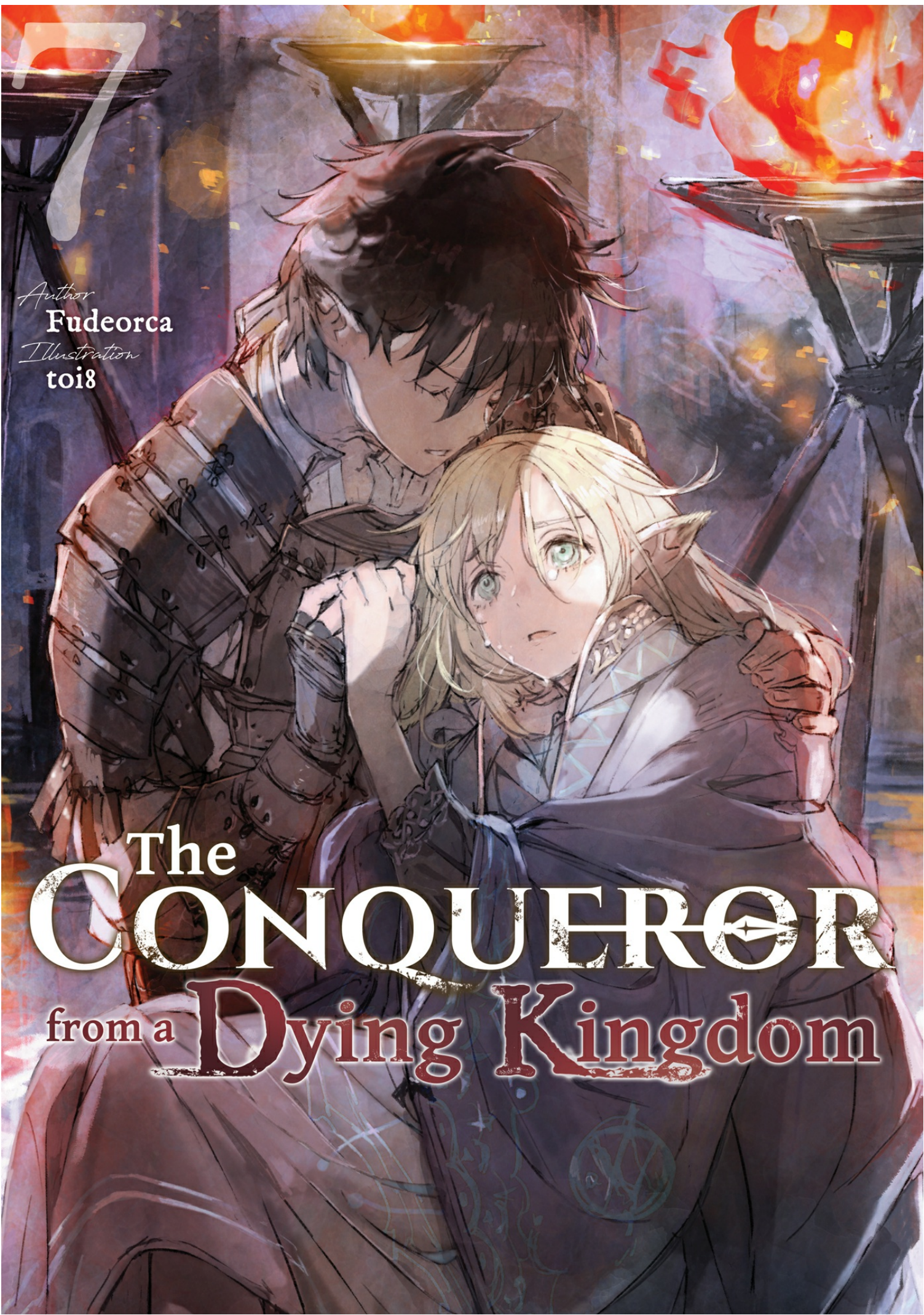


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# The CONQUEROR from a Dying Kingdom





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# Characters



## YURI HO

Eldest son of the Ho family—one of the Shiyalta Kingdom's chieftain families. While studying at the Knight Academy, he founded Ho Company. Having foreseen the downfall of the kingdom, he's trying to locate a new continent. He has past-life memories of living in modern-day Japan.



