be fine enough, but imagine the profits if the mines contained gold and silver!”

“With those funds, I could hire even more soldiers. Then, we could invade that horrible Brigandia! Ah, this must be divine providence!”

Balthazar was happily making a rather delusional plan for the future, but there was no one there to admonish him. In fact, Gorthuk being there would only stir him up more, making him spiral out of control.

“You haven’t told anyone else, have you?” Balthazar asked.

“Perish the thought,” Gorthuk said. “I would never speak of this to anyone but you, Your Highness, the future king!”

“What an admirable attitude! When we retake Stonegaze, I will allow you to handle all of the gold and silver that come from the mines!”

Gleeful of the flattery, Balthazar was making generous promises to Gorthuk about the gold and silver trade as if he already had them under ownership. And even though it was just a verbal promise, and not binding, Gorthuk gave him a vulgar smile back.

“Thank you so very much! You’re just as bighearted as I would expect, Your Highness!”

“Ha ha ha, of *course* I am!”

“While it may not be nearly enough for your big heart, I shall share the profits from those sales with you as usual. So please, do continue to do business with me...”

“He he he, Gorthuk, you’re an evil one.”

There wasn’t even a speck of royal dignity in Balthazar’s grin. He was drooling like a beast, completely unaware that the opportunity he was being given was just bait. And Gorthuk was much more of the same.

“But if there are mines, then we’ll need to take control of them before anyone else notices.”

“Yes, exactly. But fear not! I’ve prepared plenty of provisions!”

“How dependable! Then I must quickly gather soldiers and attack!”

Nodding at Gorthuk’s words, Balthazar hurried out of the room to begin preparing to dispatch troops. All of this without saying a word to his older brother the first prince or his still-healthy father the king. If he did, then they would find out about the mines. Either that, or they would talk him into stopping, which was exactly what would happen.

But he was making a fundamental misunderstanding and was rushing into things without anyone correcting him—rushing towards ruin.



“We’ve received a report from Rob,” Nia said. “It appears that they’ve taken the bait.”

“Seriously? That easily?”

We were inside the office of the lord’s manor in Stonegaze. Everything was going swimmingly so far, enough that it was kind of a strange letdown.

Rob, by the way, was the name of the old gardener.

“They’ve fallen for it so easily that I’m a tad worried that it’s an act.”

“Yeah, that happens. I understand how you feel, though.”

I shrugged at Nia’s worry, though not dismissively, and explained myself when she gave me a questioning look.

“People on the offensive never think that they’re going to be attacked. In the same way, people who think they’re going to set someone up never expect that they’re the ones getting set up. Balthazar and his lackey are no exception to this.”

“I see,” Nia said, thoughtful. “Now that you mention it, his personality would make it so that he would most likely just accept what he was told because it would benefit him,” she murmured her thoughts, nodding a few times in understanding before gasping. “No. It might make sense, but we shouldn’t let our guard down. Next time, we might end up falling into the same mentality.”

*And this is what makes Nia and Balthazar so different*, I thought to myself, marveling at Nia’s wisdom. I had just been about to warn her of the same thing, though I’d just be repeating what I’d heard.

“His Highness Prince Alphonse told me the exact same thing,” I replied. “The moment you think that you’ve caught the enemy off guard is when you’re at your most vulnerable.”

“So we shouldn’t dismiss the idea that their reaction could be their own way of luring us into a trap, yes?”

“That’s right. So we need to keep on paying attention to their movements, but in a way that still works for us, just in case they’ve really fallen for our trick,” I said.

“That’s true. It wouldn’t be good if we hesitated too much and did nothing.”

Mentioning His Highness must have made my words all the more believable, because Nia looked somewhat satisfied. When it came to matters of subterfuge, His Highness was rarely wrong. And to think he and I were the same age. Growing up in the gilded pit of noble society must have exposed him to a lot.

Anyway, this got our basic plans out of the way, but...

“But good on Rob, easily getting intel from the inside of Sylvario’s royal palace,” I said, bringing up what I’d been wondering. I knew that it had to be true if Nia was bringing it up, but I wasn’t so sure that I wouldn’t voice some thoughts as to where it came from.

Nia must have known that as well, because she answered without seeming put off. “Yes, apparently the information came from his former coworkers,” she said quite simply.

“Rob’s former coworkers,” I repeated before going silent for a moment. Then, I brought up my question, seeing as it was probably an appropriate time. “Rob’s a gardener, right?”

“Yes, he’s a gardener.”

“Not a garden keeper?”

“Hee hee, aren’t *garden keepers* spies from an eastern country?” Nia replied, her giggle like the ringing of a bell.

It was Nia, so her knowing about that wasn’t unusual. But the fact that she answered without a moment’s delay made me think she might’ve seen through what I was trying to ask.

“I see. So Rob is a gardener, not a garden keeper.”

“Yes. *Rob* is a gardener.”

Hmm. Nia had put some emphasis on Rob’s name. She was probably implying that no matter what he *used* to do, he wanted to be a gardener now. If that was the case, then it’d be rude to keep on prying, both to Nia and to Rob.

“Okay. Rob is a gardener. The information he gets from his contacts just happens to be correct.”

“Yes, that’s a fine way to think of it.”

Nia seemed a little bit relieved when I stopped asking questions. For someone with a past in espionage to be willing to do something as dangerous as reach out to former coworkers for intel, he must be incredibly loyal to Nia and enjoying his life here. It’d be nice if he did. And if that was the case, then as his employer, I wanted to protect both him and his current circumstances.

“But if that’s the case,” I said, “if things with the Sylvarian royal family are so bad that people are willing to forsake them like this, then the intel we’re getting must be pretty accurate.”

“It might be more accurate to say that they’re forsaking the second prince specifically. They must have deduced that his current position and plans for power would only hurt the kingdom in the long run.”

“I see, not good for the ‘kingdom,’ not the ‘royal family,’” I said for confirmation, getting a smile back from Nia. That must’ve meant I was right. “Could it be that the knights are in charge of Sylvario’s spies?”

“There are spies under the command of the knights, yes.”

“Ahh, that’s why. Which means that there are spies under Sir Eisendarque’s command.”

Now things made sense. Sir Eisendarque, the commander of Sylvario’s knights, had given up on the royal family after the mess around Princess Sonia’s disappearance, and since then he had been quietly distancing himself from them. While he had yet to do anything openly, he was apparently also gathering other Sylvarian nobles who’d lost faith in the royal family behind closed doors. This, of course, meant he had probably gotten control of the knights in his own turf, the Order of Knights, before all else... And if the spies were under his influence, then it was likely that they were trustworthy. That was also probably exactly why it was so easy for Rob to get the intel in the first place.

“Well then. I guess now all we need to do is keep an eye on how they move while we prepare for our counterattack. But they’ll probably rush into striking before they’re really ready. It’ll probably happen in a month or less.”

After all, Balthazar had to invade before his brother Elmer, the first prince, even found out what he was planning. Even if it’d be hard to notice Balthazar’s plan thanks to Gorthuk handling the procurement of war supplies, the best they could hope for would be to hide it for a month at the most. Plus, from what we knew about how many mercenaries they’d gathered, they’d probably have enough that by the time they wanted to mobilize, an invasion wouldn’t be out of the question.

“So that’s your estimate, Lord Ark? Do you think we’ll be ready to

counterattack by then?”

“Yes, of course.”

Wise as Nia might have been, she wasn't very familiar with military affairs, and so she trusted what I had to say. That trust made me so happy, and I didn't want to betray it in any way.

“They'll probably be able to scrape up about ten thousand troops, most of whom would be mercenaries. On our end, the brigade Count Farlon leads has about five thousand troops, a mix of knights and foot soldiers. If we put the town of Bigden to use, then we shouldn't have any problems defending against them.”

Even though they were provincial towns, or maybe *because* of it, they had defensive walls that were an order of magnitude better than others. Bigden, being the central town of the province, was no exception to this, and its defenses would have no issue withstanding a siege.

Common knowledge dictated that those attacking a garrisoned force would need to have three to five times the soldiers attacking as the defenders. Things were generally stacked so favorably towards the defending side of a siege that some even stated that ten times the manpower of the defensive side was necessary for an assured victory.

What's more, most of Sylvario's forces would be mercenaries. While their numbers would prove formidable in a standard battle across open space, in a siege they quite honestly weren't all that effective.

A successful siege required loyalty, tenacity, and no small amount of courage, and mercenaries lacked all three of those qualities. You might be able to taunt some of them into charging in by doubting their nerve, but not many were that simpleminded. Those types tended to not last long.

In this case, the employer would want the mercenaries they'd hired to charge in and die for them. But a mercenary would never throw their life away so carelessly, and thus there was already a fundamental disconnect between them. If the employer paid them a hefty amount, perhaps several times their usual fee, some of the more desperate ones might steel themselves for death, but from what we'd heard, Balthazar just wasn't that good.

The only time mercenaries would do well in a siege would be if they did indeed have ten times the troops and proceeded to surround the garrison they were attacking in order to slowly chip away at its defenses. But seeing as they were also in a race against time, Balthazar wouldn't be able to get that many people. This all meant that if things came down to a siege, we'd most likely win, but...

"If we do defend against them that way, it would take quite a toll on the civilian population, wouldn't it?"

"That's our big problem. If we knew things ahead of time, we might have been able to evacuate them all to Stonehunt and Diamoncut, but... That's just not realistic."

Nia looked troubled as she asked, and unfortunately, all I could do was nod as I confirmed her worries.

Bigden wasn't a very large town, but it still had a population of a few thousand people. It would take a great number of men to safely and quickly evacuate that many, but since the brigade would be handling the town's defense, there was no way that they could spare that many soldiers.

"The possibility they might not have enough men for a siege is also troubling," I continued, getting a small nod back from Nia.

As I mentioned before, for a successful siege the attacking force would need three to five times the number of defending troops, but on the flip side of that, there were quite a number of cases where the attacker, not having enough men to do the job, wouldn't go for a siege at all. This was especially true when most of the attackers would be mercenaries; their presence for the sake of sheer numbers made it common in such cases for the defending side to decide to attack themselves.

While mercenaries made their livelihoods out of fighting, it wasn't as if all of them stoically devoted themselves to bettering their skills, so quality-wise they were all over the place. For instance, there might be some who would give even me a run for my money, while there could be others who made you wonder why they even joined in. Most of the latter group would most likely end up dead sooner rather than later, though.



Anyway, unless there was someone within their ranks who was particularly outstanding on the battlefield, it was a general rule that it was the *weakest* members of a troop that had the most influence.

Plus, since they hadn't been trained in fighting in groups, they were probably terrible at reacting to a commander's orders. Squads of mercenaries couldn't pull even slightly difficult tactics; a simple "charge" could be all they could handle, leaving the defense to just stay in place and wait for the fight to come to them. So, while they could somehow overpower regular foot soldiers with their numbers, a unit on horseback could use their mobility to cause upset and deal a huge blow to their fighting power.

"From what I've seen of Count Farlon's skills and his brigade's proficiency, it would be well within our abilities to go on the offensive. But if we did, it would be high risk, high return."

"Of course it would be," Nia said, tone weakening.

It might've been obvious for me, but for a kind woman like Nia, the thought of sending the knights and soldiers out on the offensive to an undefended field battle would be heart-wrenching. As capable as she was, she was still young, so there wasn't much that could be done about that. But she also wanted to avoid risking the safety of the town's citizens in a siege.

"Then what could we do?"

"I'd like to set things up such that a field battle is all we'd need to demolish them."

"Set things up'? What do you mean?"

Nia was shocked at my statement. In response, I gave her the most reliable-looking smile I could muster back. After all, I didn't just see shock in her eyes, but hope as well. And I couldn't call myself a man if I didn't meet her expectations, now could I?

"Actually, I've been thinking of this plan for a while now, but..."

And that was why I told Nia about the idea that I'd been cooking up in secret.



Nia approved of my idea. We barely had enough time to put it into place, but if things went well, its effect would be massive. We couldn't pull it off alone, though. We would absolutely need to work with Count Farlon's brigade. They were the main force here, after all.

And so, I quickly sent a messenger to make an appointment to see the count.

"So Sylvario will attack in about a month..."

Once we were in the reception room and had got most of the greetings out of the way, I started telling him about what Sylvario was doing. He looked worried. I had figured he'd probably be a little skeptical hearing that the country we'd just gone into a ceasefire with was about to attack, but that didn't seem to be the case.

"This must have been what His Highness Prince Alphonse spoke of in his letter..."

"His Highness's letter?"

At his words, I remembered the letter His Highness had had me deliver when I first arrived in Stonegaze. All I had been told about it was that it contained something that would benefit everyone.

"Wait. Did His Highness say that you'd be able to distinguish yourself through military service if you worked with me?"

"Just what I'd expect from His Highness's right-hand man. That's *exactly* what he wrote," Count Farlon confirmed, impressed.

"No, I am definitely not his right-hand man. I'm not *that* close to him yet."

I was pretty sure I was more like one of His Highness's ballistae than his right-hand man. Or maybe just his hound. But I was impressed that His Highness had tempted him with a payoff like that.

Count Farlon was a territory-less count palatine and a higher-up in the Order of Knights. He had enough experience to be sent out near the kingdom's border like this, and on top of that, he was definitely skilled.

So basically, you could say his position was supported by his martial merits and distinctions, but up until recently he'd had no part in the war with Sylvario

we'd just been in. It wasn't like that would have any effect on his standing, but it wouldn't hurt for him to get some more distinctions...

Or wait, maybe he was having troubles? It was completely possible that His Highness understood his situation and made his offer because of it. And the fact that His Highness didn't tell me anything about it was probably his way of telling me to keep my nose out of it. *I should probably stop with this line of thought and go back to business.*

"Let's forget about how His Highness thinks of me. I wanted to have a meeting with you about our counterattack."

"Which would mean that not only do you have information on the enemy, but also a plan against them?"

"Yes, that's correct."

*Count Farlon is sharp. Though I guess he wouldn't survive in the palace if he wasn't*, I thought, keeping my admiration to myself as I shared all of the information that we had so far.

"I see," the count replied after I finished. "With those numbers, we would be more than able to defend against them, but..."

"Yes, the brigade would take heavy losses. And, speaking as the province's lord, we would also be unable to avoid this town taking substantial damage as well."

The count nodded at my statement. Now, we'd established that sitting and doing nothing would be bad for both of us. This meant...

"On the other hand, it would favor us both to get a sweeping victory against them in a field battle."

"That's true, but we would need a plan."

"Which we have. And that plan is..."

Count Farlon didn't jump at my words, instead looking cautious. That was a good attitude to have. He looked to be a well-balanced commander. And if he was, then he'd probably accept my suggestion.

"I see. That is quite a good idea. If we can pull it off, that is."

*Ooh, it looks like he calculated everything in his mind while he was listening.*

When we first met, I'd thought he might be bad at thinking on the fly, but it now looked like he was probably just good at calculating things and planning when given information beforehand. He was probably really serious with his preparations too. That would be why he was bad at things he hadn't prepared for. If that was the case, then it gave me a clear idea of how to support him.

"We can definitely do the preparations. Nia captured the citizens' hearts on our trip a while back."

"I see. Then I should be able to expect great things." He quickly nodded at my explanation. Nia had captured his heart too. I was a bit afraid that she'd done it a little *too* well. "If that's the case, then we'll have to prepare so we can face their attacks without issue."

Count Farlon was also very quick to visualize the plan mentally. My plan was purely the trigger, while his brigade would take the lead on the battlefield. Or rather, I needed them to do so, because even if we got the Sylvarians to fall for it, the brigade would be losing the most blood.

"Basically, you would be stopping a straight charge. Their forces will mainly be composed of mercenaries, so I doubt they'll be able to execute anything more complicated," I explained.

"Then we should prepare simple-to-build anticavalry palisades. They should act as replacement bulwarks."

*Ooh, he's already imagining the flow of battle in his head.*

As I mentioned before, there were all sorts of mercenaries, and their quality was all over the place. They felt next to no loyalty and weren't well trained in fighting in groups, so most of them were slow to follow orders.

For example, it would be incredibly difficult for them to do something like split as they advanced to perform a two-prong attack. To be precise, it wasn't completely impossible, but it would take so long for them to keep pace with each other that it would be next to impossible to time it well.

It would be a different story if they had a unit commander with a lot of charisma, but Balthazar probably didn't have it himself and most likely didn't

have any skilled commanders under his belt. But that was only a guess, so we couldn't let our guard down and would make sure to have a backup plan.

"Do you have plenty of longswords for the foot soldiers?" I asked.

"Of course. I'm sure we could prepare even more if needed."

"And we can have His Highness help us with the expenses for the anticavalry palisades."

Prince Alphonse probably wouldn't refuse if he thought about the effect it would have.

With this, we were going to make it look like a field battle while it was actually a siege, though it would only be for a short time. It would all depend on how quickly those palisades could be built, but we'd just have to trust in Count Farlon and his brigade for that. They'd probably be frantically trying to keep themselves alive, after all.

"All that's left is deciding how the cavalry will be placed and their roles. I'll leave that all to you, Count Farlon."

"I see. So we'll be showing you what we have."

"No, no, I don't mean that at all. Anyway, I'm not that great of a commander."

I quickly shook my head when Count Farlon said that with a daring grin. Honestly, I'd only ever commanded a company before, so I was in no place to say anything about someone commanding an entire brigade. The count probably knew this and was half praising and half teasing me. And him doing that showed that he'd opened up to me a little bit.

"Whatever the case, the use of our cavalry will depend on our opponent."

"That's true. While I believe they'll probably charge straight at us, it will ultimately depend on their formation." I nodded in response to Count Farlon's statement.

Cavalry were more skilled in comparison to foot soldiers and mercenaries, and incomparably faster. Seeing as they were usually knights, their sense of loyalty, morale, and understanding of warfare were also very different. Their strength was in their versatility—how they could aim for an enemy's weakness

and ruin whatever gambit their opponent had planned, along with many other things depending on the situation.

All of this meant that their presence on the battlefield changed drastically based on the skill of who was commanding them, but Count Farlon was well aware of that and probably wouldn't have any issues.

"We'll do our best on our side to gather intelligence for you," I said.

"All right. Seeing as you seem to have quite the wide intelligence network, I won't object to your help."

*Ah, damn. So he noticed that we had a unique network from our conversation, huh.* I couldn't really help it this time, but I'd have to be careful about how I came out with things from now on. My discussion with the count concluded soon after I came to that thought.



*A month after Balthazar took the bait Nia and Ark had laid for him...*

"Bwa hah hah! Those Brigandian hounds might be sly, but there's no chance that they would ever expect us to invade so surreptitiously and so fast!"

Doing his (awful) best to hold back the glee in his tone, Balthazar had quietly gathered his troops inside Brigandia's borders. The troops under his command numbered roughly twelve thousand. The march he would lead was a little bit more than Ark had estimated beforehand.

The fact he'd managed to gather that many mercenaries was nothing to sneeze at. For Balthazar to gather such a hodgepodge of mercenaries to march for him in so little time was as sneaky and fast as he boasted.

Balthazar was by no means incompetent—really, he was skilled. The problem was that more often than not, he used his skills for the wrong reasons and without thinking things through, causing himself and the people around him to suffer.

"It's truly amazing, Your Highness. If we attack now, it will be well within our power to catch them off guard and rout them completely!"

That was why the knight acting as his adjutant was getting carried away.

While the second prince had a bad reputation, upon actually attending to him, the adjutant was able to see for himself that Balthazar was quite skilled and that his confidence could even be perceived as that of a true monarch's. From the knight's more warrior-like standpoint, the first prince Elmer's behavior could only be seen as weak-kneed, which made Balthazar look better in comparison.

All of that together made the man look at the situation too optimistically, seeing no reason to question just how exactly they were able to infiltrate the borders of a nation that had defeated them so soundly in the war.

"The mercenaries are marching so briskly after being touched by your authority. I've never seen such obedient mercenaries!"

"Me neither!"

The other knights, seemingly feeling the same way, kept on piling Balthazar with praise, but they couldn't really be blamed for it.

Normally, mercenaries hired for money had very little loyalty, along with little training on how to march properly, so they couldn't usually manage to march at a measured, slower pace. But these mercenaries were different. They were obediently following Balthazar's orders. And the knights—thoroughly influenced by the prince—didn't think that was strange in the least.

Perhaps the situation could have changed if someone had questioned it, had even investigated it just the smallest bit. But there were any number of reasons to explain the mercenaries' unusual behavior: the guaranteed pay, or, if they were from far away, just wanting to get the job done and leave, for example. And so, from their point of view, everything was going perfectly.

"Ha ha ha, I'm almost scared by my own talent! To think that I could make these classless mercenaries obey me so easily! With this, we'll capture Bigden in the blink of an eye!"

"Yes, beyond a doubt! We'll wipe them out, hands down!"

Thanks to the blatant bootlicking, Balthazar was in a wonderful mood. After all, the knights were half truthful, so he couldn't see through any of it. In the first place, he never even thought to question praise directed at him, because

he considered it all to be *obvious*. And unfortunately, at that moment, the knights at his side truly did believe that he was a master worthy of praise. Regardless of the truth.

And so, Balthazar's army pressed on, with no one to remonstrate with him.

"Bigden should come into view in about two days. In that case..."

Before they knew it, they'd come that close. They couldn't turn back anymore. And it was then that the news arrived.

"I have a report! The Brigandian army has been deployed in our path."

"So they did sniff us out."

Balthazar and his lackeys all looked at each other when they heard the report from the reconnaissance party they'd sent ahead. Then, they smiled.

"Everything is going according to your plan, Your Highness!"

"Ha ha ha, of course it is! I knew they'd try attacking us when they realized our numbers!"

As one of his toadies praised him, Balthazar nodded over and over, pleased with himself. Of course he would be; in his eyes, he could have hired even more mercenaries but had admirably exercised some restraint and refrained. His aim was just as he said: to lure the Brigandians into attacking him first.

Balthazar had thought that a mere provincial town like Bigden wouldn't have the facilities necessary to hold out over a lengthy siege. Yes, "thought," because he didn't look into it at all. If you'd asked any sensible Sylvanian soldier, then they would've just silently stared into the sky.