## CAROL FLUE SHALTl

A princess of the Shiyalta Kingdom raised to become the future queen. She attends both the Knight Academy and the Cultural Academy. She's prideful, but lacks worldly experience. Her beautiful blonde hair and blue eyes are evidence of her royal heritage.



## MYALO GUDINVEIL

A girl who studies at the Knight Academy despite being the eldest daughter from a witch family. She is loyal to Yuri and serves him like a staff officer.



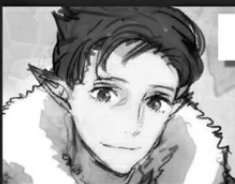
## SHAM HO

Yuri's cousin and a student of the Cultural Academy. Despite her genius intellect, she struggles with social interaction.



## LILLY AMIAN

A senior Cultural Academy student who shares a dorm room with Sham. She's a skilled engineer and often makes devices at Yuri's request.



## ROOK HO

Yuri's father. He used to manage a ranch until he succeeded his brother to become ruler of Ho Province.



## SUZUYA HO

Yuri's mother. She was born to a farming family and has a gentle manner that conceals her strong will.



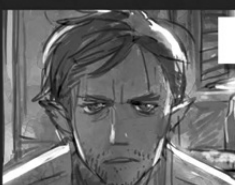
## ETHER WICHITA

A Kulati woman who fled her country after being branded a heretic. She teaches Kulatish language classes.



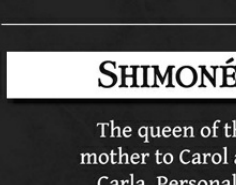
## DOLLA GODWIN

A boy of Yuri's age who attends the Knight Academy. He's heavyset and proficient in martial arts. He's in love with Carol.



## CAPH ORNETTE

The president of Ho Company. Yuri pulled him out of his former state of decline.



## SHIMONÉ FLUE SHALTl

The queen of the Shiyalta Kingdom and mother to Carol and Carol's younger sister, Carla. Personality-wise, she's laid-back.