From the prince's point of view, Bigden wouldn't be able to defend against a siege, so they wouldn't try unless there was a marked difference between the number of troops on either side. He'd invaded on that guess, and since Brigandia had indeed gone on the offensive, of course he would smile.

"I would applaud them for their courage in charging without fear for our numbers, but it seems they didn't even have the brainpower to even calculate their odds!"

"That's right. They should have just given up and handed the town over to



us!”

Balthazar and his group were at the very back of the twelve-thousand-strong army. Not only did Brigandia’s troops look small due to the distance, but all they could see from their horses were rows and rows of their own forces. Perhaps some pity could be given here, for their lack of battlefield experience led them to think their army was bigger than it actually was.

But that was exactly why Balthazar should have had a much more experienced man as his adjutant. But he had distanced himself from the knight commander Count Eisendarque and his skilled military, thinking they were nagging him. And as a result, the only people by his side now were inexperienced bootlickers. That was why there was no one to stop him, or able to move things properly.

“Everyone, our victory is assured! All troops, charge!”

“All troops, charge!”

“All troops, charge!!!”

On Balthazar’s order, the commanders placed here and there repeated it loudly, starting a chain reaction to spread his order to every end of the army. And, as it spread... More and more mercenaries started looking at each other, and nothing more.

“Bah! What are they doing?! This is why I hate mercenaries!” Balthazar cried in annoyance. In his mind, the entire army was supposed to charge at once at his orders. But in reality, they weren’t moving. Or rather, they were moving, but very slowly.

“It’s almost as if they didn’t hear His Highness’s command. Lowborns must have bad hearing,” sighed one of the toady knights, but it was probably the mercenaries who *really* wanted to sigh.

When more than ten thousand humans were marching, it was easy for a single voice to get drowned out. And an army couldn’t actually begin charging until the troops at the front started moving, but since they were the ones farthest from Balthazar and his men, they couldn’t hear him and only started to move once the order had been properly spread. But since Balthazar and

company didn't know that, they just got annoyed.

"They must not understand words. You, blow the charge horn!"

"U-Understood!"

When one of the indignant knights gave the order, a soldier, who had been nearby the entire time yet completely ignored, took out his bugle and blew with all his might. And just as you'd expect from a soldier entrusted with a bugle to relay orders, he had an impressive lung capacity. The strong sound carried all the way to the front lines, and whether it was a matter of them understanding the bugle or the initial order having finally reached them, they began charging with great force.

"Goodness, with these kinds of mercenaries, we'll lose a battle we should have won," Balthazar vented, his mood seemingly now soured. He still thought they would win, even right up until this point. Even though he could see his mercenaries as they charged and Brigandia's army in the distance, it would take him a little while longer to understand what that meant. And that moment arrived relatively soon.

"What? It looks as if the mercenaries are slowing down."

"Yes, it does, doesn't it... What in the world? Were they not well enough trained?"

"No, they shouldn't be. We confirmed that they had at least the bare minimum of training."

When Balthazar first spoke, perplexed, the knights around him all looked confused, offering what observations they could. From what they saw, the mercenaries who had begun to charge at the sound of the horn were suddenly slowing down.

Of course they would. There was a limit to how far a person could attack on foot since a human fully loaded down by heavy armor and weapons could only run so far. If the mercenaries were like Ark, and had trained themselves to run with such a burden, they might have gone farther, but normal soldiers and mercenaries wouldn't push themselves so hard. Orders to charge, therefore, usually came when one was much closer to their target.

But Balthazar, with his lack of experience and high spirits, had given the order while his army was much too far away for their charge to reach the enemy. The reason the mercenaries had looked at each other and had moved so slowly at first was because they were uncertain about the order. But when the horn blew to emphasize it, they could only accept that the order was real.

That was why they charged, half desperate.

Perhaps, if their fighting spirit had been properly stoked for the charge, then they might have made it without losing momentum. But they were only hired mercenaries, so it was rather difficult to make them care about anything other than the job.

Balthazar may have gotten them to march smoothly, but there were two ways to view such a thing. A positive spin would have argued that the mercenaries had mobilized because Balthazar's actions were logical. A negative view—and the more accurate one, in this case—would have stated that not only was Balthazar indifferent and businesslike with his men, he treated them as if they were inferior, giving orders from on high rather than genuinely interacting with them. In doing so, his behavior guaranteed that any single soldier would only do what they were paid to do and no more. The only reasons why they had listened to him, therefore, were because he paid on time and provided enough food.

But that wasn't the only mistake Balthazar and his men had made.

"Now that I think about it, I seem to recall a number of mercenaries coughing and claiming fatigue," one of the toadies murmured, only for all eyes to fall on him. And that was not because they noticed the importance of the reports.

"What?! How could they work as mercenaries if they were so gutless?!"

It was because everyone present thought the same way as the knight who had raised his voice; their fury was completely off the mark.

It was true that, while their progress this time had been done on a tight schedule, they had given their troops plenty of breaks and food to help them recover from their fatigue. You could say that Balthazar was skilled with that sort of thing, and that his toadies were exasperated because they knew that.

But that was also unfortunate. It was because the situation was what it was that they didn't think they were at all at fault. And since they tended to play the blame game rather than take accountability, they also ended up blaming the mercenaries they looked down on.

And that was how they overlooked the fact that there may have been another reason for their troops to feel unwell.

"Goodness! And here we had given them the honor of serving at the lowest rank of our glorious army, only for them to spout the same sort of whining that the farmers here did!" one of the knights harping on the mercenaries said. He had been to the province of Stonegaze back when it had been part of the Kingdom of Sylvario.

Balthazar gave that knight a puzzled look. "Hm? You've been to Stonegaze before?"

"Yes, a few years ago. Back when Your Highness skillfully brought an end to the disputes here."

"Oh yes, that did happen. I see, so that's why you know."

"Your management back then was truly superb, Your Highness!"

"Ha ha ha, of course it was! And you worked well too!"

Balthazar cackled proudly. He made sure not to forget to praise his subordinates as he boasted about his achievements, in order to bask in his belief that he was truly suited to rule. And the knights themselves were playing it up too, so it wasn't much different.

Incidentally, both Balthazar and the knight had half-assed the situation, and it had been Princess Sonia who finally resolved the problem. Though, of course, the two didn't realize that. But you could say it was because of that that they were missing the main point.

The reason why the farmers had claimed to be fatigued was, in fact, because of the area's local endemic, which the mercenaries had ended up catching. If even one of the individuals among their company had been familiar with the area, they would have realized what had happened with their troops immediately. But there was no one. Not one. Because Balthazar stayed away

from those people, calling them hicks.

To Balthazar, not only was he not cognizant of the fact that the area was now enemy territory, but he also was unaware of the true significance of intelligence in a battle.

On the battlefield, the situation was constantly changing, and one had to always be aware of what was happening. That would have been obvious to anyone with a bit of experience, but it is important to again note that he lacked that. That was why he didn't notice and couldn't react.

"It seems that the vanguard has begun to get confused?"

"No, they've suddenly started splitting up."

"Goodness, can they not even advance as a group?!"

In front of their eyes, the vanguard who had lost momentum had begun to lose cohesion. From the perspective of the toadies amusing themselves by disparaging the mercenaries, they could only see it as laziness on the part of the help. But they were laboring under a fundamental misunderstanding. It was, in the first place, difficult to advance as a group. Even soldiers who had strong bonds among each other and as a collective could only pull such a thing off after multiple marching drills. For mercenaries who had been scraped together from all over, it was next to impossible.

Neither Balthazar nor his underling knights realized this. All of the soldiers they had seen had already been through those steady drills.

Things might have been a bit different if they had a commander with both experience and charisma on the front lines, but unfortunately, Balthazar didn't have anyone like that working for him. They wouldn't have followed his orders, and the prince himself hadn't thought at all that he would need someone like that.

Balthazar gave orders, and the people around him listened. The only ones who didn't were those whom the first prince Elmer had influence over. This was why Balthazar had made the mercenaries he'd gathered the main force of his invasion instead of the royal army, which was under Elmer's control. Though, of course, another reason for Balthazar to use mercenaries was because the royal

army hadn't recovered their fighting power after losing so much of it in their loss in the previous war.

And now, Balthazar had been able to march his gathered mercenaries this far without any major problems. Such a thing could arguably be considered a success, which only served to feed his ego and further cloud his vision.

He had the skill to send the necessary people where they needed to go, and he wasn't completely lacking in the aptitude to become a competent strategist. His problem was that he needed a teacher to calmly bash a levelheaded third-person perspective into his brain to make that aptitude bloom, but no one like that had appeared before him. Not only that, but his aptitude as a battlefield tactician was fatally lacking.

"The enemy has begun volleying arrows!"

"Ignore them and keep on charging! The fact that our soldiers have split up is actually to our advantage. It will lessen the effect of their volley!"

In response to the report from a knight watching the battle, Balthazar clucked his tongue and shot out orders.

"The vanguard have made contact with the enemy...! No, they're being wiped out, one after the other!"

"They've finally made contact, and now this?! So they were nothing but lowborn mercenaries in the end!" Balthazar was lamenting with his rage out in the open, but the reality was that everything that was occurring was the result of his orders, which, while technically sound, were only temporary measures poorly suited for actual victory. "S-Send in the knights! Have them reprimand the mercenaries and regain command!"

Balthazar raised his voice, trying to defuse the situation. But this was the moment the battle's outcome was decided.



"Just what I expected from Count Farlon. They're following the battle plan perfectly," I murmured, impressed, from a short distance away.

The foot soldiers had been sent forward to build the anticavalry palisades and

retreated immediately after they finished. Then, the Sylvarian mercenaries charged on in, only to get overrun when their formations were broken. While it might've been easy to explain, getting several thousand foot soldiers to actually accomplish it was an incredible feat. And Count Farlon had done it brilliantly.

"If we mess up now, I could never show my face in front of the count again. I'd be way too humiliated."

"Seriously. What are you gonna do about this, Commander? You've raised the hurdle too high."

"Don't call me Commander. I'm a viscount now. Or wait, I guess I am the captain right now, huh?"

I gave the knight beside me a wry smile as he sassed me. He was one of the members of His Highness Prince Alphonse's Special Battalion that he had sent out to me for this battle, and he had been one of my subordinates from back when I was company commander.

"Shouldn't 'Commander' be fine, then? You're not the type to be a full-on commander, and this is all on a much smaller scale, anyway."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. I wouldn't be able to handle things if there were more people."

I turned as I replied, and my eyes fell on the ten knights in armor, including this guy. I also saw the rows of stiff-faced soldiers lined up behind them. They'd all been equipped with the same spears and shields, but their equipment and physiques were all over the place. They were not Brigandian soldiers.

"Well then. You all can address me as Commander as well."

"My lord, such a thing is impossible!" screeched the man standing at the very front of the line.

He was the leader of the soldiers, but he was a commoner. And, as you might've guessed from his response, he was also one of the citizens of my territory. From his point of view, or rather, from *all* of their points of view, they could never bring themselves to be anything less than totally formal. The proof of that was how the men behind him all nodded, looking like they were about to die. I couldn't blame them; they were all my citizens, after all. But for just this

moment I needed them to loosen up a bit.

*What do I do?*

“Yeah, that’s true. For you guys, I’m your lord,” I said, sounding as understanding as I could be. They all nodded back, so I must have been right. It was good of them as citizens, but I’d need to get their hearts pointing a different way.

“But I’d like for you to forget that fact for the moment. After all!”

I upped the force in my tone before intentionally pausing as I looked at the soldiers. They all looked surprised into silence. But that was for only one or two seconds. Once I paused, their surprise seemed to lessen, and the look in their eyes changed, as if they were waiting for my words.

I didn’t let the opportunity slide, opening my mouth once more. “Right here, right now, we are on the battlefield, where death could come at any moment! But you all knew that! You all *volunteered* for this!”

As my voice rose another level, the soldiers—volunteers—all straightened up. Being a soldier wasn’t their job. They were all volunteers who’d come forward from places Nia and I had visited, like Stonehunt and Diamoncut, as well as Stonegaze.

“Attention!”

At my command, they all stood at attention. That was the product of about a month of training, and really, all they had achieved: the ability to respond to my order immediately and straighten themselves up. But that was enough. As long as they could respond immediately, that was fine.

“And right here, right now, I am not your lord! I am here today to lead you through the vanguard! Something we can do only because of *you*!”

Their eyes had been trembling, but at my words the volunteers started to settle. Strength had returned to their eyes, their faces. And seeing that, I pretended not to notice as I continued speaking.

“You are all brave warriors, acknowledged by Saintess Nia! That is why I can trust you all to watch my back! Because you are *worthy* of that trust!”



Their eyes changed when I mentioned Nia. They all knew of Princess Sonia's achievements. It had also been explained to them that the viscountess was Princess Sonia's best friend, and a Saintess whom the princess had entrusted Stonegaze to.

It was all clever talk. But to them, it had real meaning. They were the kind of people who couldn't let a favor go unpaid, and they dearly wanted to protect their homes.

And there was a reason I was reminding them all of this. Rationally, I could never trust in a citizen's militia with nothing but a month's worth of training behind them. Some of them had served in the military before, but the other half were just normal people with a lot of stamina. Under normal circumstances, they would never be relied on as a fighting force, and normally, I wouldn't dare trust them to support me in battle.

The operative word here was "normally." In this moment, for *this* battle, I needed the abnormal to take precedence. And I was sure I could; their stance, their energy, had clearly changed. But it still weighed on my conscience that they were here at all.

"When I die, you die, and when you die, I die! To hold back in times like this because of things like 'commoners' and 'lords' is unnecessary. No, it is a *burden!*"

I'd thought about getting into all the fancy rhetoric, but decided against it. Simple was best in this case. It wasn't my logic, after all, that they needed to understand.

"We are comrades! Brothers-in-arms who will repel these invaders as one!"

It was that idea that was truly important, truly needed, right now.

They were getting heated up. I could feel something I could only describe as heat coming off of them—tangible proof that I'd wound them up. If they were already feeling this much, then I just needed to give them one more push.

"Remember why you're here! Remember the people you want to protect! Remember the homes you want to save!"

I kept my sentences short and simple to give them ample time to digest what I

was saying. It was common knowledge that people who had something they wanted to protect—and truly understood the weight of that desire—could do extraordinary things.

“What you want to protect, I want to protect! We are comrades!”

“Uooooooooahhhhh!!!”

I spoke just a bit louder, and they roared in reply.

Okay, full disclosure: The first person to roar was someone I had planted in the crowd to do just that. But the others who roared in response did it out of their own free will. They roared with the heat springing forth from their hearts. Now that they’d come this far, all we needed to do was go forward.

The hearts of these volunteers were like charcoal: While they were hard to ignite, once lit, they wouldn’t go out easily. It was because they had that fuel in the depths of their hearts that they volunteered to fight in the first place.

“You’re still just as good at riling people up as ever,” quipped the knight beside me.

“Don’t tease me. This isn’t something I can brag about,” I responded, a bitter smile on my lips. His Highness probably could’ve done it a lot better. I was nowhere near as good. But he wasn’t here. We would’ve actually been in trouble if he was. I was responsible for what happened here, so the role fell to me.

“Just how many of these guys are gonna make it?”

*Don’t say something so ominous! You think that I, as their leader, haven’t thought that exact thing?*

Some people die in battle. It was a simple fact. Which was why...

“All of them,” I said, smiling, to my subordinate’s shock. I must have looked as fierce as a wolf. “I won’t let a single one of my men die, you included. This pointless battle shouldn’t cost even one single man.”

I had no intention of dying either, of course. The Sylvarians couldn’t kill me.

“I’ll remind them what the Black Wolf looks like when he gets serious,” I declared, baring my fangs.

When I took a step forward, the knights around me took one step backwards. Then, they moved to their positions. The knights who'd been sent from the Special Battalion would be commanding the volunteer militia, while I would be the supreme commander.

"All men, fall in! We will begin our advance as planned!" I shouted.

At my order, the volunteer soldiers' faces firmed up. Not tensed.

That's what I needed to see. The lot of them all had good expressions. They were exactly what you'd think of when someone mentioned fighters.

With just a little push, a rabbit could become a lion. But they wouldn't be real lions yet, because their bodies didn't match their hearts. Of course they wouldn't, because unlike hearts, bodies couldn't change so quickly. Although the same could be said about hearts.

But by continually running into walls, and sometimes getting through battles, both hearts and bodies could become strong. Which meant that if they could get through this battle here, they'd probably become quite the reliable lions. That was why I wouldn't let them die. Not a single one of them would die on my watch.

"Don't speak! Move in silence! From now on, the game is how close we can get without being noticed!"

The whole group nodded at my order. We were currently stationed a little ways away from the woodland path that the Sylvanian army was using.

Even if the mercenaries were used to uncultivated land, the fact that such a big army was managing to march along a barely maintained road was shocking. I could understand how Balthazar could get so haughty if he could pull off something like this. And if this was all I saw of him, then I definitely would've thought of changing our plans. But look beyond this feat, and everything else was a complete shitshow.

From what I'd heard of him from Nia, the second prince had next to no experience on the battlefield. To underscore this, the Sylvanian army on the field right now was currently moving with total lifelessness, like they had no brains. Ironically, they'd been able to come this far because of Balthazar's

lopsided abilities. And because he'd shown off those abilities first, no one doubted his orders, and in the end, they were barely able to move on the battlefield.

If he'd brought a commander of Sir Eisendarque's level and actually listened to that person's input, then this situation probably wouldn't have happened. But he wouldn't listen to anyone like that, and in the first place, he wouldn't have invaded at all if they existed. The downfall of Balthazar, the second prince of Sylvario, was set in stone from the moment he decided to invade.

Under my orders, my knights and the volunteer militia moved forward silently, keeping their footsteps as quiet as possible. I expected that of the knights from the Special Battalion, but the volunteers were pretty good themselves. Now that I thought of it, they were used to long hours in the field and treading over mountain paths, so it was understandable that they were steady on their feet. And especially on mountain paths, they would have learned to move in a way that wouldn't startle any wild animals.

Thanks to all of this, we managed to get close without the Sylvarians noticing us.

"Seems like the knights who were guarding their leader have moved up to the front lines."

"So their formations did actually get messed up. They probably got sent up there to force the barrier troops back in line."

With wonderful timing, the knights had run their horses towards the vanguard right before our eyes. If they were going this slow, then they probably couldn't hear the horn orders. They were forced, therefore, to send knights to the front themselves. Mercenaries listening at all was an iffy concept in the first place, not even factoring in the likelihood that the knights might not have the same exact order in mind to get them all together again. No, even if they did, they might not be able to handle them.

"Let's go. Everyone, stay silent until I raise my voice."

The knights commanding the soldiers nodded, and said soldiers followed a second later. They looked a mix of nervous and excited. I couldn't blame them. Right in front of us was a number of soldiers raising Sylvarian flags. Under those

flags, then, would be the army's leader, the second prince Balthazar. If we defeated them, then victory was ours. But if any of the militia let out a war cry in excitement at any point, for example, we'd have big problems.

Telling them to stay silent once more, I ran out from the grove where we'd been hidden. But I wasn't running full tilt off the bat, of course. Even I wouldn't be able to sprint the entire distance between us wearing my armor.

I ran for a bit. Luckily, the entire lot of them were focused on the miserable scene in front of them, so they didn't notice me. It was only once I'd gotten quite a bit closer than I'd thought I would that a soldier looked my way.

"What?! A-An enemy?!"

In response to his voice, a few other soldiers looked. Then, it spread like a wave among them, and they all began looking over towards me.

*This is a good distance. It's time.*

"Everyone, charge! Hit them head-on!" I screamed, running full tilt. Behind me, I could sense the Special Battalion knights and the volunteer militia they were leading begin to run too.

I didn't have time to look, so all I could do was sense their movements. I was running in front of them, and of course, the only people in front of me were enemies. Of course I couldn't look back. And it was because I had nothing but enemies in front of me that I could run with all of my strength and could wield my "wolf fang cudgel" with all of my strength as well.

"Take, thiiiiisssss!"

The soldiers rushed to point their spears our way when we attacked, but their commands were all over the place and entirely uncoordinated.

I charged into them, screaming as I swung my cudgel, and the brutal sound of a crash rang out as the three soldiers I hit were all sent flying backwards into the people behind them.

*Did that feel stronger than usual?*

Whatever the case was, having three full-grown men suddenly flying at you at super fast speeds was too much for even trained soldiers to handle, so a

number of people collapsed to the ground.

“Bwuh?”

One Sylvarian soldier blurted out a goofy confused sound, but I had neither the time to listen nor the obligation to answer. I stepped farther forward and swung my cudgel, sweeping away another group of soldiers, including him. In just two swings, I had put a massive hole in their already thin defenses.

“Now! Everyone follow the captain!”

“U-Uooooooooaarrghhh!”

And that was when, after a short delay, my men charged. Between the uncoordinated, out-of-formation foot soldiers and us, who’d charged in as one, all ready to lay down our lives, it was easier to see what would happen than it was to see a flame ignite in total darkness.

“Wh-What, what’s happening?! Why are we the ones being attacked?!”

When I turned in the direction of that particular shriek, my eyes fell upon an especially conspicuous pale man in fancy armor. He was probably Balthazar, Sylvario’s second prince. So there was only one thing for me to do.

“You must be Sylvario’s second prince, His Highness Prince Balthazar! I am Ark McGuine! I come to feed the Black Wolf’s fangs a feast!”

“Th-The Black Wolf?! You’re saying *you’re* the Black Wolf?!”

Once I had told him my name, Balthazar screeched, very clearly disturbed, causing his already disconcerted foot soldiers to lose even more will to fight.

The Kingdom of Brigandia’s infamous “Black Wolf.” Whether it was because of the rumors His Highness had secretly spread or not, the soldiers were very clearly terrified. I mean, it probably helped that just a moment ago they’d just seen the rumored Black Wolf’s military might displayed right before their eyes. That was exactly why I’d charged ahead first. It had been dangerous, but it let me show my full strength without any worries. And showing that rampage had the effect you were seeing now.

I knew it was a bit weird of me to say this myself, but I didn’t think many people could’ve watched it without getting scared. It might have pumped up

Count Barracuda, but he was more or less an ally. Generally, once a human has felt fear, they're even more vulnerable to being surprised.

“I seek the head of His Highness Prince Balthazar, and only his! But I will show no mercy to those who get in my way! Now, who wants to die next?!” I declared, making sure to sound as dramatic as I could and, for good measure, swinging my wolf fang cudgel once to brashly spray the blood clinging to the tips of its spikes.





Because of its shape and its multitudes of sharp spikes, the wolf fang cudgel was easier to shake blood off of than a regular flat sword. Its shape meant that if you gave it a good swing after smashing some people, it'd automatically whip a wide spray of blood. And that, of course, would probably look pretty damn ghastly. On top of that, I gave their vague fears a clear shape: that they might be next.

“Uwahhh, waahhhhhhhhhh?!”

“E-Eeeeeeeek!”

When one soldier screamed and started running, that set off another one, and then another one, as the soldiers chased after him with faltering footsteps. They were all like the “bandit” group we'd busted before: At heart, none of them were ready to die. The only difference here was that they had only vague concerns about things based on their own observations of how the battle was progressing. When I slammed the clear fear of death in front of them, most of their hearts broke like a twig.

“Wh-What?! Fools, how dare you run?! Protect me! Protect me, or it'll be your heads!”

Balthazar was panicking, trying to stop the soldiers, but they weren't gonna stop just for that. If they stopped, they'd die—that was most likely the prominent thought in half their heads. Most of the other half probably gathered that the prince and his lackeys likely wouldn't be able to catch them, if they did run fearing for their lives. And then there were probably a handful of them who thought this: If the Black Wolf killed Balthazar, then no one would chase them at all.

Those destined for leadership should discipline and hone themselves so that they would never inspire those kinds of thoughts in their subordinates. But it was Balthazar's contempt for that theory that I was currently taking advantage of.

“Now, best resign yourself to these next few moments, Your Highness!”

I'd given our volunteer militia the easy job of chasing down the soldiers who ran, so we were surrounded by chaos. Because of that, when I shouted at him,

he just shook, unable to ride his horse away due to his lack of skill. He'd already looked pretty damn sickly, but now, he was way past regular pale and deep into being as white as a sheet.

His toady knights were still there, but they couldn't handle their panicking horses and hadn't managed to draw their swords. It pissed me off a bit, honestly; it only took this little bit to get them rattled like this?

"S-Stop! I'm... Just who do you think you're threatening?! The noble blood of Sylvario's royal family runs through my veins, and I will be the kingdom's next king..."

I ignored Balthazar as he started to babble, stepping forward. Two knights on horseback moved forward to shield him. But that just made them easier targets.

"Out of the way!" I screamed as I swung my cudgel, slamming it into their horses with an awful, fleshy sound. The horses toppled to their sides, and the knights who fell with him must have fallen wrong, because they twitched a few times before they stopped moving.

I felt bad for the horses, but this was war, and we were on a battlefield. I hoped they'd understand if I gave them a proper burial later.

"Prepare yourself!" I exclaimed.

"E-E-Eeeeeek!"

I charged forward at him with a shout, and he screeched as he leaned backwards. But that wasn't a good thing to do. Whether he'd messed up pulling at the reins or the horse was afraid of me, his horse cried and reared itself up on its hind legs, going wild.

"Uwah, ahhh, ahhhhh?!"

Balthazar, of course, had no skills to calm it with, so he just ended up falling off. When he hit the ground, he must've hit something wrong, because he went completely still. His steed didn't give him even the slightest glance, running away.

"Damn. Did he die? Nah, he's not dead maybe?"

I gave the prince a good once-over. His neck was fine, and wasn't bent at a

weird angle. There was, of course, still a chance he'd hit his head wrong and was gone, but I probably didn't need to check right now.

"Tie Balthazar up! And lower all of Sylvario's flags! We'll show them that we've won!"

When I gave the order, one of the Special Battalion knights started binding Balthazar up with a practiced hand. Beyond them, the volunteer militia surrounded and pinned down the Sylvarian flag bearers who'd held on through the whole mess.

*Looks like even the very bottom members of the Sylvarian army are properly trained soldiers.* My current position reminded me again of the importance of competent leadership—of how so much depended on having a good leader in charge. But this wasn't the time to moon about that sort of stuff, so I threw out some more orders.

"Shout out our victory! We have won!"

"Yeahhhhhhhhhhhh!!!"

"Woooooooooooooh?!"

After the Special Battalion knights showed them an example of what to do, the volunteer militia raised their voices too. At first, they were timid. But as they continued shouting, their voices got more and more assured. And those voices spread to every bit of the battlefield.



"Wha? Wh-Why are the flags being lowered?" a single mercenary muttered, stunned.

He was located near the back of Sylvario's army, in a relatively safe spot. Which was why he saw it: the leading camp lowering its flags. But since the man couldn't see it very well, it was understandable that he was confused.

A lowering of the flags would mean either that the leader of the army—in this case, Balthazar—had been killed or captured, or that they were retreating, which meant that the army would inevitably dissolve. It was crucial in such circumstances for the flag bearers to hold out until the very end, and precisely

why Ark had made targeting them his group's sole concrete goal.

And now, those flags were gone. They'd been lowered. And the mercenaries were fast on their feet at the sight.

"What do we do now?!"

"What *else* would you think we'd do?!"

One of the mercenaries had been asked that question by another shocked one, and he pulled his stiff face into something like a smile in response.

"WE RUNNNNNN!!!"

As soon as one had sped off with a scream, the other mercenaries scrambled to flee.

In the first place, not only had they crossed the sea to get there and were totally unfamiliar with the area, they had also fallen ill to a local endemic and were so exhausted they had to almost literally drag themselves along, and they were in enemy territory with an opponent who'd essentially knocked out their boss in one blow. They were in a pretty hopeless situation.

"Dammit, I never should have come to this country!"

But despite their screams, it was far too late.



"I never thought he would finish things so cleanly..."

Having given the order to pursue the stampeding Sylvanian forces, Count Farlon couldn't help but lament. The Black Wolf hadn't let the perfect opportunity that had arisen during the battle slip by, and he had ended things with a single bite.

"He moved as if he'd read the entire battlefield's flow and breathing," he murmured. "So *this* is the man known as the Black Wolf's sense of smell..."

Count Farlon—a seasoned knight used to the stench of blood—shuddered at the thought.

Those fangs would probably never be pointed his way. But still, he couldn't shake the chill that ran down his spine.

## Chapter 7: After All the Weak Pretenses Were Stripped Away

And so, we managed to repel Sylvario's army with barely any casualties, just as we had originally planned. Things went so well that I was honestly a little scared.

While I'd always known I had a kind of sixth sense for the battlefield—when to advance, when to pull back, and other things like that—things had gone especially well today. I'd also managed to do a better job at supporting and leading my subordinates than I usually did. This all happened despite me not doing much more than what I usually did for a battle.

"It's definitely thanks to Nia, huh," I murmured baselessly as I watched the Special Battalion knights direct the volunteer militia on tying up all of the prisoners we'd taken.

Because I mean, really, the only thing that was different between the last war and today's battle was Nia. I hadn't trained any differently than before; if anything, I was training less these days because of how busy I was. It wouldn't have been odd for my skills to be a little duller with how happily I'd been living lately.

But even so, I was sharp when I was out on the battlefield, and when I spoke to my subordinates, I could sense how much more powerful my voice was than usual. I was certain that, at the level my skills had been before, I would have lost a few soldiers in today's battle. But that didn't happen. My voice carried more than usual, I got my subordinates pumped up for battle, and my orders reached every one of them. I was physically better too—I couldn't remember ever being able to swing my wolf fang cudgel as lightly as I had today. I had probably moved better today than I had ever in my life. And I don't think I could've been blamed for believing that Nia had to be the reason behind it all.

"I wanna see her," I couldn't help but murmur. But hear me out here: Just remembering her face energized me, as tired as I was. Energy surged through

me; I felt like breaking out into a run.

“What’s that sloppy grin for, Commander?” crudely needled one of the Special Battalion knights I was friendly with. But I was feeling magnanimous, so I let it go.

“For your information, this is what someone looks like when they’re basking in joy. You’ve still got a long way to go if you can’t tell the difference.”

“Nah, I don’t think there’s much of a difference between the two at all.”

It was a relief that we could actually have such a silly conversation. While our plan had, of course, been likely to succeed, we had still been outnumbered, and anything could have happened on the battlefield. Even though our targets, Balthazar and his guard, had been awful tactically, they’d still had around the same number of troops as we’d had, if not a bit more.

We had charged right at them, and normally, it would’ve been natural for us to experience some deaths on our side. But I’d been sure that wouldn’t happen. And I’d been right. Not one casualty in my entire troop.

“Well, you’ll learn the difference soon enough.”

We had a future, after all. We’d survived, and we would see tomorrow. We’d been given a “next time.”

“Commander, we did it!”

“We won! We drove them away!”

The volunteer militia were running towards me, having finished either tying up our prisoners or chasing off the soldiers who’d decided to flee. They all had nothing but good expressions on their faces, which was promising.

While they still had a lot to learn, they’d gotten through the thing I’d wanted them to experience the most: surviving on the battlefield. Soldiers who managed that became quite strong. I knew that fact well. All we needed to do now was bring them further along.

“You did great! Just what I expected from the heroes recognized by Saintess Nia!”

When I praised them, they all looked proud. It would be fair to say that we’d

made great military gains here. I wasn't just talking emotionally, but realistically as well; we now had five hundred soldiers with battlefield experience.

If we sent half to Stonehunt and half to Diamoncut, then not only would they probably be able to keep the peace, but in emergencies, they'd come in handy as a legitimate fighting force. Random bandits would be no match for them, and any of the mercenaries who ran away during today's battle probably wouldn't manage to form a gang of more than ten or so people, so the militia would have no problem routing them. If that happened, I was sure that they'd be fine implementing any of the various plans we'd developed.

This all, of course, had been part of His Highness Prince Alphonse's plans. I seriously wasn't sure if he was actually human or not.

Nia was an incredible advisor too, but compared to His Highness, she couldn't stop her kindness from impacting her strategies. His Highness's personality was much more suited to using and discarding people.

But when I thought about it all, Nia had no reason to get any better at that. Nope, not at all. I mean, if she did and became more like His Highness, then my healing refuge by her side would be gone. Our conversations were already mostly about work, after all, so it would be unbearable if they started getting more bloodthirsty too.

*It's so weird. Where did my sweet newlywed life go?*

"Commander? Is something the matter?" one of the volunteer militia soldiers asked me when I accidentally got to thinking too much.

"Huh? Ah, no, I was just a bit lost in thought."

Whoops. Speculation and planning are all well and good, but right now, we needed to celebrate our victory. Good times wouldn't last long, after all.

"Okay! Once we've got all our prisoners bound, let's take 'em to town! After that is our celebratory feast!" I cried.

"Yeahhhh!"

When I shouted that out, everyone around me raised their voices in agreement. Their reaction and timing were a lot more coordinated than they'd

been before the battle. I was planning on having some of the Special Battalion knights stay in the region to lead the militia, so I was glad the vibes were this good, seeing as I wouldn't be around to oversee the militia once they were sent to their postings.

"Man, the booze is gonna taste so good tonight!" chirped a thrilled knight.

"Probably. Make sure you guys get a good taste of it too, all right?" I answered lightly. The drinks they were going to have today were the sweet nectar of victory, so of course it was gonna be good. But I had no idea if I'd be able to get a taste of it. "I've gotta go give my report to His Highness as soon as we arrive, so I won't be able to join you until later."

It was even a bit iffy for me to say "until later," because I had no idea if I'd even get a chance to join in at all. This was because the leader of the Special Battalion, Brigandia's third prince, His Highness Prince Alphonse, was currently in Bigden and chomping at the bit to hear what happened from me. He'd probably be drilling me for hours for all the info he could get, and it was plenty likely that he'd give me my next job before I even had a chance to rest.

Though I wished he could cut me some slack, for the sake of my sweet newlywed life that would commence once all this Sylvario business was finished, I couldn't say no.

"Welcome home, Lord Ark. Bravo on your victory."

Waiting for us when we got back to Bigden was Nia, dressed up a little more than usual. She was beautiful from the get-go, so some nice clothes and a little bit of makeup were enough to shoot her way up to gorgeous. I nearly started staring, entranced, before I frantically got myself back on track.

"Thanks for meeting us here, Nia. This was all thanks to them," I said, gesturing to the knights and volunteer militia waiting behind me.

As an aside, Nia and I had decided beforehand that I would address her more informally when in public. If I, the territory's lord, was too formal with my wife, there was a chance that people would look down on me.

Personally, I thought anyone who would look down on someone for something so small was in the wrong, but some people were just like that, and



trying to change their minds would be a waste of time. That was why we'd decided that I'd talk like this out in public. It might've caused some strife between us later if I suddenly acted so casual, but since we had clearly communicated about this, I was probably okay here.

"Yes, I've heard," Nia said. "You all fought bravely. Just what I had expected from the men who volunteered to rise up and protect their homeland. You are all heroes."

After slowly looking at the militia members that I'd gestured at, Nia gave them a soft smile, one that I would swear was exactly how a saintess was supposed to smile. The militia soldiers all froze when they saw it, as if they'd just been struck by lightning. The Special Battalion knights actually did too. I couldn't fault them for it: Not even the knights would've had someone as beautiful as Nia smile at them before, let alone praise them directly.

"I am so very proud of the way you all fought, and more than anything, of your hearts."

"M-Madam... No, Lady Saintess..."

When Nia said even more, the militia members barely squeaked out responses, absolutely touched. Some of them dropped to their knees in tears, gripping their hands in front of their chests as if they were praying.

*Go Nia.* With that, their loyalty to her was cemented, and they'd probably work themselves to the bone for her from now on. It admittedly felt a little wrong to think about them in that way, but I probably had to get used to that sort of thing.

"It's just as she says, everyone. You've done incredible! I am proud of you as well!" I added in.

"C-Commander..."

When I praised them too, the militia all looked over to me. It'd probably be a good idea for me to say something to capture their hearts on my end too. Not really my kinda thing, but...

"Attention!"

My order was sudden, but everyone went quiet. Their reactions really had gotten better. I was proud of them for that too.

“Repeat after me! We won!”

“W-We won!” they said back.

“*Again!* We won!”

“We won!”

Their first repetition was a bit hesitant, but it looked like their hype won out in the end, because the second time was smooth. This was good. I’d use this to my advantage.

“We won! We protected everyone!” I continued.

“We won! We protected everyone!”

They got even more heated. Was it because saying it again made it feel more real, or had repeating it as a group got them worked up? Maybe it was actually a bit of both. But the one thing I was sure of was that they were pumped, and it was good.

“We did it, dammit!” I shouted.

“We did it, dammit!”

I made the language a bit rougher, but I hope you’ll ignore that. At times like this, swearing made people even more excited. It was just a man thing. Probably.

“We’re the best!”

“We’re the best!”

I got even louder for the last round, and their repetition was completely in sync. Our sense of unity was at an apex. And that felt damn good.

“For our best men, we’ve prepared the best banquet! A banquet to celebrate our triumph! Eat and drink all you want!”

“Whoaaaaaaa! Go Commander!”

The volunteer militia, and even the knights with them, got even more hyped,

chanting “Commander! Commander!” I was pretty sure that meant I’d grabbed their hearts in a different way from Nia.

“You really did an amazing job, Lord Ark,” Nia praised, giving me an appreciative smile as I watched my men head off to the banquet. And that smile was all for me. Just for me. The fact that something as simple as that was enough to give me a sense of superiority probably meant I was a pretty simple guy. But I was happy with that, so whatever.

“Thank you, Nia. Good work on keeping the town settled and getting the banquet ready. Really, thanks.”

“Hee hee, don’t mention it. It’s nothing to thank me for,” Nia said with a shy smile. Then, she got a little mumbly, and continued. “Of course I would support you from behind. I’m your wife, after all.”

The way she said that so bashfully was so good. I really thought my heart was gonna stop.

But that was true. Nia was my *wife*. I couldn’t get used to that, no matter how many times I heard it, but it made me happy to hear every single time I did. I was a lucky guy.

“No, please, let me thank you. It’s because you’re here that I can go to the front lines without worries. I’m a lucky beggar.”

“Lord Ark...”

The words just fell out of my mouth. It was a little bit embarrassing, but it was the truth. Nia must have felt that, because her smile became more gentle, more happy.

“If you’re a lucky beggar, so am I. You’re saying everything I always wished someone would say to me.”

I realized something when she said that to me. The citizens of the towns and villages Nia had visited up until now had probably thanked her. But she had never heard such words from the people she really wanted to hear it from. Worse, they never acknowledged that she’d done anything at all. That was why they didn’t know how much she was worth and tried to marry her off as a hostage.

I might've been a happier man for it, but I couldn't be too happy.

"Then I'll say it a lot more from now on. So much that you'll be sick of hearing it."

"Hee hee, I wonder," Nia said, pinching my sleeve. She didn't grab it or grip it, just pinched it with the very tips of her fingers. *So cute*. But the moment I thought that, she hit me with a follow-up shot. "If you're the one saying it, Lord Ark, I won't ever get sick of it."

I thought my heart was really going to stop. How many times had I thought that so far today? Why did now feel even worse for my heart than being on a battlefield? My heart was thumping loudly, and I could feel the blood rising to my cheeks. This was bad.

"Lord Ark?"

Nia seemed to have noticed that I wasn't saying anything—well, that I couldn't say anything—and looked up at me as she tilted her head to the side. *Cute*. Oh no, she was too cute!

*At this rate, I'll never be able to talk again! Spit something out, Ark!*

"N-No, nothing. Um, I'm just happy you think that way."

The only thing I managed to get out of my mouth was something safe and simple like that. But the fact that I'd only managed that was awful! This was bad. I was getting even more worked up.

"Oh my. If it makes you that happy, then I'll have to say it more and more!"

Nia got another innocent, merciless shot in. *Why was she being so forward?! Wait, she probably didn't even realize!*

I was at the height of my panic when I got an unexpected helping hand.

"Commander Ark! His Highness is calling for you! He would like for the viscountess to come as well!"

His Highness was requesting my report. I mean, it wasn't actually unexpected, or much of a helping hand. But even if I might've thought that way, we couldn't ignore it. And more importantly, his summons had fully popped the little bubble Nia and I were in instantly. Made me a little sad, to be honest.

“A-All right. We’ll be heading there directly!” I responded before turning back to Nia. “I’m sorry, Nia. We need to go speak to His Highness and discuss our next steps.”

“Yes, I understand. There’s also something that only I can do.”

Her demeanor changed in an instant as she schooled her features again. She was really good at that.

But yes, Nia needed to come with me, even though I felt bad about it.

As I swallowed those emotions, the two of us headed for the brigade’s garrison, where His Highness was staying.



“Nice of both of you to come,” His Highness said. “You especially, Ark. Good work.”

We were brought to His Highness’s room as soon as we arrived. It had originally been a guest room made for high-ranking knights to stay when they came to observe the brigade, and it was near Count Farlon’s room so that he could come running in the event that anything happened. It was, of course, surrounded by tons of guard knights, and the windows were made of tougher stuff than usual.

Knowing all that, it was probably appropriate for use by His Highness Prince Alphonse, as the third prince of Brigandia. Unfortunately, the lord’s manor didn’t have a good enough guest room for him to use. I mean, in a pinch, he could’ve slept in my room, which would’ve been the safest option. But I *really* didn’t want that to happen, and I was sure His Highness felt the same.

I mean, we’d slept in a huddle together before back when we were in the capital after boozing it up, but things were much different back then, both in terms of the situation and our respective positions.

“Thank you very much. I am grateful for your praise,” I replied, straightening up and giving him a knight’s salute. Nia followed suit, bowing her head.

Normally, Nia would have had to thank him too since he was speaking to the both of us, but it being wartime as it were, it was better to keep things short.

His Highness would understand plenty.

“And Count Farlon and his brigade did all of the difficult work. I only swooped in to take the best part,” I continued, turning towards Count Farlon—who was currently standing behind His Highness—and saluting him. The count looked shocked for just one moment, before saluting me back. Was it that surprising that I was showing him my gratitude?

“You are too kind,” the count eventually replied. “But we were only able to fight safely because of you and your wife’s strategy and preparation, Sir McGuine. It was thanks to that that we managed to keep our casualties to a minimum.”

“I see. I’m glad to hear that.”

I was truly relieved to hear his response. I knew it wasn’t a very good thing for a noble to be relieved about, but it’d probably be okay for me to say it here.

The whole thing had been a bit of a gamble, to be honest; we’d aimed to create the conditions for the shortest possible confrontation while considering the damage that would be done to the town and how it would affect our future plans against Sylvario. One could think that since the brigade had decided to go in on the gamble as well, any casualties they took would be their own fault, but I didn’t like that kind of thinking. Really, they’d put their lives on the line in agreement with our naive desire to keep the damage to the town to a minimum, so I could never thank them enough. So the fact that they’d kept their own losses to a minimum made me really happy, and Nia was happy as well.

“Don’t worry. We’ll be compensating the families of those who died in battle or were heavily wounded,” His Highness said.

“Thank you very much. While it is our duty to put our lives on the line for our country, I am sure that they would think it was all the more worth it.”

Count Farlon gave a low bow in return. We’d never know for sure whether they would actually be happy about their compensation without going to the next world to ask, but at the very least, it would comfort the people they left behind. It hurt that that was all we could do, but at the same time, I knew I had to accept it.

In battle, it was common knowledge that to save one life meant to risk even more lives. The higher one rose in rank, the more important it became to avoid that pitfall. Both His Highness and Count Farlon knew that fact well, and I needed to get used to it. I just wasn't there yet.

And His Highness wasn't even thinking about that.

"They won't only be given financial compensation, but honors as well," His Highness added. "As heroes who drove away an enemy force twice their number, they've more than earned it."

"While it pains me that that is all we can do for them...that is an honor for us in the military."

"As the one who led them to this victory, rest assured you'll get your share of fame as well," His Highness said with a light smile, getting a troubled smile in reply from the count.