# The Story So Far

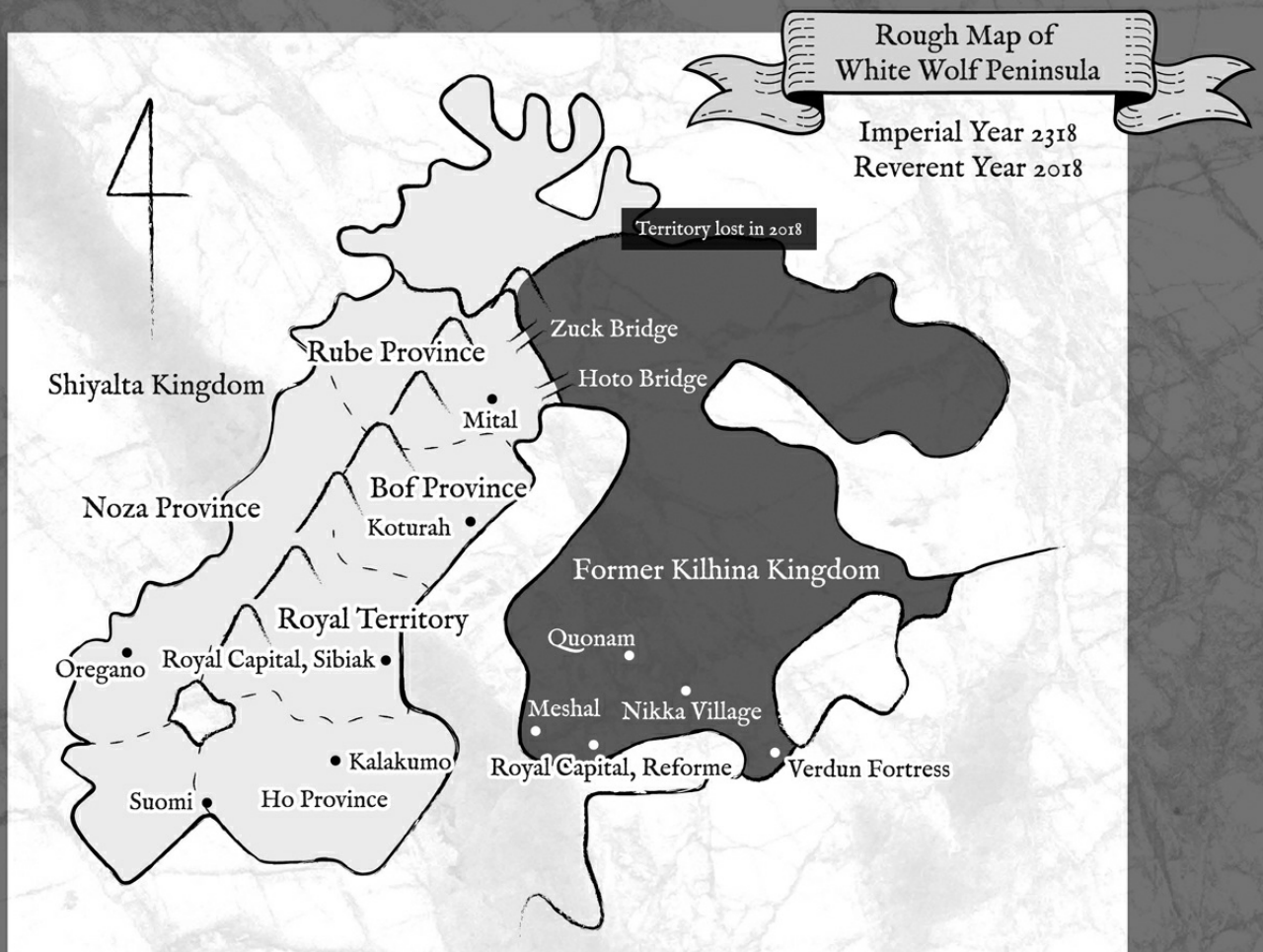
The world is inhabited by two types of humans—the Shanti and the Kulati—that are locked in a battle for survival. Invaders from Kulati nations—who’ve branded the Shanti as demons—have left only two Shanti kingdoms standing, both of which are on White Wolf Peninsula.

In one of those kingdoms, the Shiyalta Kingdom, a boy named Yuri was born to a chieftain family. Having realized that the place he calls home won’t persist for much longer, he started a business known as Ho Company while also studying at the Knight Academy to prepare himself for his responsibilities as heir to the Ho family headship.

Using memories of his past life spent in modern-day Japan, he developed a system for celestial navigation and is searching for a new continent while conducting trade with foreign nations.

Yuri and Princess Carol had already developed strong feelings for each other, so the two agreed to marry after Carol became pregnant.