Today's battle would most likely be reported as something like "a brigade led by Count Farlon drove away a Sylvarian force twice its size and captured Sylvario's second prince, all the while taking very few casualties themselves."

I agreed with this and understood it. As I've mentioned a few times, it was Count Farlon's brigade that actually put their safety on the line to pull this all off. It would also be reported that my force of around five hundred people raided Balthazar's group, of course. But my part in this probably wasn't going to be the main topic.

While I and my notorious name amassed fame during the war, that couldn't be said for the Royal Order of Knights. They'd probably do everything they could to spread that this was all thanks to Count Farlon and his men. That'd mean that they'd be given honors according to their merits. And that was just what His Highness Prince Alphonse wanted.

"I assume this is what Your Highness was referring to when promising me fame," concluded Count Farlon.

"Partially. I'd gain nothing from breaking a promise with you. Especially when you're such a skilled man."

"Your Highness, I must request that you not tease me."

“I’m not teasing you. This was all good for me too.”

Count Farlon was incredibly grateful for His Highness’s honest praise. But there was no way that had been all the Smiling Iceberg was after.

“Now, we’ve shown our neighbors that not only does Brigandia’s military have the Black Wolf—the man who can take on a thousand men—but it is filled with strong warriors who can defeat forces even double their size. None of them will be suicidal enough to attack the kingdom for a good while.”

“Which would mean that even if we send most of our forces to annex Sylvario, we won’t have to worry about other nations targeting us while our forces are thinned out,” I said, picking up on His Highness’s logic. “Knowing you, Your Highness, you’ve already prepared to spread these rumors, haven’t you?”

“You know me well, Ark.”

When I exasperatedly quipped at him, His Highness gave me a pleased smile, as if he’d just pulled off a particularly clever prank. But this definitely was nowhere near the right level to be a prank. Count Farlon was completely dumbfounded. Nia was just smiling wryly. This payoff was why His Highness okayed our gamble.

People who listened to rumors wouldn’t care enough to ask about *how* the soldiers were spread out. The rumor that would spread, then, would most likely not be something like “a brigade of six thousand perfectly prepared Brigandian soldiers drove away a force of twelve thousand badly led mercenaries working for Sylvario.” It would be much more exciting to regale the tale of how six thousand Brigandian soldiers repelled a Sylvarian army twelve thousand strong with minimal casualties, especially after said twelve-thousand-strong army refused to learn their lesson and dared to attack us so soon after the war. People would probably be telling the story in bars all over the land, as if they’d seen it all with their own eyes. That was also just about all a drunkard could remember and, subsequently, all that a foreign spy nestled in Brigandia would hear.

“I see. So that is why you wanted to ensure Count Farlon received the credit for this,” Nia said. “Making that official would mean that any skilled spies who might have made their way into the palace would find that the rumors matched



up with what would be discussed when meeting to decide what honors to confer.”

“That’s right. By publicizing that Count Farlon was the leading figure behind our sweeping victory, we’d gain the same effect as if we’d added tens of thousands of guard soldiers to our ranks.”

When Nia piped up, looking half understanding and half impressed, His Highness gave her a proud smile.

*I have a bad feeling about this.* Nia wasn’t studying and absorbing His Highness’s methods for herself, was she? I mean, she had the talent for it, sure, but the possibility was terrifying.

While I was thinking all of that, His Highness suddenly shot me a glare. “You’re not thinking something rude, are you, Ark?”

“Oh, not at all,” I said. “I was just thinking something completely normal.”

“Hmmm? So you think that sort of thought is normal for me, huh?” His Highness continued, lips raising into a smirk.

*Shit, did he really know what I was thinking? No, he’s just trying to spook me. Don’t let it show.*

Those thoughts didn’t take even a second to go through my mind, so I was able to keep a bright smile on my face.

“I see. You’ve grown, Ark.”

“I haven’t the foggiest idea what you’re talking about, Your Highness.” I was pretty sure he saw through my attempts to smooth things over, but I wouldn’t budge. Once I got through this, I’d be able to change the subject. “Anyway! If we want this plan to have any lasting effects, then we need good reason to invade Sylvario. I assume that’s why you called for Nia?”

When I said that, His Highness looked shocked for a moment. It was weird how just that made me feel like I’d accomplished something.

“That’s right. You really *have* grown, Ark. I guess starting a family changes a man.”

I wanted to quip that he should do it too then, but I stopped. If I happened to

step on a land mine related to some sour past relationship, I'd feel bad for subjecting Nia and Count Farlon to what would happen.

"I do feel like, with Nia by my side, that I'm growing every day."

"You can say it now, can't you?"

"Thanks to you, Your Highness. So?"

His Highness nodded, gaze moving over towards Nia. "Viscountess McGuine. There is something I'd like to request from you."

"Understood. Anything you wish."

Nia must have predicted what he was going to ask, because she bowed to him without hesitation.



Having gained Nia's consent, His Highness gave the order to Count Farlon to show the three of us to the cell housing Balthazar, second prince of the Kingdom of Sylvario. This confused the count.

"Your Highness, while I can understand Sir McGuine coming along, why would you need to have the viscountess accompany us as well?" he asked. "I do not believe that it would be appropriate to bring a lady to a place like this."

"You're not really wrong there," His Highness replied. "But there's a reason she needs to be there."

"I see," the count replied. "Understood. I will obey your order."

When His Highness answered like that, Count Farlon didn't seem completely convinced, but he couldn't put up any more resistance against the idea. It probably helped that both Nia and I, her husband, were acting like it was completely normal. He immediately sent one of his subordinates to the jail and another one to gather His Highness's guards. When that was all finished, we headed to the cell.

"Wh-Who are you lot? Do you somehow have business with *me*?!"

Inside the cell was a flustered man who might have been Balthazar. Given the haughty way he was acting and the crest of the Sylvarian royal family engraved

in the armor, it was almost certainly him, but it technically wasn't confirmed yet. At least, publicly.

"A-Are you abusing me like this even knowing that I am Balthazar, second prince of the Kingdom of Sylvario?!" he continued. "Is this how you treat royalty?! Wait, right. I *demand* you treat me in a way befitting my status!"

While I had been skeptical, the guy spilled the beans himself. Did he know he was just tightening the noose around his neck? Nah, probably not.

"I see. Now we have clear reason to hang you for impersonating a member of the royal family," His Highness said.

"What?!"

Oh, His Highness was already using that card. That meant he must've been trying to get Balthazar out of the picture ASAP.

"W-Wait, I really, truly am a member of Sylvario's royal family! I'm the second prince!"

*What is he, a kid?* That was the first thing that ran through my mind when he started panicking even more. And he took His Highness's words at face value too! Was His Highness gauging Balthazar's capacity by his reactions? With what we'd seen so far, it had most likely dropped to an absolute zero.

"You're the one insisting that, aren't you? Oh, that's right. You had the royal family's crest on your armor, but..."

"S-See?! That's proof that I'm—"

"It's a serious crime to forge a crest for the sake of misuse. Maybe we should crucify you upside down instead."

"You're wrong! You've got it *wrong*!"

As His Highness continued to speak so matter-of-factly, Balthazar rushed to object. But it was ridiculously pitiful how clear it was that it was all emotional drivel instead of anything believable.

What Balthazar could have done was argue that no skilled artisan would willingly participate in such a serious crime as forging a royal crest. The armor he'd been wearing was truly grand, a masterpiece that the artisan who made it

would have surely boasted about. There was no sign on the armor that the crest had been roughly engraved after the armor's creation by some backstreet artisan.

There was a chance that there was someone with amazing enough skills to make it in the underbelly of society, but the Special Battalion's intelligence network hadn't found anyone like that, and if they really did have skills that rivaled those of an artisan used by the royal family, there was no way they would ever take such a risky job.

So even though it wasn't completely unbelievable, the man hadn't thought of that. Judging by how he'd acted up until now, Balthazar probably didn't even have a sliver of interest about the armor, who made it, and who purchased it, and he had never had any respect for the artisan's work. It was pretty obvious to see, but to witness it firsthand was something else.

"In the first place, who would believe that a person who attacked a country with an army of mercenaries was a member of the royal family?"

"Wha?! That's because you damned Brigandians exhausted our military!"

"Then why wouldn't you have waited until your military was back up to par? It doesn't make sense."

"Ghh, th-that's because..." Balthazar started arguing before going silent. It seemed even he realized that it wouldn't be a good idea to talk about the antagonism between himself and the first prince, though it might've simply been his pride getting in the way.

"There's a lot more circumstantial evidence that you aren't a royal. How did you even manage to employ this many mercenaries?"

"I-I used my privileges as a member of the royal family!"

When His Highness asked that, Balthazar started frantically explaining everything. The source of his funding and the methods of transportation, such as the boats that he used. He must've understood that his life was on the line, because he told us everything, without noticing that Prince Alphonse had threatened him for that exact reason.

It was a pity. If he'd actually disciplined himself, he might've turned out to be

a great strategist. But whether it was because everyone around him babied him, or his personality, or maybe even both, he'd come this far without building on his abilities. And it had led to this.

"All right, I understand the chronology of how you got all of your soldiers, but what I don't understand is how you got the amount of provisions you would need for them."

"Th-That was simple! There's a merchant named Gorthuk."

Wow. He blabbed that too. From his perspective, it had probably been easy to betray the man whom you could call his accomplice. He even told us where the merchant was currently waiting.

"Have you known Gorthuk very long?"

"I have, but now that I think of it, none of his schemes to make money ever worked out. It was the same thing a while ago."

Balthazar went on to tell us the absolute worst thing he could have. From what Nia had told us, we'd known that he and Gorthuk had probably been working together to drag out the dispute in the provinces so as to profit off of them. But what we hadn't thought of was that the war we'd just had was another one of those moneymaking schemes as well. He seemingly thought nothing of getting another country caught in the mess, nor did he think twice before harming soldiers and the citizens of the area in order to line his own pockets.

I thought my blood was going to boil over, but I got so heated up that my mind was strangely clear. What end would be suitable for this guy?

"I see," His Highness said. "It kind of adds up."

"Right?! So, I—"

"But we can't ignore the possibility that you were simply aware of that information."

"Wh-Why?! You want *more*?!"

While I was thinking violent thoughts, the two princes were still continuing their chat. Actually, Balthazar had seemingly gotten so worried for his safety

that he was blabbing things we hadn't even asked him about. It looked as if he didn't have a single shred of pride as a member of a royal family. But it definitely benefited us.

There was some intel that we'd already known, but the fact that a royal like him was telling it all to us to save his own skin gave it legitimacy, so it would be useful. But emotionally, I had a hard time stomaching the whole thing. It looked like Count Farlon felt the same.

The one I was most worried about was Nia. She had a little smile on her face for some reason, but it made me incredibly concerned. I wanted to say something to her, but I had to stay quiet here.

But that frustrating period finally came to an end.

"You've told us a lot, but that hasn't answered my first question."

"Wh-What? What do you *still* want to know?! Just *tell me*, and I'll tell *you*!"

*Pathetic.* His behavior could only be described as disgraceful, but he still tried to curry favor with His Highness with a condescending attitude. Even when trying to sell us information to save himself, he was still so arrogant. *Ah, I guess this is what unsightliness looks like.*

Inside of me, the cold desire to kill this man was keenly felt. But I wouldn't be the one to wield that blade.

"First of all, why haven't you wondered who *I* am? Really, I have no idea how you didn't notice," His Highness sighed.

After the prince said that, Balthazar took a good look at Prince Alphonse's face for the very first time. This entire conversation up until this point, he hadn't actually looked at His Highness at all. He hadn't tried at all to gather information on his side so he could try to de-escalate the situation. He'd probably never been in a situation where he would have to up until now. I didn't pity him for his position, though.

"Y-Your hair, and eyes... W-Wait, you're a member of Brigandia's royal family?!"

"You finally realized? So do you mean to say you don't even know my name?"

“N-No, I, um... Oh! You’re Alphonse, the third prince!” Balthazar cried, frantically squeezing the answer out of his brain.

He was right. But in a lot of ways, that had been the wrong answer. I mean, first off, he didn’t add a “His Highness” in, even despite the situation he was in. He got that Prince Alphonse was a member of Brigandian royalty, but His Highness’s name hadn’t come to him immediately. That meant that Balthazar hadn’t had any information on His Highness stored in his brain in such a way that he could access it quickly.

*Does this guy not even remember His Highness busting into Sylvario’s palace and doing so much damage?*

It looked like the man hadn’t even thought of basic questions like who to be wary of or who might even show up in sticky situations.

“A man under suspicion of pretending to be a member of Sylvario’s royal family, speaking to *me* so irreverently? You’ve got guts.”

“What?! Y-You still don’t believe me?! Wasn’t what I told you enough?!”

“That’s not for you to decide. Looks like you still don’t realize that I’m in charge here.”

*Urk.* A chill just ran down my spine. I couldn’t blame His Highness, though. Balthazar didn’t know his own capacity and was being an uppity know-it-all. He was the type of person that His Highness hated the most. The only reason he was still alive was the fact that he was still a tiny bit useful, but that usefulness was about to run out.

“Though if I had to say so, there’s one person who *could* know who you are... Viscountess McGuine. Is this man claiming to be Sylvario’s second prince, Balthazar, truly the prince?”

At His Highness’s prompt, Nia, who’d been standing back by my side, stepped forward. Then, with a smile on her face, her and Balthazar’s eyes met. Or at least, they should have.

“Yes, there’s no mistaking it. He is Balthazar, second prince of the Kingdom of Sylvario.”

It was a lot less polite than a mere viscountess should have been talking to another country's prince. Nia wouldn't have made a mistake like that, meaning that she had spoken that way intentionally. But it seemed that Balthazar still didn't understand what he was up against. Even though you could have called it his very last chance.

"Y-You *wretch*! How dare a simple viscountess speak to me like that?!" Balthazar raged.

That was where his fate ran out. Not only Balthazar's, but the Kingdom of Sylvario's as well.

Any trace of warmth left in Nia's eyes as she looked at him disappeared. She kept a smile on her face, but her gaze was so cold that she would have given His Highness a run for his money.

"You don't realize who I am."

"Hah? Why would I?"

That sentence must have been the last bit of mercy Nia was giving him. But even though he got an even better look at her after hearing it, he didn't seem to recognize her. And that was that.

Nia heaved a small sigh. Balthazar had no idea what that meant, and he would never get the chance to.

"If you don't realize, that's fine. We found out everything we needed to know," Nia said with the expression of someone who'd gotten over the situation.

Nia, formerly Sonia, the fourth princess of Sylvario. She'd cut the golden hair that was a sign of the royal family, and dyed it too. But her face hadn't changed at all, and her eyes were the same color as well. But still, Balthazar hadn't recognized her—his biologically related little sister.

I frantically rushed to hold back the rage I felt welling up in my stomach. After all, Nia was the one who would be hurt the most about this, and she wasn't showing her emotions.

"Thank you, Viscountess McGuine. Now we know that he's actually the real



deal.”

When His Highness said that, Balthazar was clearly relieved. He had no idea he’d just opened the gates of hell.

“That means that, despite Sylvario having just come to a truce with Brigandia, a Sylvarian royal himself led an army to try to invade our kingdom without a declaration of war.”

“Huh?”

He must’ve thought he’d been saved. Balthazar had a dumbass look on his face when he heard those fatal words a sentence later.

First of all, attacking a country without declaring war was a faux pas, one highly disapproved of. While you might think that war didn’t have rules, there were still some unwritten ones. One of them being, war must be declared before hostilities are to begin.

While it was somewhat unlucky for Balthazar, the war between Sylvario and Brigandia had started because of a regional dispute boiling over, and it had been gradual. Because of that, it had been acceptable for there not to be a formal declaration of war, but that wasn’t usually how it worked.

To be particular, Balthazar’s invasion should have been preceded by a declaration because it was decided unilaterally. But he hadn’t declared it. All because he didn’t want it to come out publicly and have people like the first prince Elmer object. And in the end, he’d driven the Kingdom of Sylvario into a situation where they couldn’t complain about anything that would happen to them now and moving forward.

“Thank you, Prince Balthazar. Because of you, we can do whatever we want.”

“WH-WHAAAA?!”

As Balthazar screeched unintelligibly, His Highness Prince Alphonse gave him an amused smile, with eyes cold as ice. This had probably played out exactly how His Highness had planned it. And Nia had helped it along perfectly... Though I wasn’t happy about what happened.

“I’ll let you live. You still have a little use left in you, after all,” His Highness

said coldly.

Balthazar couldn't even put together a response anymore, mouth just opening and closing. Prince Alphonse only gave him a single glance before turning and leaving. Nia and I followed behind him, with Count Farlon a step behind as we all turned our back on Sylvario's prince. The last thing I saw was Balthazar's face warped, white as a sheet, and I immediately brushed it from my memory.



We returned to His Highness's room, and despite his plan going perfectly, His Highness looked quite conflicted about it all. Count Farlon as well had a look on his face like he wanted to say something, but he was quiet instead, even though I was sure he had noticed something.

This was yet another moment where I had to count my blessings for having such people in my life. But at the same time, I knew I couldn't just rely on them all the time.

"Ark, you can head on home for today," said His Highness, perfectly polite, while his eyes practically spat at me to get going already. It was yet another example of how different he and Balthazar were.

It raised the question: Just how delusional was that guy in thinking he could invade us? But he didn't matter anymore.

"Thank you for your concern. I will take you up on your offer and bring my wife home to rest."

"Um, Lord Ark, I'm fine."

While I agreed with His Highness, Nia actually objected, though hesitantly. She was so brave. But, no, because of this, I couldn't rely on her courage.

"Nia. His Highness and I always let our soldiers get as much rest as they need. If they didn't, then they wouldn't be able to fight at their fullest. Part of a fighter's duty is to rest," I said as gently, but still firmly, as possible.

What sort of expression was I making right now? I was trying to give her a kind look, but I wasn't sure if I was able to manage it. There was no way I could

stay calm when the person I loved was hurt, but I absolutely couldn't let Nia see that. She hurt the most, after all.

"I understand. If you say so..."

Nia didn't continue speaking after that. There was no logical way for her to object, after all. And plus, she couldn't say any more than that in front of His Highness and Count Farlon. That was exactly why I wanted to get her home, quickly.

Nia had fought. Even if she hadn't realized it herself, she'd always been fighting. And that fight had just now come to a definite end. Against her fully blood-related brother, at that. I knew it would happen, but the ending was brutal. And I didn't mean the fact that his fate had been sealed—I had already known that would happen. I even knew that Nia would hurt from this. But even so, she *did* get hurt, and that was, of course, painful.

If this had been me getting physically injured, I could've taken it no problem. But I couldn't handle Nia hurting emotionally. And if I felt like that, then just how bad was it for her? I didn't know. And it was exactly because I didn't know that I wanted to do all that I could. I was certain that I wasn't worrying over nothing.

Nia swayed suddenly, and I rushed to support her.

"My apologies, Your Highness," I said. "It seems she's quite exhausted."

"All right. Don't worry about etiquette. Just get her home quickly."

When I spoke again, His Highness responded immediately. Just what I expected from him, but...

"I'm sorry," he said, in a murmur.

That was it. What was the difference between a devil who understood the hearts of humans and a devil with the heart of one? I didn't know. And when I looked at His Highness, I was even less sure.

That was why I couldn't resent him, even though I would probably feel a bit better if I did. This was the reason I bared my fangs; if I could do away with all this, in the way I knew how, then things would be better—for both His Highness

and Nia. That was just about what I could do.

My body would heal. A bit of recklessness wouldn't hurt me much, and it was unlikely I'd take a fatal hit. In some ways, the human body was a lot harder than the human heart.

And that was why I smiled.

"What are you saying, Your Highness? There's an even bigger job waiting for us from now on."

I said it in a bright and intentionally lighthearted manner.

The real fight was now. From this point on, we would be taking down the Kingdom of Sylvario. It was a given that a lot of lives would be lost for that sake. It wasn't something that we should welcome, of course, but it was a lot more preferable than letting Sylvario grow out of control, that was for sure.

And honestly, more than anything, conquering Sylvario would free Nia from whatever was holding her back. All it would take was some emotional damage, either large or small. Even if that was the case, I wanted to believe that freeing her would lead to a better future than she would have had otherwise, and I swore to myself, deep in my heart, that I would make that future happen.

"Well then. We'll be leaving now," I announced, before supporting Nia as we walked out of the room. I pretended I didn't see the look on His Highness's face.



After that, we headed straight back to the lord's manor instead of joining in on the victory banquet. We had planned to attend originally, but it just wasn't in the cards now.

On the carriage ride home, Nia was quieter than usual. The expression on her face was a little sullen, but that was just her outside appearance. How was she mentally? Unfortunately, I didn't know that much.

"It's really not something you need to worry about, Lord Ark," Nia said once I'd had Laura prepare some tea and sat her down at the table.

But unlike usual, I didn't take her words at face value. I stared right into her eyes from across the table, and she stared right back. Then, she let out a little

laugh.

“It’s always like this with you, Lord Ark. You look at me. And that makes me so happy.”

“If this is enough to make you happy, then I’ll look at you all you want,” I replied, eyes still locked on hers. The words sounded a little pretentious, but they were how I really felt, so I hope you’ll forgive that.

It must have been funny or something, because Nia laughed, her expression lacking the usual sparkle and pluck.

“I have you, someone who will say such things just like that. And I have Laura and Tom. I thought that was all I needed.”

After saying that much, Nia went silent. Her gaze fell to the cup in her hands. It almost seemed as if she were searching for some sign in the steam rising from her tea.

That was why I waited silently. She’d continue once she found the words. And I was right; a few moments later, she spoke again.

“I’d known all along that to him, I wasn’t family. I knew that,” Nia said, before heaving a little sigh. “But being proved right all over again just has me overwhelmed. It’s like I’m exhausted...”

“Nia, that’s...”

What should I say?

Nia had left the home country that had snubbed her, throwing away both her name and status. She had actively taken part in our plan to take over Sylvario, and to that end had provided us with a number of strategies for doing so. But I guessed that deep in her heart, she’d still been unable to throw away her feelings towards her family.

Just as I thought that, Nia shook her head a little at me.

“No, it’s not like I feel guilty about driving my family towards ruin. I just feel *tired*,” she continued, holding a hand to her chest as she looked downwards. Then, she went silent again, almost as if she were having an internal heart-to-heart.

When I saw her like that, a thought flashed in my mind.

“You might not have noticed how tired you were,” I said.

“Not have noticed?” Nia parroted my words back, a look of surprise on her face.

“Haven’t you been really tense this entire time? Throwing away everything and coming to an unfamiliar country, and then working to take revenge on your own homeland. Or no, maybe you’ve been tense since even before that.” As the guesses came from my mouth, it felt as if all of the puzzle pieces I had gathered inside of me were coming together.

Now that I was thinking about it, no matter how brilliant she was, she was still a teenage girl. There was no way someone her age could travel to the territories to try to help the residents there, and then return to the palace and hide what they had done from almost everyone *without* being tense.

“You relaxed. It happens to me too. The moment I let go of the energy that keeps me going when I run wild, I suddenly feel completely exhausted. It’s happened to me a bunch of times.”

I was sure that it had been necessary for Nia not to notice her exhaustion. She’d been running all of this time. She’d had no other choice.

She’d also probably *wanted* to run too. If she’d done all she did for the province of Stonegaze purely out of duty, then the citizens of Stonegaze wouldn’t have supported her as much as they do now.

She was in a position where she had to keep on running, and she had both the skill and the will to do so. But she was still a young girl, and at some point, she’d get out of breath.

I stood from my chair and knelt beside her.

“Lord Ark...?”

“We achieved one of our biggest goals in this battle. Of course you’d feel spent after. And I’m happy that you do,” I said, taking her hand.

It was small. Her usual maturity made it easy to forget, but it was a young, pale hand, just what you’d expect someone her age to have. It had gone

through more hardships than you'd expect the hand of a former royal to have, but... No. Because of that, I found it all the more precious.

"You're happy...?"

"Yes. It means you're feeling like you can relax. And if that's because it's with me, then nothing could make me happier."

If Nia, who'd always put on a bold front in order to survive, was able to relax in front of me—if she could, in a way, feel comfortable enough to put her heart in my hands—then nothing would thrill me more as a man.

I would definitely protect Nia. That was why I wanted her to rest. And I put all those feelings into the kiss I placed on the back of her hand.

"Nia."

"...Yes?"

"You did great coming this far. And it was because you'd done your best until now that we managed to catch Balthazar today without many casualties. This is *your* achievement, Nia."

"My achievement..."

"That's right."

It *was* an achievement—a glorious one. But while the guys would've been pumped to be told that, judging from how Nia looked right now, she'd react a bit differently.

What did she want to hear? With that question in mind, the following words came out naturally.

"It's okay for you to rest now," I said. "Relax, and leave the rest of it to me and His Highness."

No matter what she did, no one had ever acknowledged Nia. If that was the reason she couldn't relax and leave anything to others, then I wanted to tell her that it was different now—that it was okay to rely on me. Sure, her battle was far from over, but just for now she could take a break. I poured those feelings into my words.

Nia went silent at my words, a single tear slipping from her eyes.

“Is it really okay?” she asked. “I’m not so used to depending on other people.”

“Of course it is. Really, I’m always the one relying on you. So please, let me act cool, at least right now,” I said a bit jokingly, getting a tiny smile from Nia.

I was glad. A little relieved. And that was bad.

“But, Lord Ark, um. You’re *always* cool, you know?”

“Nnghh!”

Nia’s unexpected statement did a critical hit on the soft bits of my heart.

*Come on, Ark, stay strong! We can’t get flustered like we always do! It’s times like this that we need to be cool! What would we do if we can’t manage it?!*

I did my best to not let my emotions rise to my face as I scolded myself.

“Hearing you say that makes it all worth it. I’ll have to try harder to make you think I’m even cooler.”

“I might be in a bit of trouble, then. If you got any cooler, I don’t think my heart could take it.”

“Nggghghhhh!”

This was bad. I thought I was on the verge of a heart attack.

She hit hard—the gap between her usual look and the fleeting, shy look on her face right now made her usual destructive power significantly magnified. At this rate, my heart was the one that wasn’t gonna survive!

“I would be in trouble, then. So please, just take it easy and rest for tonight.”

“Okay, I will.”

The soft smile on her face made my heart rate spike even higher. Her power was off the charts. I was seriously in trouble!

I frantically tried to repress the panic in my heart. *I am an adult. I am a gentleman. I am an adult. I am a gentleman.* I repeated that inside my mind as I spoke. “Good. That’s a relief. I’ll be heading back to meet with His Highness and the count now, then.”



“Okay. See you later. Um, Lord Ark?”

I had stood up and was just about to ask Laura to take care of Nia when the former princess stopped me. I looked at her, wondering what she needed, and she smiled.

“I’m glad that you found me. I’m glad that I can be by your side.”

“N-Nia?”

Wait, this was not a good time for her to say that. It was really bad! But of course, I couldn’t put my wussy feelings into words. Which meant that Nia continued speaking without pause.

“I’m sure that meeting you must have been fate. I understand that now, and I’m really happy.”

“Nggghghhhghhh!”

I stopped breathing. My heart barely managed to withstand the hit. But I was at my limit. I couldn’t take any more! I was absolutely thrilled, but my heart just couldn’t take another hit!

“Thank you, Nia. I’m happy too, you know,” I managed to say.

“Hee hee, I’m glad. So this is what happiness feels like,” Nia said, smiling again.

*Ahh. Damn.* I was really at my limit.

“Yes, it must be. And I’ll be leaving so I can protect that happiness.”

“All right. See you later, Lord Ark. I’ll be waiting for you to come home.”

“No, don’t wait. Please go to sleep.”

We gave each other another smile, and I walked out of Nia’s room. Then, I took a few steps before suddenly gripping my face in my hands. The moment I did, the tears started overflowing.

Nia said she was happy. She really said it. She’d come to the point where she could. That made me so overjoyed that I couldn’t handle it.

I hope you’ll forgive me for being thrilled that at my side she felt even a bit happy. I couldn’t help being selfish like that. But I was so glad that I didn’t even

care. I was just so *happy*.

I did all that I could to stop my feelings from coming out vocally, which turned them into sobs instead, but I managed to keep myself quiet. It would have been beyond humiliating if Nia overheard me. And, knowing her, she'd worry about me. I'd feel too bad if I worried her over something like this. I wouldn't be cool at all if she did. And I really wanted to be cool.

"Here, Master," said Tom as he appeared out of nowhere with a cool, damp towel, which I gratefully accepted. The cool cloth felt nice on my heated eyes, and it calmed me a little bit.

"Thanks, Tom. You're good."

"Oh, no. This is nothing."

That was all he said when I thanked him. He didn't say anything else unnecessary. He really was good at what he did, and a good guy to boot. I belatedly felt just how much he had helped me—on multiple fronts.

"Tom. I'm really glad you, no, that *all* of you, are here."

"What are you saying all of the sudden, Master?"

His reaction sounded exasperated, but that was truly how I felt.

Tom supported me like he was doing now, and I could leave Nia, who needed to rest, safely in Laura's hands. It wasn't just them. Every servant in the manor was someone I could rely on. I was really blessed.

Which was why I couldn't let go of this blessing. I had to protect it.

"Sorry, but I need you to send word that I'll be heading back to the garrison."

"Understood." As soon as he answered, Tom spun around and headed outside.

*Now. I gotta do something about my face.*

If I showed up looking so miserable, His Highness would never let me live it down. And most importantly, I couldn't decide what we'd do with Balthazar looking like this.

"Don't think you're gonna get off that easily," I muttered without consciously

deciding to do so.

He was the mastermind behind everything. For his own selfish reasons, he'd sown mayhem everywhere, going as far as to attack Brigandia again; in doing so, caused massive amounts of damage. We might've kept the casualties in my troop to a minimum, but some soldiers had still died. Plus, we didn't even know how many of the mercenaries he'd hired had lost their lives. We had no pity to spare on someone like him.

But. I couldn't let Nia decide his fate, his punishment. I couldn't let her be there. It was my job to dirty my hands, and His Highness's job to order me to.

"Get ready, you bastard."

With that, I headed back to my own bedroom to get myself ready for what was next.



"Now, Madam, please lie down here."

"Thank you, Laura."

After Ark had left, Laura got Nia changed and into bed. Then, Laura scolded herself. Why? Because Ark was correct. Nia *was* exhausted.

It wasn't the physical kind of exhaustion. Laura and the other servants put all their effort into caring for her every single day, after all. So the exhaustion was purely mental. And, in what she could only think of as failure...Laura hadn't noticed.

It went without saying that Laura had known Nia for much longer than Ark had. But she hadn't noticed. And maybe that was the cause of her ignorance. She knew how strong Nia was because she was with her 24/7. And it was because she was so close to her mistress that Laura hadn't noticed.

Yet, Ark—who had yet to even share a bed with Nia after marrying her and had kept a certain distance from her—noticed. How ironic could it have been if he had noticed *because* of the distance between them.

"That useless man isn't completely useless, huh," Laura mumbled to herself.

"Huh? Did you say something, Laura?"

The disrespectful words for her employer had slipped out of her mouth, but Nia, who looked like she could have drifted off at any moment, didn't hear. Laura was relieved. After all, Nia was head over heels for Ark. And manners were necessary in close relationships as well. No matter how snippy Laura could get, there were lines that she should never cross, though at times she jumped right over them without thinking.

"No, I didn't say anything. Relax and sleep, Madam."

"All right. I'm sorry. I will."

When Laura said that, Nia gave an obedient nod before giggling.

"Madam?"

"Oh, it's nothing. I was just thinking that I truly am tired. Lord Ark was right."

Just as she said, Nia's eyelids looked as if they could close any moment. Judging from how sleepy she was, she really must have been tired.

That fact was out in the open, and now she could rest when she needed to rest. That was all thanks to Laura's employer, Ark McGuine. The fact made her jealous, but also, just a little bit... A little tiny bit happy. It seemed that the mistress she adored had met someone that the maid could truly trust her with. Incredibly, unfortunately. Regrettably.

As hardheaded as Laura was about Nia, she couldn't do much but accept that as fact.

"Just as the master said, you've been working hard this whole time," Laura said. "No one will fault you for taking a little rest."

Laura held back the words "though it pisses me off." The words were, of course, because Ark had been right. They were also a bit at herself.

The maid really did want her mistress to rest well. When she thought over all she'd been through, it would have been perfectly understandable for Nia to take it easy for several years. And Ark, who was smitten with her, probably would have allowed it, because he recognized how hard her mistress had worked.

While that was another thing that pissed Laura off, the maid couldn't admit

that out loud.

“You’re right. I’ll rest a bit. After all, the real fight is next,” Nia murmured with a sigh.

This was why Laura couldn’t tell her mistress to rest for a long, long while; she actually couldn’t. Next up was the main act. They’d come to a point where they couldn’t go back. They couldn’t run. The situation, her position, everything else.

If that was the case, Nia would probably stand and fight. Really, she would probably be ashamed at the idea of not fighting. She might regret it for her whole life. Laura knew that, so she didn’t stop her.

“We’ve finally come this far,” Laura said.

“Yes... Finally, we’re here.”

Nia didn’t sound like she had any regrets about what had happened; she must have prepared herself for this long ago. While she might not have known when it would come, she had known that it absolutely would.

“And it’s all thanks to Lord Ark.”

“...You’re right. It is all thanks to the master.”

As much as it bothered her, Laura couldn’t do anything but admit that their meeting Ark had been what decided things, and that really, meeting him had been an act of fate. Had Ark just been a man using Nia to conquer Sylvario, then the maid could have thought otherwise, but the fact that he wasn’t was another annoying thing about him.

“And that very same master was the one who told you to rest, so make sure you get that rest tonight.”

“Yes, you’re right,” Nia mumbled. “We’ll be busy from tomorrow on, after all.”

Balthazar’s fate would surely be decided overnight. Whether they killed him or let him live to be useful, Prince Alphonse would never let this opportunity go to waste.

“Luckily for us, we didn’t lose many soldiers, and we kept their fatigue to a minimum. We could even start our counterattack tomorrow,” Nia said, her

mind starting to plan ahead.

“Stop right there, Madam,” Laura said firmly. “Resting doesn’t just mean lying still.”

What would happen from tomorrow onwards? It had been clear that Nia’s mind was starting to speculate on all of that, and so Laura had put a stop to it.

“What will you do if all of that thinking gives you a fever?” Laura said. “Though I won’t stop you if you *want* to worry the master.”

“N-No, I wasn’t thinking that at all! Though it might not be half bad...?”

At Nia’s words, one thought rose in Laura’s mind: *She has it bad.*

While she hadn’t really wanted to ever see her mistress be like this, a part of her was also thankful that there was someone who made Nia act this way.

Nia was still a girl, after all. Laura could still remember Nia saying that with a bashful smile on the day they had met him, after Ark had left in a tizzy. Looking back, she thought that might have been a clue that things would inevitably end like this.

“All right, all right. Stop saying silly things and get some proper rest.”

“Okaaaay.”

Laura gave Nia a tiny pat on the forehead, and Nia closed her eyes without resisting. As Laura watched her mistress’s face, wondering if she’d finally go to sleep...

“Laura?”

“Yes, Madam?”

“Thank you too. If you hadn’t been with me, I never would have made it this far.”

“Madam...”

The maid went silent at the unexpected thanks. And in that short moment, Nia’s breathing became regular as she finally drifted off to sleep. She really must have been exhausted. Laura gazed at her mistress’s sleeping face.

“That’s what I should be saying,” she murmured softly, not wanting to wake

Nia, a conflicted look on her face.



“Is your wife all right?”

“Yes, she doesn’t have a fever. But she is mentally exhausted.”

That was the first thing His Highness asked the moment I returned to his room in the garrison. I was a bit relieved. It made me feel like he really had let Nia into his inner circle. That meant that she would become someone this cruel, blackhearted prince would protect. If that was the case, then there was nothing for me to fear.

“Well then. Let’s get to taking down Sylvario!”

“While I’d like to tell you you’re getting ahead of yourself, this is probably our chance.”

I’d said it a bit forcefully, but instead of His Highness stopping me like I thought he would, he nodded, albeit with a little joking tease.

*I see. So that’s it.*

“So you’ve completed all your preparations in the past month?”

“A few coincidences happened to fall into place,” His Highness began, adjusting himself in his chair. At this small gesture, both Count Farlon and I straightened up as well.

“Ark. From your perspective, what is the biggest obstacle in our plan to take Sylvario down?” His Highness asked.

“Well, Sir Eisendarque, of course,” I answered. “If we stormed their capital with him protecting it, then we’d need to be prepared to take considerable losses.”

“So he’s someone who would make even Sir McGuine say that,” Count Farlon commented, trailing off.

When His Highness posed the question to me, I answered without a pause.

Count Eisendarque was the commander of the Kingdom of Sylvario’s knights and one of the few decent people in the higher rungs of the country. I could tell

just how good a warrior he was with a single glance, and he was someone I personally would've loved to have a bout with.

While he'd given up on the Sylvarian royal family, he was very serious about his job, which meant that if he was defending their capital—a place where their defenses had all the upgrades and resources money could buy—then we'd have a really hard time there.

"I thought so. That's why I made him disappear," His Highness said.

"What?"

I was almost aghast hearing those unexpected words, before I thought on them further. Sir Eisendarque was currently mostly on our side. There was no way that His Highness would erase him so easily. In the first place, he'd probably be really hard to assassinate.

When I gave His Highness a suspicious glare, the prince shot a wry smile back. "Guess a joke like that isn't enough to shake you."

"I've known you for a long time after all, Your Highness. So? What is it that you mean?"

"Sir Eisendarque is currently outside of the Sylvarian capital. He's now stationed on their eastern border."

When he said that, I pulled up a simple map in my brain. The Kingdom of Sylvario was located to the east of Brigandia. So from a Sylvarian perspective, we touched their western border. And on the other side, to their east...

"So the Kingdom of Zandia made a move on them?"

"You catch on quick. Yes, that's right. They attacked while Sylvario was weak."

"I see. So you made sure to provoke them by leaking information their way."

My words got an icy smile back. It seemed I was correct. His Highness really seemed like he was having fun.

"Between Brigandia—who they just reached an armistice with—and Zandia, who are clearly moving their military against them... It's obvious which one they'd be on guard against."



“And thanks to exhausting their army in the war, Sylvario doesn’t have much to defend their border with. Which would make sending Sir Eisendarque there a necessity,” I continued where His Highness left off, getting a satisfied smile from him.

Of course he was smiling. He’d gotten rid of our biggest obstacle without losing a single soldier from my battalion. But that wasn’t all.

“And while our kingdom’s defenses would normally be thin if we were to counterattack,” Count Farlon murmured, looking off into the distance.

They say one man’s fault is another’s lesson, but we were likely to make the same mistake as Sylvario if we invaded carelessly. But of course, His Highness Prince Alphonse had already taken that into account.

“As I said before, we’ve achieved the same effect as doubling our forces thanks to Count Farlon here. From what I know, none of the countries bordering Brigandia would willingly attack us if we’re supposedly that strong,” His Highness said amusedly.

Count Farlon could only give a forced smile. And thinking back on the situation again, I, too, had a distant look in my eyes.

With our magnificent victory in the field battle today, Count Farlon’s rating went up, I had managed to defend the town of Bigden without any damage, and His Highness gained the pretext needed to invade Sylvario. Brigandia had also become a country full of strong warriors that couldn’t be easily invaded. There were probably other pluses in our favor in places I couldn’t see.

We’d gained all of that with the defense of a single border town. Seriously, this guy was something. I’d already known it, but His Highness truly shone when he was putting his schemes into practice.

And if all of that was the case, then...

“Could it be that the big victory party in the town is part of that plan? To have any spies who get in bring that intel back with them? If it is, then are you planning on making a big announcement in the capital too?”

“Oooh, you’ve got most of it. You are correct. I’ve already sent word to the capital,” His Highness said as if it were completely obvious. Was that supposed

to be a compliment to me?

It went without saying that the capital was an intel goldmine. There were sure to be tons of foreign spies there, and most of them probably had a method of communicating quickly with their superiors, such as carrier pigeons. If they got wind that “Brigandia defeated an enemy twice their army’s size in a field battle while taking almost no casualties,” then they’d be sure to rush to call home about it. They would *have* to, using something like carrier pigeons.

“And you would need that intelligence to be something so sensational, yet concise, that they would have to send it back home as soon as possible.”

Judging from His Highness’s face, my answer got a passing mark. And hearing that, Count Farlon looked even more shocked than before.

“Ah. I-I see,” he said, still shocked. “The battle took place outside of town, on the field, and not only did it not last a day, but it only took a few hours. In such little time, foreign spies would be incapable of analyzing the battle. It’s likely they wouldn’t have noticed that the Sylvarian forces were comprised mostly of mercenaries,” concluded the count.

“And they’d have no way of knowing that those mercenaries were battered from catching the local endemic, and that they were actually in a terrible state,” I added.

“The only intelligence that other countries would end up getting is that ‘Brigandia’s army drove off Sylvarian forces twice their size,’” His Highness finished.

*Is he the devil?* That was all I could think of as I looked at His Highness smile in glee.

Obviously, if that intel made its way back to other countries, then they would mistakenly assume that both sides had been fighting with their proper soldiers. Normally, no one would ever think that a nation would attack with a force composed primarily of mercenaries. I mean, normally, no one would hire that many. They *couldn’t*. And even more unthinkable was attacking again so shortly after losing a war to us.

“So you took Balthazar’s half-assed talents into consideration...”

“And I have your wife to thank for that.”

Yep. Balthazar really *was* a failure. He might’ve had the talent, but he was born in the wrong age. And even though he had His Highness in the country next door, there was no mistaking that he wouldn’t accomplish anything with his personality or surroundings.

When His Highness said that, Count Farlon gave me a questioning gaze.

*Ahh. How much did His Highness tell him?* I wondered, making eye contact with the prince.

“Viscountess McGuine is the daughter of a scholar, you see. She knows a lot about the state Sylvario is in,” His Highness said, stopping there, even though his explanation was clearly lacking. It was a hint that he couldn’t say more.

And Count Farlon got that hint. “I see. So that’s the case,” the count said. The way he just nodded easily with no change in expression gave me the sense that he’d gone through a lot living in the royal court. *Middle management’s rough, huh...*

“We should drink together sometime, Count Farlon,” I said.

“All of a sudden? Though I’d be happy to take you up on your offer.”

The count looked shocked at my sudden invitation. Of course he would. It didn’t have any logical connection to what we were talking about.

“Well, I’m just fine with that. You two getting closer is a plus for me,” His Highness said.

“Your Highness, you could have said that in another way,” I chided.

“But before any of that, we need to take Sylvario down first.”

“Your Highness, you could have said *that* in another way!”

How was he here talking so lightly about conquering a nation? Although, yeah, we were almost done with it at this point.

“I’ll need you two to get back to work tomorrow. That’s fine, isn’t it?” His Highness asked—no, *confirmed*.

Anyway, all Count Farlon and I could do was nod.

## Chapter 8: The Fall and the Conviction

Everything happened really fast after that.

To start things off, we sent a messenger horse to the Sylvarian royal family with a declaration of war, citing Balthazar's attempted invasion as justification and including his helmet as proof. Of course, they panicked and tried to claim there was some sort of mistake, but we ignored them. We literally had Balthazar in custody, after all.

The only reason the guy was still alive was to show that our counterattack was just. But the moment we were finished, he was toast.

There was a chance Sylvario would try to claim he was an imposter, but that would just mean he'd die sooner. Our plans weren't going to change; it was internationally known that Sylvario had attacked us, after all.

Anyway, we didn't wait for a reply. Brigandia began its invasion around the same time we assumed our messenger would get there. The main force numbered around ten thousand, marching along the main highway that linked both Brigandia's and Sylvario's capitals. It was the same one I'd traveled back then on my way to Sylvario's capital. On that same note, we'd already managed to get the magistrate of Vestigo, the border city, to support us, so we had no trouble passing into Sylvario. He might've been a bit weak-willed, but he had good judgment, so he'd probably already realized Sylvario's royal family was done for.