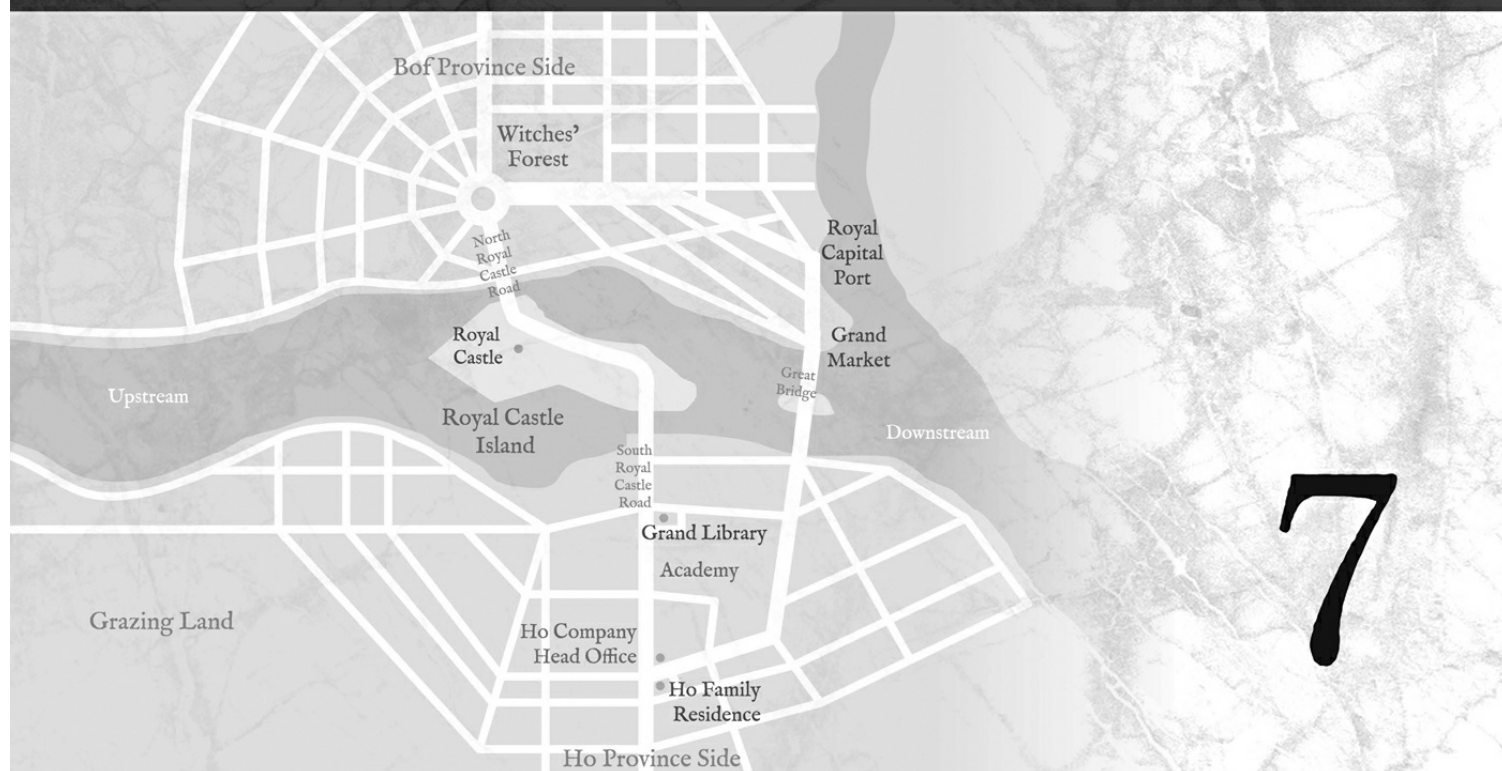
However, when their families met to celebrate, the queen and Yuri’s parents were killed by poison. Carol consumed that same poison, and it’s still unclear whether she’ll survive.





# C O N T E N T S

Chapter 1	↻	Breaking Away
Chapter 2	↻	The Battle for Sibiak
Chapter 3	↻	The Last Sabbath
Chapter 4	↻	The Next War
Intermission	↻	A Meeting in Andahl
Chapter 5	↻	Survivors and the Dead
Final Chapter	↻	A Girl's Days





# Chapter 1 — Breaking Away

I

White Sunset plunged straight down on a collision course with the ground.

After we'd descended about three meters, I gave the reins a strong pull. White Sunset calmly spread his wings wide, catching the slower-moving air around us.

Rook had handpicked this eagle. After giving up his career as a rancher, he'd continued to raise birds out of pure passion, rather than for profit. His birds had been trained as thoroughly as ever.

White Sunset's wings smoothly redirected our vertical momentum, such that our flight path became horizontal. We swiftly passed over the heads of the soldiers outside as we glided away from the royal castle.

But despite being exceptional, White Sunset suffered from the same limitations as all living creatures. He had to beat his wings faster than most eagles could've managed in order to support the two riders on his back, but those efforts produced less than half the ordinary lift. We were too heavy. White Sunset's angle of descent was unusually steep, because even gliding was a challenge. The ground was slowly getting closer.