And with all of that together, we started our push as well. With Count Farlon's brigade plus Prince Alphonse's Special Battalion, we numbered near seven thousand, but thanks to Nia's knowledge of the terrain and all the talks she'd had earlier with Sylvarian nobles, we progressed quite smoothly. On the way, we also managed to pick up Gorthuk—who was completely ignorant of current events—at a military supply depot, simultaneously capturing him and his inventory.

Though we were technically farther away than they had been, we arrived at

Sylvario's capital around the same time as the main force did.

"Things are going a little too well, aren't they?" I muttered, neither complaining nor joking, as I gazed at the walls of Sylvario's capital now right in front of my eyes.

"My father-in-law said the same thing."

I turned around when I heard a voice I recognized, and there was Gale with a wry smile on his face.

"Well, if it isn't Gale! So Count Barracuda is here too?" I asked.

"Yes. He said that this is part of my training to take over as head of the family..."

*I see. So his educational practices haven't changed.*

Barracuda County had a tradition of bringing both the head of their family and their heir to fight on the battlefield with no holds barred. That tradition had led to the count losing his oldest son in the previous war and causing a bit of a stir when he tried to get me to marry his daughter and take over the family. In the end, he'd gotten Gale, a skilled and politically safe groom. And it seemed he was using the same training practices with his new groom. But since Gale had already gone through a number of battlefields, I figured he was safe.

"He's getting you some experience with sieges here?"

"Yes, though he said that this might not be a very good example."

I couldn't help but give him a bitter smile back at his reply. After all, things were uneventful enough that we were able to shoot the shit at each other like this, despite the fact that we were right at the walls of Sylvario's capital.

Why were things so quiet here? Because Sylvario's army had made the choice to garrison themselves. Our Brigandian forces numbered only seventeen thousand, while Sylvario should have had over twenty thousand soldiers. But they still didn't attack us.

"Well, it's not like I don't understand what they're thinking," I said. "They probably don't have anyone who could lead twenty thousand soldiers to battle right now."

“Oh, that’s right, Count Eisendarque isn’t here,” Gale replied. “But isn’t the head of their Royal Guard still around?”

“The fact that he’s still around says it all.”

“Ahh, so that’s what’s happening.”

My explanation was right to the point, but Gale still got it.

From our little investigation, we’d learned that the commander of Sylvario’s Royal Guard had no experience in real battle. He had a big, fancy job title, but in reality he didn’t have experience doing much else but guarding the palace. There was no way he could successfully lead an army of twenty thousand men.

What was even worse was that he was either an incompetent man who couldn’t even manage security around the palace, or a corrupt, rotten bastard—possibly even both. He’d ignored the abuse that Princess Sonia had to endure, so on the list of “Bastards I Need to Punch in the Face,” he definitely had a place near the top.

“The only bit of commanding this guy has done would probably be on-the-spot security decisions and other spontaneous things. And to think they believe that’ll be enough to protect them.”

“Then it really doesn’t seem like I’ll learn much.”

Seeing Gale smile like that in front of me made me realize that he was already learning Barracuda County’s ways. I mean, he was already good with those types of jokes, having been on the battlefield before, but it felt like he was more comfortable with it now. At this rate, he was gonna be good and ready by the time he and his fiancée, Emilia, actually married. And if that was the case, he might understand what I was about to say.

“You really aren’t gonna learn anything here. Like, at all,” I said.

“Huh? Do you mean we’re not going to use orthodox methods here?”

Looked like he got what I was saying. If this development made him bored, then I would’ve said he was much closer to being a hardcore military type like myself and Count Barracuda. But his hint of surprise meant he wasn’t that far gone yet.

Feeling a little bit relieved, I gave him a smile.

“That’s right. We’ve got a wonderful source of intel, after all.”

“Ah, that’s right. Now that you mention it, we do,” Gale agreed, nodding in understanding.

Gale, of course, knew that we’d taken Sylvario’s second prince, Balthazar, prisoner. Normally, that would’ve been enough, but...

“But are we sure that intel is reliable? I’ve heard he was an overconfident, self-proclaimed tactician. Are we certain we aren’t doing exactly what he wants?”

Good on Gale for thinking about all of that too. That actually was something we would’ve normally had to watch out for.

“We’re talking about His Highness Prince Alphonse here. Of course he’s taken measures against that.”

“Now that you mention it, we should be fine.”

Gale nodded in understanding again, seemingly not having caught on to the fact that those measures weren’t normal ones either. Of course he’d never even think we had a former Sylvarian royal on our side and were checking everything Balthazar said against her. The “wonderful source of intel” I had mentioned had actually been Nia.

With thoughts like that, I finally understood just how easy it was to snub royalty. The moment you got carried away with that kind of thinking was when you became more prone to fatal mistakes. In the first place, an entire country was about to fall because of one of those fatal mistakes.

“Well, you might not learn anything, but... I’m pretty sure you’re about to see something interesting,” I boasted, getting another wry smile back.

And really, if Gale knew what the battle plan was, he’d have the same look on his face. The plan was to use the secret underground passages that only Sylvarian royalty knew of to sneak into the palace. His Highness had guessed that since there were some under Brigandia’s capital city, Sylvario would probably have some too, and he was right. When we questioned Balthazar

about it, he blabbed immediately to save his own skin. He did it so easily that we thought something was up, and...

“He isn’t lying, but he isn’t telling you everything either,” Nia had added from where she was hiding while listening, and I’d understood.

The only ones who were intended to know about the secret passages were members of the royal family, but there was a possibility that other people would find them. Which was why they were dotted with traps which only the royal family knew how to disarm.

“He didn’t tell you about a number of those traps. In particular, three especially lethal ones,” Nia said.

“Ahh, so he’s trying to be clever. He must know that good swindlers surround their lies with truths,” His Highness said, smiling amusedly as Nia explained back at the camp after Balthazar’s questioning. He’d probably guessed that the guy would either lie or omit certain facts. And Prince Alphonse had been right on the money, and Balthazar had no choice but to continue dancing in the palm of His Highness’s hand.

“One of the traps that Balthazar did mention is particularly tricky to disarm. And despite the fact that he knows how to do it, he hasn’t told you,” Nia said. “I’m relatively certain you wouldn’t have just blindly trusted Balthazar’s words and would have sent some scouts to verify his claims. I believe he planned to offer his help to disarm them when your scouts returned with injuries.”

“So instead of telling us about them from the beginning, he’d use the traps to make himself more valuable,” His Highness surmised. “Perhaps he planned to accompany us and disarm some traps to earn our trust before triggering one to harm the group he was traveling with.”

“Probably. He must have thought that he might be able to run back to the palace afterwards.”

*Man, conversations between smart people are scary,* I thought, watching Nia and His Highness’s back-and-forth without pause.

It looked like Balthazar, the half-assed tactician, had slapped together this scheme aiming for the moment we were just about putting the final touches on



our plan. That itself wasn't a bad idea, but... He was up against the wrong person.

"Perhaps he's been so loose-lipped until now as an attempt to lull us into thinking he would reveal anything to save his own life," His Highness inferred.

"Humans do tend to think that other people think the exact same way they do, after all," Nia replied.

"So he thought I was someone who'd look down on others that easily. Even though that's not true."

*No, it isn't. And probably not in a good way either,* I thought to myself, holding the words in. It would have been one thing if we had been bantering in his office, but this was a meeting discussing battle plans.

"All right," His Highness said, in conclusion. "We've got a clear picture of the underground passages now, but it looks like it'll be quite the pain to get through them."

If His Highness had been the sort of person who'd want us to charge in as soon as we knew of the passages, then we would've fallen for Balthazar's plot hook, line, and sinker. But he really hadn't done any research on who he was up against. Although it was a little late to think that, seeing as he'd lost so stupidly.

"We have plenty of engineers, so we should be able to manage it in about two days' time," I said.

His Highness gave a small nod back at my words, but hadn't decided immediately. I intentionally neglected to mention it, but I couldn't stop thinking about just how many casualties we'd have to suffer in order to get us through the passages. We would, of course, be getting as much information about the traps from Nia as we could, but...

Just as I thought that, she spoke.

"Er, Your Highness. I realize that this is quite forward of me to ask, but would it be possible for me to come along?"

Words I'd never expected to hear came out of her mouth. I was horrified, and even His Highness froze for a moment. But of course, he composed himself

again within seconds. Seeing him do that helped me calm down too, but I still couldn't speak.

"Nia, that's..."

I wanted to say that her suggestion was ridiculous. But at the same time, I knew in my head that her idea was logical.

"Are the traps truly that difficult to disarm?" His Highness asked her, as if he were speaking on my heart's behalf.

There was no way Nia would suggest something like this without thinking, which meant that was probably the case. And she indeed nodded.

"Yes. More precisely, not only are they difficult to disarm, but the manner of their disarming would change based on the timing of their disarmament."

"So you'd have to observe them to see which method would work."

Saying that much, His Highness sighed. It was rare for him to do that, but I understood how he felt. Really, at that moment I had been the one who wanted to sigh the most.

"What do you think, Ark?"

His Highness asked me not how I felt, but what I thought of Nia's proposal. That meant that he wanted a logical answer rather than an emotional one.

"On the basis of pure logic and nothing else, I would think that would be an effective plan."

That was the only way I could respond. After I said it, I looked around the tent. His Highness and Nia were, of course, here, and both Count Barracuda and Count Farlon would probably see the benefit as well. There weren't any higher-ups from the Order of Knights who might cause problems.

*Had His Highness known something like this would happen?*

"Though Nia has various circumstances, I believe this would create our best chance to finish Sylvario off."

I had done my very best to hold my emotions back as I spoke, but it seemed like Count Farlon caught on anyway, because he'd stiffened at my words. I knew

I'd worded it badly. I'd done it intentionally. I wasn't wrong, but even I thought it was dirty of me.

"Then we'll prepare ourselves as decoys by pretending to be the main offensive force!"

Count Barracuda laughed off my words with a hearty guffaw. From his point of view, it must have been incredibly entertaining to see someone like Nia ready to take down Sylvario. And honestly, I did feel the same way, at least a little bit. But more than anything, I wanted her to achieve her life's dream.

"Good. Then we will be going with the sneak-attack invasion plan, with Viscountess McGuine accompanying them."

It must have gone exactly how His Highness had planned it. When he announced that, there'd been no way anyone could object. We all just had to bow our heads to him.

And so, at early dawn the next day, we slipped into the underground passages.

"This is so nasty."

The groan slipped from my mouth as we dodged tons of brutal traps. The traps had been hidden well—likely placed by someone with an expert knowledge of human psychology—and were all lethal, as if they were meant to eliminate everyone but those with the true right of passage. I wasn't sure if we could've even gotten through them if we'd been going through the passages fairly.

It was abundantly clear that we wouldn't have been able to clear this in two days. If we had taken that long, there was a chance that Sylvarian forces would have noticed us, requiring our surface troops to attack and take attention off of us. If this had come to pass, no doubt we would have suffered quite a few casualties.

But thanks to Nia's precise guidance, we were going to avoid those casualties.

"Laura, next is that switch."

"Yes, Madam."

When Nia called out instructions, Laura followed them as if she were an extension of Nia's arms, movements agile and swift. With their teamwork, the traps were getting disarmed left and right.

"Wow, that's seriously amazing," I murmured, impressed. Nia gave me a bright smile back from her spot at my side. And at point-blank range, that did absolutely brutal damage.

As I broke out coughing, trying to play it off, I heard jeering coming from behind us.

"Hey, Commander! Could you try *not* flirting in front of us?"

"We're not flirting, dumbass!" I spat back, turning around.

Behind us were one hundred knights from the Special Battalion. Most of them were my former subordinates, and since we'd gotten through a number of battles together, we were all pretty friendly with each other. Which was why I'd reflexively yelled back at them, but damn! Nia was *right there*!

Or so I thought. I glanced over at Nia, worried, but she seemed to enjoy the banter; she was giggling. *What a girl.*

"Hee hee, it's a bit novel seeing you like this, Lord Ark," she said.

"Oh, no, it's embarrassing."

I hope you can forgive me for not being able to look her in the eye as she laughed. While I wasn't so much *acting* when I interacted with Nia, it was true that I was still on my best behavior. It wasn't that I didn't want to act more casual around her, but, y'know, I hadn't really had an opportunity to change.

And while I was thinking all that, Nia kept on calling out instructions, and Laura flew around disarming the traps.

"Honestly, at first I wasn't really on board with this plan, but now I'm thinking it was the right call to have you two come with us. To think we'd be getting through these traps so quickly," I commented lightly, only for Nia to drop into thought for a moment. "What's wrong?" I asked her.

"No, it's, um," she said, hesitating. "It's going *too* well."

At Nia's words, I, no, *we* all stopped. It was precisely when things were going

well that one needed to be on one's best guard. Seeing as how that ironclad rule had been beaten into our troops, they also reacted quickly.

"You mean to say that we might be walking into the enemy's trap?" I asked.

"I can't really say that either," Nia said. "I said before that the methods to disarm these traps are time based. Every trap we've encountered so far has been set at the easiest method for disarmament. But since they're all governed by complex mechanisms, it wouldn't be easy at all to change them."

"So we're doing so well it can't be a coincidence, but it's also not something that could be done intentionally?" I asked to confirm, getting a nod back from Nia.

Then what was happening? We were disarming traps as we went, so there was no sending a scout ahead. All we could do was stay on guard as we went along, but that wasn't the most pleasant solution here.

An unexpected viewpoint emerged in the middle of my thoughts.

"Perhaps the castle is welcoming Madam," Laura said, walking back to Nia's side after she finished disarming a trap.

For a moment, I marveled that even she could crack a joke, but with some thought I decided that what she said wasn't actually so lighthearted.

"You might not actually be wrong there."

With a little concentration, you could feel the flow of air. Even though there shouldn't have been anything blowing through these underground passages, my senses could feel it going in a certain direction.

"Nia, would the spot we'll be coming out of in the end be in that direction?" I asked, pointing.

She looked shocked for a moment before nodding. Now it felt like even the movement of the air was the castle beckoning to us.

But whatever the case may have been, I was currently the commander of this squad. I couldn't let myself think so optimistically.

"All units, proceed with utmost vigilance. You five, be ready to move ahead of us at my signal."

“Understood!”

When I spoke to the five knights right behind Nia and myself, they responded immediately. It was unfortunate, but we would need them to protect us if anything went wrong.

If I died, the chain of command here would go out of order, and if Nia died, then there would be a chance that we would set off a trap as we retreated. So basically, if the two of us died, so would the other hundred people here. It was because of this fact that these five could respond without hesitation to my orders, but it still gave me pause.

“It’d be nice if those orders would be all for nothing,” I murmured to myself. Even though I knew that would never happen on the battlefield. But I couldn’t stop myself from wishing it.

So when nothing actually happened, and my orders turned out to be for nothing, I figured I couldn’t be blamed for looking a bit let down.

And so, we successfully sneaked into Sylvario’s royal palace.

Since we were sneaking in, we had to take the bare minimum of one hundred knights selected from the Special Battalion, but you could say the fact that we got the whole way there without losing a single man was a miracle. We had decided that one hundred knights would be enough to take the palace based on observation from the last time we’d been there, on top of insight from Nia.

But it was weird. There were supposed to be about five hundred Royal Guard knights and soldiers guarding the palace, but... It was kind of sad that my intuition matched the reality here.

But it wasn’t like the Royal Guard were completely gutless. Since they were spread out throughout such a huge palace, we’d calculated that if we crushed each group one by one, we’d be able to take them all.

And, of course, it wasn’t like there were going to be one hundred of them in one place. The most we’d see in one grouping would be about ten, which our entire group of one hundred would attack at once. Considering the difference in numbers between us, it wouldn’t take even a minute to take each sector. Then, all we had to do was do it over and over again.

And over and over again we did. So simply that it was a little bit disappointing. We even split into two groups partway through; it was that easy. If we'd all stayed together while going to capture Sylvario's king, then there was a chance that their Royal Guard could converge on us, so we split up into two, with one group headed for the central area and one to take out the ones on the perimeter.

And that turned out to have been the right choice. While there were some guards who noticed something was wrong and came running, they were all sporadic and unorganized. Since my men were all doing so well under my command, they were no threat, and we mowed them down more easily than grass.

In pretty much no time at all, we had the central area of the palace so completely under our control it was like the place had never been inhabited.

"This is weird," I muttered to myself as we tied the king up.

The weird thing wasn't that we'd captured the king so easily. It was that someone who should have been here *wasn't* here.

"Why isn't the commander of the Royal Guard here?"

The Special Battalion knights who overheard what I said looked around us. The commander of the Royal Guard, who should have been guarding the king, was not here.

"Take the other members of the royal family into custody!"

At my order, the Special Battalion knights split themselves into groups of five in an instant, running off in the depths of the palace.

If the commander was a selfish bastard with a brain, then there was a chance he was escaping with another member of the royal family. If that was the case, then there was a chance of them trying to regroup. It was honestly an unlikely idea, but we still had to consider it as a possibility.

I didn't even have to say a word of those theories out loud. The Special Battalion knights moved out all on their own. Which meant that there was no chance Nia hadn't understood what I meant.

“I believe the commander of the Royal Guard should be with Olivia, the third princess.”

Nia’s knowledge of the palace’s inner workings allowed her to share some insights with me.

“Ahh, so it’s like that, then.”

I was trying to keep my voice level, but I wasn’t sure if I’d managed it. Nia was a tough one, and her expression didn’t change, so I really didn’t know. But for me, my guts were close to boiling.

The third princess had been the one who started abusing Princess Sonia. And the commander of the Royal Guard, despite being in charge of the security of the entire palace, had been holed up in the palace with her? Quite honestly, I wasn’t sure if I’d be able to hold myself back here. If it really happened—if I really did lose my control—would my desire to shield Nia from bloodshed restrain me at all? It probably wouldn’t, but I wanted to believe it would.

I followed Nia to the chambers of the third princess, Olivia, while my feelings remained in flux.

“E-Eeek! Wh-What?! You insolent fools!”

“You bastards! Have you forced your way inside here, knowing that these are Her Highness the Third Princess’s chambers?!”

Unfortunately, Nia’s guess had been correct. The room was rank with the nauseating stench of arousal.

*Can I not just cut the two of them down now?* Just as I was thinking that with a strangely cold mind...

“Wh-What are *you* doing here?! If you—if the heroine—comes barging in here, you’ll make me look like a villainess!” the third princess screeched, pointing at Nia.

*Villainess?*

That term made me stop in my tracks. It wasn’t one I was familiar with, but I remembered hearing it somewhere.

“So you recognize me,” Nia said quietly, looking conflicted.



Now that she mentioned it, that was right. Olivia, Sylvario's third princess, had realized that Nia was Princess Sonia with a single glance. If she hadn't, then there was no way she would've paid more attention to her than the fully armored knights right beside her.

"Of course I do! Just when I'd finally managed to drive you away!"

*Ahh. So it was her. She was the source of all Nia's problems,* I thought to myself, mind surprisingly clear. That was right. The one who'd been most hostile to Princess Sonia was the third princess right here.

Even while I was remembering that, the princess kept on screeching vehemently back. And what she was saying sounded familiar to me too.

"You're talking like that pink-haired nuisance."

*Ah, damn.* My tone ended up being pretty rough. But it seemed that was effective in its own right.

The third princess flinched, face paling as she turned to look at me.

"D-Don't tell me you arrested the previous game's heroine?!"

It seemed like I was correct.

The baron's daughter who seduced Brigandia's first prince had pink hair. She had also called herself "the heroine."

"I only understood half of that, but I wasn't the one who arrested her," I said. "I was only a kid at the time, after all."

I hadn't even been in school then, yet I still heard all about what the pink-haired woman had blabbered about—just the rantings of a crazy woman. You could call everything that came out of her mouth just that. And here was another person saying the same exact things.

"You bastard! How dare you speak so rudely to Her Highbuargh?!"

The man we assumed to be the commander of the Royal Guards got pissed and tried to slash at me, but I punched him in the face with all of my strength to shut him up.

*Damn, he's weak. But even a piece of trash like him could act like he owned*

*the whole palace when he had authority. This all feels so fruitless, but just remember that this rotten place goes down today,* I told myself in my mind, somehow keeping myself calm.

“What the hell do you mean with all that villainess talk?”

*Ah, damn.* My tone was still super deep. And hearing that threatening tone made the third princess freeze up before trembling like a leaf.

When I thought about how Nia, Princess Sonia, was abused for this witch’s sake, both anger and disgust welled up within me. And thanks to that, I managed to keep my reason.

“Remember everything you’ve done to Princess Sonia,” I growled. I wasn’t really sure whether she actually heard what I said, but I paused for a moment to give her time to remember before continuing. “You’re already villainous enough.”

That definitely hit her. The third princess’s eyes widened as her face froze in shock. It took a few seconds for Olivia to process, apparently. Then, a moment later, her shrieking, screaming voice filled the room.

“N-No! No no no no! I’m *not* a villainess! I’m not going to end up ruined as a villainess princess!”

I couldn’t help but sigh. Did she not notice that she had crossed into villain territory quite a long time ago and was in the process of being checkmated? Now that I thought about it, apparently the baron’s daughter hadn’t accepted reality until the very end either.

“Give it up. You’re done.”

“I’m not done, I’m not done at all! The scenario hasn’t even started yet!”

*The scenario, huh?*

“You really are saying the exact same things as that baron’s daughter. What the hell do you mean by ‘scenario’? Do you think this is a play or something?” I snapped at the princess.

*Calm down, Ark.* If I didn’t keep telling myself that, then I thought I’d snap any minute. And no matter what the situation may have been, I didn’t want Nia to

see that. Especially since me losing control would actually push her aside, and after all, it was Nia who was the biggest victim in this room.

“So just how long, how many *years*, did you stomp all over Nia for that scenario or whatever? Just how important is your shitty performance to you?”

She wouldn’t answer. It didn’t matter. I didn’t need one. Plus, she didn’t have one in the first place. She hadn’t thought of any of that.

“You never even considered it, did you? That you were doing it to a human. That she had a heart. You just thought she was some moving doll that moved to your whims, didn’t you?”

“E-Eeek!”

I must have been right on the money, because she screamed and backed away. But her back hit the wall. There was nowhere for her to run. And I had no intention of giving her anywhere to run.

“Was it fun?” I asked. “Did you enjoy it? You two were having your little tryst *now* of all times, so it must’ve been *real* fun, huh?!”

“N-No, I... I...!”

She tried to blab out some excuse, but I didn’t care. I didn’t think anything she could say would matter to me, now or ever. We probably didn’t even exist in her world. I didn’t know why, but I was strangely sure of that fact.

“You don’t think people are humans, and you laugh as you stomp all over them. What’s the term for people like that?”

“Stop, stop! Don’t say it! I, I...!”

I wanted to sigh. Even now, she still wasn’t showing any remorse or apologizing. The way she tried to excuse herself the entire time was exactly like what you’d see from a villain at the end of a play.

“You’re already a hopeless villainess, Princess!” I declared.

“No, noooooo!”

I told the third princess exactly how I saw her. And the moment I shoved it in her face, she grabbed her head, scratching at it and messing up her hair as she

screamed.

“What?!”

And then, something like a black mist started gushing out of her body. And that black mist, or whatever it was, was rapidly expanding.

This was bad. Something I could only refer to as instinct ran through my brain.

“Everyone, get back! Don’t let that touch you!” I yelled as I shielded Nia, and the well-trained knights of the Special Battalion immediately made a big leap backwards. Everyone probably managed to dodge it.

Everyone but me.

“Lord Ark?! Are you okay?!”

It was weird for Nia to scream like that. As that nonsensical thought ran through my mind, my lips curled upwards. But I was unfortunately far too drained to show her.

“I’m fine taking this much... But she’s...”

Having taken a full blast of the black mist while shielding Nia, I was barely staying conscious. It was probably something like a curse—something a human should never touch, and that was overflowing from the third princess’s body. “This woman really is some sort of monster from a fairy tale, isn’t she!” I yelled, forcing myself to stay conscious.

I was fine. I was still conscious, though for a moment I thought the tempestuous resentment in her scream nearly swallowed me up. And because I managed to get through that, I put power into my legs, managing to stay standing.

Possibly because I stood like a wall in front of her, I felt Nia still standing behind me. Judging from her breathing, she was apparently in better shape than I was.

“Unfortunately, I can’t think of any other explanation. The fact that a human body is emitting that black mist itself is just unnatural,” she said.

It was there that Nia paused her words. I heard her shoes clacking on the floor as she walked towards me. Then, she touched my back. The moment she did, I

felt something like something warm flowing into me from the place she was touching.

“N-Nia? What are you...” I said, trailing off in shock.

“It seems I’m also something from a fairy tale.”

Her voice sounded like she was troubled but smiling. When I turned around to look at her, what I saw was bright white light.



“A goddess?”

The words came out of my mouth without thinking, but it felt as if I was right. Nia was standing there, bathed in what I could only think of as a holy white light.

“You’re calling me a goddess? How embarrassing,” Nia said, demure.

“But in my eyes, I can’t see you as anything but a goddess.”

Part of me was wondering what the hell I was letting out of my mouth at a time like this. But seriously, that was all I could see her as right now. She just looked so divine, bathed in that white light.

And maybe that was why I didn’t feel even an inkling of fear towards the third princess, Olivia, or whatever monster she was.

“How dare you ignore me to flirt!”

With a gross voice that was a mixture of the third princess’s and something so low it was far more suited to some slithering beast, the thing that should have been the third princess howled. But, huh. I didn’t know why, but it didn’t unsettle me at all.

What’s more, the mist formed into a mass, flying at me in what was clearly supposed to be an attack, but all it felt like to me was a fly flitting my way.

“You’re in the way!”

My fist smashed the mass of darkness to smithereens. All I’d done was a simple punch, but my fist glowed, roared, and broke the mass like it was nothing. There was no mistaking it. This was Nia’s power.

And just as I thought that, I remembered our wedding ceremony. I remembered how the blessed wine had felt when I drank it.

“So you really are a goddess, Nia. Either that, or a Saintess.”

“...Um...”

When I murmured that in earnest, the ever-modest Nia gave me a vague, troubled smile back. Knowing her, she’d never say anything like “Yes! I am indeed a Saintess!” But I could! I could say it loud and proud! Though I

wouldn't, because it would embarrass her!

"How? How are you a Saintess?! I didn't let you do the ceremony!" the thing that should have been the third princess shrieked.

.../ see. So there was a reason she'd abused Nia. In the scenario the third princess had wrecked, there must have been some sort of ceremony where Nia—or rather, Princess Sonia—would've been recognized as a Saintess.

But that ceremony had happened elsewhere, in a different form.

"Sorry, but the ceremony is long done now."

"How?! How did you do the ceremony?!" the thing that should have been the third princess screeched, flustered. Actually, it looked like the mist was thinning out, and she was going back to normal.

Didn't matter to me, though. Whether it was a mist mass or something in the shape of a woman, I had no mercy for it right now.

"After you threw Nia out, she met me by chance and we fell in love!"

I'd leave it at that. I could feel Laura, who'd been stuck to Nia's side even in the middle of the miss, give me a very sharp look. *Look, Laura, I was just trying to annoy the princess, so cut me some slack here!*

"And then a lot happened, and we got married," I said. "Seems like the wedding ceremony worked in place of that ceremony or whatever you're talking about."

"What?! Why? Why would she marry a background character like you?!"

"A background character?" I repeated. "Oh, that's play-speak, isn't it? For the minor roles that are even lower than side characters. Sucks for you that a minor character changed that scenario of yours, huh?"

Now that I thought about it, both the Kingdom of Sylvario and the Kingdom of Brigandia worshipped the same god. That'd mean that whatever ceremony she was talking about must not have had to happen within Sylvario's borders. Which then meant...

"Why, you ask? Let me tell you."



I took one step, two steps towards her. I could see it: The thing, you could say, was the core of the mist. It was inside the third princess's forehead. So basically, in her brain. And knowing that, I started running, closing the distance between us in an instant.

"The reason why the ceremony happened, the reason why she and I met. Everything, everything happened because you abused Princess Sonia and threw her out!"

"Ah, eee, huh~?!"

Slowly, after a few seconds, it looked like she understood what I had said. And by then, I was already right in front of her. And with the power I'd gained from Nia—or possibly from our wedding ceremony—my shining right hand grabbed the third princess's forehead.

"This is the end!"

As I squeezed my hand, the light coming from it strengthened even more. And that light went into the princess's forehead, and then even farther inside, reaching the thing nesting in her brain. I *felt* it.

"Noooooooooooo!"

"Gwaaaaaahhhhh!"

Both the princess's scream and something else rang out. The death throes of something else that I couldn't describe. The black mist dissolved and disappeared.

I wasn't sure if it was that happening or if she'd lost consciousness from the fear, but I felt the strength leaving the third princess's body, and I let go of her. I mean, I could've kept holding on to her head like that, but that would probably break her neck. She still needed to get investigated and judged, so I couldn't let her go here.

This wasn't the end, but...but still.

"It's over," murmured Nia, and I nodded back.

We'd reached one stopping point. There was no mistaking that.

And then, feeling like I still hadn't digested everything, I heaved a big sigh.



And so fell the capital of Sylvario.

By taking control of their palace, we cut off what little direction their defenses had. Before the Sylvarian guards knew what was happening, the palace doors were opened and the Brigandian army came in droves, completely unstoppable.

And even when we relayed their king's orders to stand down, hardly any of the soldiers put up a fuss. It's to be expected for the average soldiers, but still.

Next on the agenda had been solemnly dealing with the aftermath of the battle and annexing Sylvario, but...

"What the hell did you two do?" His Highness groaned, clutching his head in a way I'd seen just once before.

We were currently in a room inside Sylvario's palace that His Highness had requisitioned to be his personal office. Nia and I were present, as well as the other main players on our side, and we were supposedly all here to discuss our next steps. Supposedly.

"So you could see it from the outside?"

"Yes. Perfectly."

I'm sure you can get a grasp of the situation from those two lines of banter.

The black mist that had appeared when the third princess Olivia screamed, and the white light that had cleared it away. Though the whole incident took place indoors, apparently it was visible from outside the palace.

"How in the world has something you'd only hear of in storybooks happened here?"

"I have no idea either. Seriously. And the one person who might know isn't exactly taking questions at the moment."

His Highness was complaining in an uncharacteristically grouchy way, but I, of course, didn't know either. And we couldn't ask the third princess, who might have had an idea of things. To say it plainly, she *couldn't* be asked.

Sylvario's third princess, Olivia, had fainted after the strange white light had

poured into her, and she hadn't woken up since. According to a doctor, she was breathing, so she was alive. But she showed absolutely no response when subjected to light being shone into her eyes or any other stimuli. So even though her body was alive, her mind—her brain—had died.

"Well, whatever," His Highness said. "She's going to be either confined, poisoned, or beheaded, anyway, so it doesn't really matter."

*So it doesn't matter?* I sniped back internally, glancing over to Nia out of the corner of my eyes. Even after hearing something like that, she didn't look shaken. I'd been pretty sure she'd be okay, and it seemed like His Highness had thought the same, if he was being so frank with it all. And if Nia wasn't showing anything on her face, then there wasn't really any reason to tiptoe around her.

Which was why His Highness continued talking.

"So what I want is a 'story' to tell the people who witnessed it," he said, "and to the people who might've heard any rumors those witnesses have already spread."

"I see. A story," I repeated.

"Yes, a story. We can't help the fact that people saw it or the fact that it's going to spread. But we need to ensure this incident doesn't get overly exaggerated. Hence the need for some kind of explanation that more or less works in our favor."

*I see, so that's what he's talking about.* I nodded along in understanding. There was nothing we could do about the people who loved wild rumors, since it was simply in their nature to be that way. But since it'd be a pain for us if those rumors caused unnecessary speculation and distress, we needed to frame the incident in such a way that both satisfied the people who heard it and helped us control the overall narrative of events.

"Shouldn't that be easy for you, Your Highness?" I said. "Wasn't one of your specialties making up stories off the top of your head?"

"I understand very well how you see me. But there's an issue. As a foreigner, I'm concerned that I wouldn't be able to formulate something that would be properly rooted in Sylvanian culture," His Majesty continued, uncommonly

subdued.

He had a point. While Brigandia and Sylvario shared a border and worshipped the same god, their cultures were somewhat different. Due to their propensity for trade, Sylvarian commoners in particular adhered to customs that were quite different from those held by Brigandian commoners. Which would mean...

“So this is where Nia comes in?” I asked, guessing.

“I did, of course, consider that, but no.”

I’d said it as more of a confirmation than anything, but his reply was unexpected. I had thought that would’ve been the reason he asked for Nia to be present, but His Highness now wore a mighty smirk on his face, like he’d just pulled off a massive prank of some kind. Well, it was technically a smile, but still. This was dangerous. If he were a mind reader, I would’ve been in serious trouble.

“Ark?”

“Nothing! Absolutely nothing!”

Very serious danger, I think, maybe. Anyway, if it wasn’t that, then what was he thinking? I gave him a look to urge more of an explanation, and he apparently didn’t plan on putting on any more airs, because he immediately continued.

“I thought you might have some good ideas, Lady Laura Albashaf.”

At His Highness’s words, all eyes fell on Laura, who was waiting at Nia’s side. Even with so many eyes suddenly on her, she stayed calm. *She’s tough*. And at the same time I thought that, something else popped to mind.

“Your Highness, did you just say ‘Albashaf’? The family name sounds familiar. Wasn’t that the name of a kingdom that used to be nearby, with a royal family of the same name?”

“You’re exactly right. Thank goodness. If that hadn’t come to mind after I said that, then we wouldn’t be able to continue this chat.”

His Highness said it like a joke, but I was pretty sure I would’ve been at risk of losing my job if I hadn’t remembered that fact.

It wasn't at all rare for me and the other members of the Special Battalion to maneuver behind the scenes on His Highness's orders. And in those cases, knowledge about the nobility—nearby royalty, formerly important noble lines, and even the royalty of fallen kingdoms—was some of the bare minimum information that we had to know.

More accurately, it was the latter group of nobles that we needed to be the most familiar with, because folks from that group were often trying to jockey for higher positions or outright attempting to revive their fallen kingdoms. This meant that His Highness had probably spoken on the assumption that I knew the family name. But there was one weird thing about this.

“Why did I never think about Laura's family name before?” I said, thinking out loud.

I had known that she was the daughter of a baron and that she served Princess Nia. But I hadn't even thought about learning which house she was part of. And not doing so was pretty unusual for me.

When I looked at the maid again, she had her usual expressionless look on her face. Nia, standing beside her, looked bewildered.

“I'd be happy to get an explanation about that bit as well,” His Highness added.

Seeing the prince look at her again, Laura heaved a sigh, seemingly resigning herself to her fate. “May I interpret that as permission to speak directly to you, Your Highness?”

“Yes, of course. You even have permission to speak directly to me after this, as well.”

It was only a tiny hint, but I could almost swear that Laura looked a little bit taken aback at that. It was probably a rare attitude for a member of a royal family to take, but His Highness spoke normally even to Gale, who was common-born. In a way it was natural for him to treat Laura, the daughter of a baron, like this.

Laura seemed to bounce back immediately as well, expression returning to normal. “Understood. First, may I inquire to the room at large if you are all

aware of how the Kingdom of Albashaf was founded?”

We all nodded in response to her question. If I knew, then of course Nia and His Highness would too.

The Kingdom of Albashaf had apparently been a religious monarchy. Back in the age where faith in the gods was stronger, there was a man who could hear the voice of God, and he founded the Kingdom of Albashaf. After that, a number of prophets and saintesses loved by God appeared, and the nation cemented their position by safeguarding them.

But as time went on and belief in the gods weakened, there were longer and longer stretches of time where prophets and saintesses didn't appear, to the point where merely ten years after the last saintess passed, the kingdom was absorbed into the Kingdom of Sylvario.

“Apparently, on the eve of their absorption into Sylvario, before they became simply one of many Sylvarian baronies, the head of the Albashaf family cast a charm. One so that we wouldn't be looked down on as the royal family of a ruined kingdom and could live quietly. It was also for the sake of carrying out the mission we had left,” Laura explained.

“Their mission?” I repeated. The words triggered something in my mind, and when I looked over to Nia, it seemed that she was thinking the same exact thing.

“Nia. Did you know Laura's family name? Or did you think to ask for it?” I asked her.

“Yes. It was the first thing I confirmed when we met,” she replied with a nod.

Nia knew about the Kingdom of Albashaf, so when Laura, with the same last name, came to serve her, of course she'd have asked about it. Even I should have checked her family name when I hired her. But I didn't even think to. Even if I had trusted her simply because she was a servant of Nia's, it was still strange that I hadn't even considered a background check.

“Maybe that's the charm's effect. So that only the people who are told their family name will learn it. Either that, or that the person who they need to protect will know,” I guessed.

“That’s right. The charm would have no effect on a prophet or saintess,” confirmed Laura.

So that was why I didn’t notice Laura’s family name or think to try to find it out. But in that case, there was still one strange thing left. However, one person had already figured out the answer.

“But in the end, it was only a charm,” His Highness said. “One that couldn’t stop someone with a strong desire to know this information from researching it.”

“The charm has lost most of the original magic behind it, but there’s enough left for it to still work,” Laura confirmed. “There aren’t a lot of people who would investigate a barony with no hope of getting ahead in the world, after all.”

When His Highness spoke his conclusion, Laura agreed.

His Highness wasn’t the type you could ever compare to a prophet or a holy man, even in polite terms. The reason he’d managed to break through the Albashaf’s charm must have been because of the strength of his will. And thinking about it like that made me feel a little pitiful.

“It’s because you accepted Laura as a member of your household, Lord Ark.”

I must’ve had my feelings written all over my face, because Nia spoke up to comfort me. I had some conflicting feelings over this recent discovery, happiness and shame swirling around inside me. But hearing as much as I had, I could just accept the way things went.

“So the reason Laura was able to teach Nia so much was because she’d inherited the knowledge as a member of a former royal family?” I said. I turned to Laura. “Was that the source of all of your weird connections too?”

“I suppose. I’ve never had the desire to revive our kingdom, but I thought it would be a shame if what I knew was forgotten,” Laura replied.

“If that knowledge was what helped Nia live comfortably in Brigandia,” I said, “then I can’t thank you enough.”

“What a coincidence. I was feeling thankful for the same thing,” Laura said, a

little smile on her face. That was a bit of a relief.

“I see. So now that we know about Albashaf and stuff, it doesn’t seem like you only served Nia, or Princess Sonia, because she was the saintess, huh?”

“That might have been the case at the beginning, but that wasn’t all.”

Looking at Laura’s face, I knew. She must’ve grown fond of Princess Sonia while she was serving her and started wanting to genuinely help her. The fact that Nia—Princess Sonia—was just that sort of person was something I also knew very well.

“And it was for those reasons that I had initially planned to crush any political marriage that would harm the princess,” Laura said.

It was a bit amazing that she was saying that in front of His Highness, who was supposed to be the other party of the aforementioned political marriage. Though in our case, you could call my marriage to Nia political as well. The reason we’d married in the first place was to give Nia peerage in Brigandia.

I looked conflicted. His Highness looked like he was having the time of his life. And Nia looked nervous. After taking a look at each of our faces, Laura heaved another sigh.

“It’s my loss. I ended up thinking that Viscount McGuine would be all right.”

“Laura...”

The maid looked a bit lonely and also a bit relieved as she said that. Nia looked shocked by Laura’s words, and at once she began to tear up. She must have been absolutely touched to hear something like that from the person who raised her and was practically like a reliable older sister to her.

And yeah. On my end, I felt a little victorious and kinda happy, but also a bit heavy with the responsibility those kind of words implied. I hadn’t planned on treating Nia badly at all, but I felt even more determined not to do it now.

“Your Highness,” Laura said, “I believe that, for the ‘story’ you seek, an old anecdote about saintesses from the Kingdom of Albashaf might suit. Current citizens of Sylvario would be familiar with it.”

“I see. So if you hadn’t thought that Ark was appropriate as Princess Sonia’s,



or rather Lady Nia's, spouse, you wouldn't help us with our story," His Highness said in amusement.

I balked a little bit. And the fact that Laura just nodded in response flabbergasted me even more. Seriously? To that extent? Or no, of course it'd be to that extent. That was just how much she treasured Nia. Yet she accepted me as Nia's spouse. I really, really didn't want to betray that trust.

"Then let's go with that," His Highness said. "Make sure you do your best playing the part of the Saintess's spouse, Ark."

"Leave it to me."

Both personally and for the sake of the larger situation, I didn't want anyone else occupying that role. I didn't want to let anyone else take it. So when His Highness asked me I was able to respond immediately. It'd make me even more infamous than I already was, but at this point, I was all for it.

"Nia, can you leave being your spouse to me?" I asked.

Really, I should've asked if she could leave "playing the part" of her spouse to me, but I couldn't say it. I didn't want to. And those feelings of mine reached Nia.

"Yes, of course. There's no one else who could be my spouse," she replied with a nod and the biggest smile I'd ever seen on her face.

## Final Chapter: A Royal Hostage No More

And that was how the legendary saintess was revived in the current era. To be precise, we'd done the reviving, but no one thought of that as a problem, so we were probably fine.

The main character was, of course, Nia. And I was to play her partner. Honestly, I'd been a bit worried that we had too few players here, but I wasn't about to give up my role to anyone. All it meant was that I'd need to do a bit of the impossible to make up for what we didn't have.

"Huh. You're looking like quite the good man," His Highness said, giving me a proper compliment for once.

It took us about a month to absorb Sylvario and clean up the issues left behind. And then after another month of preparations, it was time for the confirmation ceremony that would officially acknowledge Nia as the saintess. Today was the day. And in attire that really emphasized my "Black Wolf" image, I replied to His Highness's sincere compliment, voice struck with the slightest hint of nerves. "I need to look at least fifty percent more manly than usual today, after all."

"Hmmm."

Whether it was because he wasn't happy with my answer or what, His Highness just hummed and went silent. He gave me a very rude look of appraisal, scanning me from head to toe.

"What? Is there something you'd like to say?" I asked, tetchy.

"No. I was just thinking about how much of a noble you've become," he replied.

"Seriously, what's up? Why would you say something like that? Did you eat something strange?"

His unexpected comment startled me. I quickly looked up at the sky, thinking we must've been in for a rainstorm if he was saying something like that, but the

sky was clear; not a single cloud in sight.

From my actions, His Highness immediately realized what I was saying. “I said it because it’s technically true. Showing off when they need to show off is part of a noble’s basic skill set.”

“Ahh, so that’s what you mean. The ‘technically’ part of your explanation bugs me, but it’s true that even I should try a bit harder to look the part. Especially because I’m probably getting more territory soon.”

While, of course, nothing was going to happen at today’s ceremony, it was almost set in stone that I’d be getting more territory.

While Count Farlon had gotten all of the credit for Balthazar’s capture, we couldn’t do the same thing for our plot to take the Sylvarian capital. And to put it simply, I’d taken the vanguard to storm the palace, and managed it without much bloodshed. On top of that, having the saintess’s spouse hold too low of a noble rank would cause problems politically, so they were planning on making me a count in the near future.

Things were seriously changing way too fast. But there wasn’t anything we could do about it. The fall of Sylvario meant that we’d gained a large amount of territory. While we’d be fine leaving the Sylvarian territories that had been run properly to their current lords, we couldn’t do the same for the territories that had been managed by the royal family directly.

What’s more, with the saintess “story” we’d put together, we couldn’t just stop at taking over Sylvario’s territory. The story we’d put together was that Princess Sonia, the original saintess, had been banished after being abused, and that she had passed on her holy power to her best friend Nia while she was on her deathbed.

Because this was based on a past anecdote, the Sylvarian citizens accepted it without a fuss. But moving forward with this narrative meant that those who had abused the saintess couldn’t escape their condemnation. We’d planned on doing that from the start, but we’d unexpectedly gained the justification to do so.

The biggest abusers—the third princess, Olivia, and the king’s concubine—would be beheaded. Execution via beheading like some common criminal

instead of something more dignified like poison was the most humiliating thing that could happen to them. But I wasn't sure if they even had the luxury of worrying about that at this point.