Most nights, Sibiak was eerily dark. Although the royal castle was dotted with bright lights, there were no electric lamps to illuminate the streets. On moonless nights, the outline of the streets was impossible to make out at all from just the faint light that leaked from the windows of people's homes.

But this was no ordinary night. The streets were uncharacteristically bright because of the flaming torches held by soldiers patrolling the royal capital. Their pinpricks of light were visible all across the city. If those soldiers were enforcing a sort of martial law, it might prevent chaos from erupting in the streets.

The Ho residence came into view while we still had enough altitude. It looked



like we were going to make it.

We'd been in the air less than five minutes, but the early-spring Sibiak winds had already chilled me through my light clothing.

From the air, I saw that soldiers of the royal guard were still gathered outside the residence's main gate, suggesting that the building hadn't fallen yet. I couldn't be sure what was going on, but at least the situation looked favorable. As long as we could land somewhere controlled by our allies, I'd consider myself lucky.

We needed to land without being noticed, so I deliberately changed our heading midair, taking us closer to the rear garden, where we'd be less obvious.

White Sunset spread his wings wide as he beat them in preparation for landing, but it didn't slow us down as much as I'd hoped. We were falling too fast.

I couldn't jump clear of the eagle while holding Carol, so we simply had to brace ourselves as we rushed toward the ground. It was nothing like the graceful landing of a small bird stopping on a branch—White Sunset touched down so hard that I worried his chest would hit the dirt.

Still, our landing was successful. I was worried that White Sunset might've been injured, but fortunately, he appeared unharmed. I was relieved to know I hadn't lost such a fine eagle.

"Carol? Are you okay?"

"I'm f-fine..." Carol mumbled, trembling slightly, probably in response to the cold.

As I was undoing my harness, some soldiers rushed over and surrounded us. I recognized the head guard among them.

"Lord Yuri! Lord Yuri, is that you?!" he cried.

"Yeah. And this is Princess Carol. Help me lower her down."

"Y-Yes, sir!"

"She's sick. You'll have to support her."



“Sorry,” Carol said. “I just need a shoulder for support.”

I undid the rope that bound us together before slowly passing Carol down to the head guard. Next, I climbed down myself.

“We can’t stay here,” I said. “Get Princess Carol into a carriage. And give her a thick blanket too—the flight left her cold.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Oh, and make sure the soldiers out front don’t see her—especially her hair.”

For reasons unknown, they hadn’t attacked the residence. It was possible they hoped to avoid an open conflict with the Ho family.

If Rook and I had both died according to plan, it would’ve taken some time for a new head to assume control and take command of our army. Perhaps the witches thought they had a chance of placating the Ho family in the meantime. They might’ve begun by making a statement like, “The family head perished along with his wife and heir in a tragic, unexpected accident. You have our deepest sympathies.”

If that was their plan, then a direct assault on our residence would be a mistake. The raid would guarantee a war, because the people here couldn’t be killed in a sealed room with no witnesses like in the castle. The witches might’ve prepared for an all-out war, but they wouldn’t necessarily plunge right into one. The two approaches had much in common, but the differences were significant.

Another factor was that the plot had been carried out in such secrecy that neither the royal swords nor Myalo had gotten wind of it. Even within the second order of the royal guard, it was likely only a handful of officers who knew the truth. The rest had probably been mobilized without warning after the poison had taken effect—or, more precisely, after Carla had given the signal.

If only a few of the enemy’s officers understood the full situation, the soldiers positioned outside of the Ho residence were probably too confused to confidently attack an ally’s property. The situation would change rapidly, however—now that Carol and I were sheltering here, it wouldn’t be long until they stormed the grounds.



As I pondered over possibilities, I moved to the front of the building.

Sham and Lilly were the first ones to greet me. "Yuri!" they both cried.

"You're both all right?!" I asked them.

Sham rushed over and embraced me. "We're more concerned about you! You've no idea how worried we were!"





“Hah,” Lilly laughed. “I knew you’d be just fine, but that’s some state you’re in.”

I realized that I was wearing nothing more than a shirt and underwear resembling boxer shorts.

“Did you run here from the dorm?” I asked.