The former king and other members of the former royal family would have their fortunes confiscated and their rank lowered to barons, with their salary significantly reduced to the bare minimum for nobility. Since they'd also be living with the constant threat of death by poison over their heads, it was a toss-up as to whether their bodies or hearts would break first.

Well, the Albashafs had done their damndest to survive in similar circumstances, so we wanted the house of Sylvario to try to do the same. Even if we really didn't mean it.

Anyway, I'd been chunked in the very middle of that whole mess by having made the biggest military achievements in the situation. It was honestly kind of unbearable to be in the thick of it all, but I had decided I would do what I could to survive somehow.

"In the first place, whether he's a noble or a commoner, a man's gotta show off if he wants to look cool."

I mean, it might've been the same for women too. But almost all of my experiences were with only men, so I knew how sloppy we could be where women couldn't see. While that in itself was comfortable and fun, once you met a woman you wanted to act cool in front of, you had to show off and get a little bullheaded about stuff like this.

"Seriously, you've really changed." His Highness looked even a bit stupefied for a moment before chuckling.

*Ahh, shaddup. I know I'm not suited for it too.* But I just couldn't go back to how I used to be. Now, it was impossible to make myself leave Nia's side.

"I didn't think you could change that much," His Highness said. "Now I'm thinking I should go out and experience love myself for once."

"Is that why you've started making passes at Laura?"

I glared at him without thinking, but hopefully you can forgive me for that. We were already on the cusp of getting supremely busy, so I really did not want

him to take one of the precious few people I could leave Nia to.

But there was no way a look from me was going to scare His Highness. In fact, he gave me a smile that I had a hard time figuring out whether it was serious or joking.

“Making passes at her? How rude,” he quipped. “For once, I’m approaching someone properly from the front while taking all the necessary procedures.”

“And that’s exactly why I’m having a hard time figuring out how I stand on it,” I said with a sigh at his shamelessness.

The first pass His Highness Prince Alphonse had made at Laura was to send her a plaited cord dyed deep blue. Her reaction when she saw it was *something*. She was the very picture of shock, freezing in place for a few moments. His next pass had been sending her a poem written on pure white paper in blue ink. I had never seen Laura look so bewildered.

According to Nia, these were the proper procedures a male member of nobility or the royal family would take to request a relationship with a woman in the fallen Kingdom of Albashaf. Not only had he researched things, but he’d also most likely written and composed that poem on his own. It was more than enough to tell that he was quite serious in his intentions.

“But it’s the truth that she’s currently the most convenient option for me. Though I understand your feelings.”

“So you’re doing it *despite* understanding how I feel,” I said with a glare.

“Well, yes. In both a private and public sense, I’ll probably never meet anyone better for me,” His Highness retorted, his smile gaining the slightest edge of bitterness in it.

This was one of the things I didn’t like about him.

Laura was the daughter of a baron with blood harkening back to fallen royalty. She was of high birth, yet she had absolutely no political power. Not only that, but she was also competent, with an education comparable to other royals, and was additionally skilled in numerous other areas.

It was the honest truth that to His Highness—who was completely

uninterested in ruling yet wanted to work in a public-facing capacity—it would be hard to find anyone better suited to be his wife.

Had the fact that she was convenient for him been the only reason he was making passes at her, then Nia, and even I, would never accept it. I'd never say it in front of her, but now, Laura was an important part of my family. But the fact that His Highness was seemingly actually interested in her as a woman made it difficult for me to deal with the whole thing.

“Lady Laura might seem like an impregnable fortress, but it would be convenient for her as well. The rest is a matter of feelings,” His Highness concluded.

Just what I'd expect from His Highness. He didn't miss a trick when it came to using other people's feelings. Of course he wouldn't—he was the sword that would support his older brother, the next king. His position was secure.

And if Laura wanted to cement Nia's position any further, then he was the best connection she could make. Even if it was just for form's sake, having the blood of a former royal family made all of the difference, and Laura's personal pros far surpassed any of her cons, so there was no logical reason anyone could complain. And even if someone did find some sort of irrational fault with her, His Highness would probably stamp them out with a smile.

If His Highness was serious about her, then there was no one better to leave Laura to. And he *was* probably serious. His actions made me believe that he was. And plus, he'd most likely done things in such a way as to make me understand just that.

“All I'll say is that if you take her away without any consideration for anyone, you'll be in trouble.”

I was protecting her as her employer. And with my words, I was letting His Highness know that really, I understood. He *was* that sort of person, and that was my hope.

His Highness's eyes widened for a moment when I came out with that, before he burst out laughing.

“Hah, aha ha ha ha! You really do seem like a proper noble now, Ark! That's

my man!”

Hearing him answer that happily made a chill run down my spine. From the sixth sense I’d developed knowing him for so long... I heard the “now I can make you do even more impossible things” hiding in his words.

*Seriously, please don’t.* But I had no right to refuse. That was what was sad about middle management in any era.

I couldn’t respond right away, but His Highness seemed satisfied enough to turn and begin to take his leave.

“Well, it’s almost time. I’ll leave you be. Did I help with your nerves any?”

The question surprised me enough that I was shocked silent. And then, His Highness gave me a little parting blow.

“Also. From my perspective, you’re always manly.”

...*Dammit.* If he said that, then there was no way I could snipe or complain back. He really wasn’t fair.

His Highness left in the middle of my thoughts, and moments later, one of the priests working behind the scenes for the ceremony came to get me—perfectly timed with His Highness’s exit. Just thinking about how His Highness had most likely deliberately planned such a thing reminded me of how unfathomable the guy really was.

“Viscount McGuine, your wife... The Saintess has finished her preparations.”

“Thank you. I understand, I’ll be on my way,” I replied, assuming my viscount persona at once—and inside, smiling bitterly. If I looked in the mirror, I was pretty sure I’d see an expression much like that smile I was so used to getting.

At times like these I often mimicked His Highness, that person who was often asking me to do impossible, unreasonable things, yet all the same was someone I couldn’t bring myself to hate. Knowing him, he probably realized the burdens he placed on my shoulders, but if he wasn’t going to say anything, then neither was I. That was just what it was to be a man.

And so, I mimicked that unscrupulous somebody, walking off with full confidence in my step. All in order to go see the best woman in the world.

Aaand my persona collapsed instantly. Yeah, the only ones to see it crumble were Nia and other members of our household, so I could say I managed to dodge a fatal blow, but in the moment I didn't have the wherewithal to think about any of that; the moment I entered the Saintess's waiting room and the door shut behind me, I had fallen to my knees.

It was likely that Laura had seen this would happen and had prepared accordingly; the priest who'd guided me here had pushed me through the door from behind, and Tom had been standing right by the door in the perfect position to shut it with the sharpest movements I'd seen from him yet. But that was all stuff I thought of later, because I had absolutely no luxury to think about it at the moment.

"U-Um, Lord Ark? Are you okay?" Nia asked hesitantly.

And even seeing her do that was hard on me right now. The only thing going through my head was this: *A Goddess is here, and she's looking at me. Only me.*

"Nia... You're so beautiful..."

"U-Um, really, Lord Ark, are you okay?"

She was saying the exact same thing to me as she had before, but in a completely different way. The first time had been out of pure worry, but the second time was with a lot of shyness. Her cheeks were slightly red, and she was averting her eyes just a little bit. It was all so adorable.

*Not only beautiful, but truly lovely. She's perfection.* As that thought rushed through my head at full speed, I came back to my senses.

"I-I'm fine, Nia," I finally got out. "My apologies. You're just so beautiful that for just a moment I became utterly enchanted and bewitched."

"It seems like you still might be confused..."

I'd only said what I was thinking, but Nia's face was getting even redder. *Cute. No, Ark! Calm down, be cool.*

"It's just that even confused, the first thing I think of when I see you is how beautiful you are."

"Um, now I think *I'm* getting confused too..."



That was weird. I'd said it with the straightest face possible to show that I was composed again, but Nia's face was still flushed. I had no idea where I'd gone wrong here, and I wasn't sure what to do.

"All right, all right. Madam, Master, have you forgotten the important jobs you have today?"

Someone shot in between us, clapping her hands. It was, of course, Laura. I mean, yeah, it was a good thing considering the time and place. And her saying that made me remember that a very important ceremony was about to take place.

"My apologies. That's right. And it looks like you're well prepared," I said, looking at Nia once again.

The first thing that I saw was her dress—a cool and clear white that was bright to the eyes. It wasn't gaudy as a whole, but it used a ton of intricate, masterfully made lace, the calculated draping of which gave her a gorgeous and holy aura.

And it was Nia wearing that dress—Nia, who already was brilliant and had incredible strength of heart. What was more, today she was wearing makeup that made her look a little bit more adult than usual, so it wasn't a stretch to say that she now was a goddess who had descended from heaven.

"No, that is definitely an exaggeration, all right?!" Nia screeched, voice echoing.

*Oh shit!* "D-Did I just say that out loud?"

"Yes. Very, very clearly..."

My face went bright red at Nia's immediate response. I had meant everything that came out of my mouth, but the fact that other people had heard it was incredibly embarrassing.

"I would have preferred if Nia was the only one who heard that..."

*"That's what you're concerned about?!"*

I was about to say that yes, it was, but I stopped myself. If I'd said it, then we'd be doing this back and forth forever.

“Seriously. Please leave that sort of talk for the bedroom,” Laura’s cold voice rang out. Nia froze in place, now red as a tomato.

I mean, I think I froze too, but that was that. I mean, well, *that* was something I needed to get ready for, sooner or later.

“Laura, you really are a capable maid,” I said.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been less pleased to receive such praise.”

*Damn, she’s harsh.* Her curt words actually were a little bit of a relief for me.

The Saintess, reborn in the present day, and the hero who saved her. With us propped up like that there weren’t a lot of people who could speak to the two of us like that anymore. I mean, His Highness Prince Alphonse could run his mouth all he wanted to. Wait, put it that way and he was a precious person to us too, huh?

But I was honestly thankful to have a servant who could be straight with us like that. It would keep me sane and prevent me from getting carried away with the power and authority I’d been given.

“Please keep this disposition in the future,” I said to Laura. “I’m sure that either you or Tom could slam me in the back of the head if I ever got arrogant and unguarded.”

“Could you not get me mixed up in all of this so casually?!” Tom screeched in reply, but I couldn’t take back what I said. Few people in my life could physically knock some sense into me, so he needed to stick around after all this too.

“And here I was thinking there weren’t many people I’d give permission to punch me,” I mused out loud.

“And I’m saying I don’t *want* to punch you in the first place! Figure it out already!”

*I see. Ahh, I see, that really works, huh.*

“I’ve got it, Tom. Yep, I do. I’ll make sure to be someone who won’t trouble the both of you.”

That was probably the only way I could repay the two of them for supporting Nia: by being a proper, reasonable master. By being a hero who wouldn’t

embarrass the Saintess as her husband. It was horribly draining to put into words, but I was the one who chose this path, so I couldn't just throw it away.

"Let's go, Nia. Everyone is waiting."

I straightened my back and schooled my face into a hero's look, one of exalted, loving kindness and repose. Then, I held my hand out towards Nia.

"Yes, let's go... Ark."

Aaaaand that face was almost instantly shattered. I mean, wait, seriously, taking my hand while saying that was just unfair! I mean, yeah, we'd discussed this beforehand, but...!

In the end, I was the Saintess's spouse, akin to a slightly elevated follower. So officially, Nia was above me in rank, which was why we'd decided that she'd act that way in official settings. I had accepted that. But dropping the "Lord" at this timing was just *bad*!

But even though I thought that, I didn't let it show on my face. My pride was on the line here.

"I had thought that this would be an extravagant celebration, but I hadn't thought it would be *this* large-scale," I remarked.

"Hee hee. Let's just be thankful that it was publicly funded," Nia said, giggling. "Things are going to get even more expensive from now on."

"Just what I would expect from House McGuine's brains. You've got the strings on our wallet pulled tight."

The reason why we were able to have this little conversation as we walked out of the venue must have been because I was getting used to acting like a proper noble.

We were in the plaza of a huge church in Sylvario's royal capital. The plaza was normally used as a space for worshippers to listen to sermons and the like, but it was currently filled with excitement by all the people who'd pushed their way inside.

Yeah. The place was just *stuffed* with people. *Is the entire population of the capital here?* I almost burst out in laughter at the thought.

“I feel like I’m gonna laugh,” I said, thoughts coming out of my mouth. Seriously, though, it was all I could do in this situation.

“Is there something funny?”

“Kind of funny. More like exhilarating,” I responded, looking over the crowd of spectators again.

It was a massive group of people, tens of thousands in number. My battlefield experience lent me a knack for estimating crowd sizes, and with a population of roughly one million, it seemed like half the capital had shown up here.

“We’re going to be able to declare, in front of this many people, that you’re mine and I’m yours. Could anything be more exciting than this?” I said.

“Um, that’s...”

When I said it, a bit overwhelmed by the situation, Nia started mumbling. *Cute. No, Ark.*

But despite me saying that, she didn’t immediately shoot it down. That made me almost unbearably happy. I thought I couldn’t be any happier. But then, *it* happened.

“...Ark.”

“Yes?”

“Will you make me yours?”

*Am I about to die here?* Really, I would’ve been satisfied dying from that in front of all of these people. But I couldn’t die. Unlike fairy tales, reality didn’t just end with a “and they lived happily ever after.” Life would go on after this.

“Of course.”

So.

Life—my life with Nia—was going to continue after this. Couldn’t I be a little selfish here, then?

“Nia, you are mine. And I’ll never let you go.”

And with that declaration, I embraced her.

Ahh. I once again realized how delicate Nia was. With her slender frame, she'd fought as hard as she could to get to this point. When I thought about how she'd fought, something hot bubbled up within my chest.

"Don't ever let me go. I won't let you go either," Nia said. "Make me yours."

I was impressed with my sense of reason for surviving that. If we hadn't been in front of people, then I might've ended up letting my passion take hold of my body. It was getting really, *really* dangerous.

"Of course. It's absolute. It's eternal," I said, a vow from the bottom of our heart. And forgetting all procedure, we joined our lips in a kiss.

Apparently, the crowd went wild with glee, but at the moment I couldn't hear any of it.

I was going to live with Nia. I was sure that in the future I would be asked to do even more unreasonable things. There were probably relentless battles ahead of us too. But so what?! I wouldn't lose. There was no reason I would *ever* lose.

"I love you, Nia. From the bottom of my heart, only you."

After all, how could I lose? The woman I loved most was here in my arms.

"Yes. I love you too, Ark."

And so, the legend of the Saintess ended with a happily ever after, before beginning all over again. I'm sure that one day this story will be told—the one of the Saintess who involved an entire continent in her affairs. But that day wasn't today. I wanted a break from that right now. At this moment, right now, I just wanted to feel our happiness. And for just a moment my meager wish was granted.



*A few months after Balthazar's failed invasion of Brigandia and the subsequent conquest of Sylvario.*

I had taken an unexpectedly long time dealing with something non-work-related and arrived home much later than planned.

"Welcome home, Lord Ark."

“I’m home, Nia. Y’know, I’d really like it if you dropped the ‘Lord’ at home too soon.”

“Huh... Um, wait, Lord Ark!”

When I said that with a very serious expression, Nia immediately started panicking. *Cute.*

After the ceremony unveiling Nia as the Saintess a while back, I’d started talking more casually to her. And Nia did too; she was dropping the “Lord” honorific and speaking in a more casual tone more often when we were alone.

Honestly, hearing her talk to me so intimately was unbelievably cute, so I was split between the feelings of wanting to hear her talk to me like that normally and wanting her to only speak that way when she was with me. I knew it was a pretty luxurious problem to have, but a worry was a worry. But even after I said that, if she found it too embarrassing, then I wasn’t going to force her to do it.

“Anyway, what was your business tonight?” Nia asked, trying to change the subject with a rather forceful diversion. For her sake, I decided to go along with it.

“Oh, yeah, Gale wanted to talk,” I answered. “He wanted advice on marriage and running a household.”

“I see. So it was what you might call a ‘man-to-man’ talk?”

“Yeah, kinda.”

Nia seemed to infer a lot from that little back-and-forth.

While there hadn’t been any proper fighting during the last military expedition he’d been on, Count Barracuda’s group of retainers had seen Gale’s skill at coordinating the army as the count’s adjutant, and they’d accepted that he would be marrying into Barracuda County and become its next head of house. Thanks to that, preparations for his wedding to his fiancée, Count Barracuda’s daughter, Miss Emilia, had suddenly started speeding up, and his anxieties and worries over various things had increased.

So, as I was his senior in the field of suddenly being made head of a noble family, he came to me for advice.

“Gentlemen have their own problems, huh,” Nia said. “I’ve heard things from Emilia, but...”

“Yeah, I heard you ladies have it rough too. I’m sure Miss Emilia appreciates being able to confide in you.”

Really, there was no way Nia wasn’t being asked for advice when she was so much better at it than I was.

After all the postwar cleanup was done with, Nia and Miss Emilia had started meeting up quite frequently. Not only were their intellects at similar levels and their conversations thus lively, but Miss Emilia had a lot of worries, and Nia’s replies to them must’ve been really clear and helpful.

I’d been shocked when I’d realized they’d stopped adding “Lady” in front of each other’s name. In noble society, that basically meant they were best friends. While the wall between the wife of a viscount and the future wife of a count was surprisingly thick, it seemed that Miss Emilia didn’t care about things like that. And anyway, by the time she really did become a countess, that problem would be gone.

“Soon enough you’ll be the one needing her advice on how to run a count’s household, so it wouldn’t hurt to butter her up while you can.”

“Oh my, so it’s finally been decided?”

“In a couple years, at the very latest,” I confirmed. “According to His Highness, it might not even take a year if we speed it up.”

Nia’s eyes widened a little bit in surprise. *Cute. Wait, no.*

It wasn’t strange that Nia was surprised. I’d just been raised to the rank of viscount, but I was saying that my rise in peerage to a count was practically guaranteed to happen in the near future. Moving up at this speed definitely wasn’t normal.

But having a mere viscount be the Saintess’s spouse was bad for looks, and plus, I’d done so much in our conquest of Sylvario that my promotion had been decided on in an instant. Well, mostly it was because of His Highness spearheading the whole thing.

A small part of me knew this was happening so fast because it was His Highness, Count Barracuda, *and* Count Farlon all wanting this to happen. They might've just wanted me to owe them, though.

"Things'll be getting even busier, so I'd like to rest for today, And," I said, "Laura is out tonight."

When I said that, Nia gave me a little troubled smile, her cheeks red.

Laura had finally given in, and she was currently attending a ball with His Highness. So, if we married folk wanted to relax in our room, then we'd be all alone, *without* Laura.

While the maid wasn't staying the night there, she'd taken the next day off because she knew she wouldn't be back until late. This was at Nia's orders. Since Laura was from a former royal family *and* servant to the Saintess, she'd probably spent a lot of time at the ball being bombarded with questions, enough to exhaust even her. If Nia hadn't ordered her to rest, she probably would've ignored her exhaustion and tried to serve Nia instead.

While I was thinking about that, Nia whispered something quietly.

"Hmm? What did you just say, Nia?"

"Er, um, I mean, uh..."

When I asked her to repeat it, she couldn't reply immediately. That was rare. But I couldn't blame her. My ears were sharper than a normal person's, so I had heard what she said loud and clear. And despite this, I was *still* asking her to repeat it. Even I thought that was a nasty bit of work.

"Um. I don't have any plans for tomorrow. So, um..."

"Ah, um. I see."

I couldn't say any more than that. I'd gotten embarrassed myself.

She had no plans for tomorrow. Which meant she could stay up late. And that meant... Yeah, you get it.

Nia knew I would get what she was saying, so this was her doing her very best at seducing me. Which meant that it'd be mean of me to tease her too much, and anyway, I didn't have the presence of mind to tease her.



We'd spent the night together a number of times by now, but I still couldn't get used to it. At all. But I guess it was nice in itself that every time felt like the first.

"So no one can get between us tonight," I said.

"R-Right." Nia nodded bashfully. *Cute.*

I couldn't be more thankful to spend my life by this angel's side—to be her husband. It was something I never, ever wanted to lose. And for that reason, I'd go all out, as much as needed; the Black Wolf's fangs would always be bared. And they would surely never be dull.

## Afterword

To my first-time readers: Nice to meet you! And to those of you who read the last volume, long time no see. I'm Ajigozen. It's thanks to the support from all of you that I was able to get this second volume out, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

As those who read the previous volume and its afterword already know, there were some slightly strange circumstances behind this story's production, making it veer from the typical book's developments, but I managed to get to the ending. Thinking about everything that happened publishing-wise before, I'm thankful.

Ark and Nia's story will continue, of course, but between Alphonse's unparalleled mind for strategy and immense economic influence, plus Nia's peerless saintess power now that she's got devotees, I'm pretty sure it'd be a bit difficult to make into a book. I mean yeah, it might be interesting, but it'd probably also drift into another genre entirely. To do that when it's already barely scraping by as a female-targeted work...

Volume 2, especially, was just me writing "my idea of the strongest hero ever," so I'm a bit worried about how all of you will take it. He's kind, serious, yet knows how to take a joke. He's the strongest human ever, yet he's still got a brain. Just judging from Ark's specs, not only would he be a noble, but a perfect superhuman too. And he got to go crazy on the battlefield this time! I can only hope that you think that the earnest, clumsy part of himself that he shows to Nia is cute.

Speaking of things I'm thankful for, I'm really grateful to Yura Chujo-sensei for handling the cover and insert illustrations for this volume too. Olivia the third princess's expression in the frontispiece got me especially good... How about you guys? And the cover! I don't think we could've gotten a cover more suited for the finale of this series anywhere else! I'm really so lucky to have gotten Yura Chujo-sensei to draw it.

If you all consider this story's ending as its grand finale and enjoyed it, then I couldn't wish for anything more. And if it's at all possible, I hope we meet again somewhere, someday. I pray from the bottom of my heart that you pick up another book of mine.











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The Royal Hostage Has Vanished: The Black Wolf Knight Yearns for the Persecuted Princess Volume 2

by Ajigozen

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