“Myalo fetched us from our room and had us follow her,” Lilly explained.

*Myalo...* I was more thankful than ever to have her in my service. I couldn’t have asked for more.

Next, the head maid appeared and dashed over to me. “Put some clothes on before you do anything else, little one,” she said.

It was as though her primary responsibility was to ensure I was properly dressed at all times. Then again, I wasn’t eager to start issuing orders in my underwear, so I’d be glad to put on whatever clothes she had prepared.

“Sham, let go of me.”

“Okay.” Sham stopped pressing her face against my stomach and stepped back.

As I followed the head maid into the residence, I told her, “I need armor too, but nothing heavy. Leather would be enough.”

“I’ll prepare it for you at once.”

Several sets of clothing had already been laid out for me in the room closest to the front entrance. They’d clearly been put there in advance so that whoever might escape the castle could change soon after arriving.

The head maid swiftly set to work helping me get dressed. She removed my thin shirt and held up another of thicker material, then she helped me put my head through some jangling chain mail. When she began tying the cord on my left side, I began tying the one on the right.

“You’ll have to stop calling me ‘little one.’ Father has...passed away.”

The head maid’s hands came to a stop. She remained perfectly still for about two seconds before she resumed her work. “Very well...my lord.”



Once I'd donned the armor, I concealed my dagger in my pocket, picked up a spear, and went back outside.

Over at the front gate, I could hear two groups of soldiers yelling at each other, seemingly on the verge of a fight.

In the garden, there were about twenty noncombatants, including a few fearful maids and several of the employees who'd been working in Ho Company's office across the street. Caph was part of the group, as was his wife-to-be, Beaule. Company procedures dictated that employees should take refuge in the residence in the event of an attack on the office—it had proved a wise decision. The pair had been planning to get married next month, but those arrangements looked unrealistic now.

Near Caph, there was a shallow hole in the ground containing various burning objects. I assumed they were secret documents he'd brought here from the office. That said, we'd known the office was likely to be raided at some point, so documents in the royal capital pertaining to secret technologies or the new continent were always scant on details. Whatever he was burning couldn't have been particularly sensitive.

"Everyone gather round!" I ordered.

A surprisingly high number of soldiers came over to me. I estimated that there were about two hundred in total. Then it hit me that many of them had been escorting Rook and Suzuya the day before. Since the soldiers they'd be relieving hadn't yet returned to Ho Province, many of the posts in the royal capital were currently double-staffed.

Among them, I spotted Soim. He appeared to have taken charge for the time being. Before stepping away from the main gate, he'd stopped to instruct the bare minimum number of soldiers to remain there since we couldn't just leave it undefended.

I kept myself positioned behind in the shadow of an entrance pillar where I wouldn't be visible from the gate as I addressed the soldiers.

"First, I'd like to give you all a brief summary of our situation. That is, the reason we're currently surrounded. You may have heard rumors already, but my mother and my father were invited to the royal castle today to discuss my

marriage. We were served poisoned wine with our meal. Through good fortune, I escaped unharmed. Sadly, the poison took my parents' lives."

I couldn't be sure they were dead, but saying so was the best way to encourage the soldiers to fight. They initially reacted to my words with expressions of disbelief. Then, as the significance of what I'd said sunk in, their emotions turned to anger.

"But this act was not committed by the royal family. I'm sure of it—Her Majesty Queen Shimoné and Her Highness Princess Carol also consumed the poison. That is to say, a sinister plot is underway that—in a single night—was intended to kill our queen, the crown princess, the man who was to marry the princess and become her prince consort, the lord-supreme who ruled the Ho family, and his wife. At this very moment, the plot has ensnared you all as well. These callous, cowardly murders were the work of Carla Flue Shaltl. But I'm sure many of you have heard the things people say about her. The girl is such a fool that the planning involved is far beyond her capabilities. The plot was devised, suggested to her, and then also proposed to the second order of the royal guard by the witches who infest this city."

As I made it clear who we were fighting against, I studied the faces of the many soldiers. There were no signs of doubt among them. Each soldier appeared determined as they established their enemy.

"Come what may, I will eradicate this foe upon my return. I will show no mercy to those who conceived this plan, poisoned my parents, and assassinated Her Majesty. I swear to you, on the graves of my mother and father, that someday, I will kill them all. Unfortunately, such a feat is beyond me while I have only the soldiers before me. That, too, was part of the witches' plan."

The soldiers listened to my words attentively.

"Although everyone except me consumed the poison, Princess Carol was also fortunate enough to escape relatively unharmed due to the small amount she drank. I had to leave the royal castle and part with my parents as they were coughing up blood, all so that I could come here with Princess Carol—the only righteous survivor of the royal lineage. I must get her to a safe place. That can only mean Ho Province. But, to do that, I must break through the heavy siege



that surrounds us. In other words, we need to break through the rabble that stands outside that gate and escape the royal capital. Lace up your boots and find your spears. Those with a bird, mount it at once. Those who can't fight, board a carriage. It's only in battle that we show our true power! Now, get moving!"

When I clapped my hands together, the soldiers moved as swiftly as fish dropped back into a river. Captains instantly took charge of their squads and began to give orders.

Soim stepped forward. He was dressed more lightly than me. With just a few narrow strips of metal offering him protection, his armor could've passed for ordinary clothing. He also wore a piece of headgear that was like a cross between a helmet and an iron headband. It only covered the front of his head. On his feet, however, were the sturdy boots worn by plainrunner riders. As minimal as his gear appeared, he was dressed for actual combat—a rider's legs were the parts most likely to be attacked. In his hand, he held an armored mask with a fearsome design similar to a Japanese men-yoroi's. It looked like some decorative piece that he'd brought out from the residence.

"That was a splendid speech to give before a battle, Young Master. Or should I call you 'Your Excellency'?"

"Not now."

"Please allow me to offer you my spear. A few words will suffice."

To accept his spear would mean accepting a vow of allegiance, but now wasn't the time—I'd just told him we needed to hurry.

"Just to be sure," I said, "you're not planning on dying here, are you?"

Soim grinned in response. He wasn't putting on an act, just showing his genuine happiness. "It fills me with the utmost joy to think that these old bones might yet be laid to rest before they've decayed."

"I'd...really prefer it if you survived." Komimi Culotte would feel the same way.

"To fall on the battlefield would be the greatest honor. I beg you."

Soim sounded determined to have his way. Or perhaps determination was the wrong word—for him, this wasn't even a decision. If he died here, he'd simply be obeying his nature. If I stood in his way, unable to bear the loss, I'd be refusing to respect the life he'd chosen.

"Soim, you've already given me your spear. It lives within me as lessons taught by a one-of-a-kind teacher. You're offering me something you've already given me."

"Then the honor will be mine all the more. What do you say?" Soim dropped to one knee before me and held out his spear flat.

I lowered my own weapon, rested it against the wall, and took his instead. "Soim Hao. Do you vow to serve as my spear?"

"I do."

"Then my spear you shall be from this moment forth. You are a true spear. Remain ever sharp, ready to pierce my foes at my command."

I handed his weapon back to him. He'd said a few words would be enough, so I hoped my short speech was enough to satisfy him.

"Now I can go forth into battle free from regrets," Soim said.

With the ritual over, he got to his feet looking oddly refreshed. It was like some of his youth had returned to him.

"I, Soim, having served the Ho family for four generations, long regretted my failure to give my life during the reign of Lord Gok...but now, fate has given me another chance. I thought I was too old to be filled with such joy. As your first retainer, I must serve you well enough to be worthy of this honor, Young Master."

"Why's a vow of servitude so important to you?" There had to be some significance to this ritual beyond choosing where to die.

Soim looked stunned by the question. "Must I say it? If I fall in battle without pledging my allegiance, it will be the death of a bloodthirsty killer. Knights who die in service of a vow do so honorably. It will be something I boast of to my friends in the netherworld."



“Is that right?”

Soim had lost all of his sons to war during Gok’s time, but I’d never expected that he’d be in a hurry to follow them since he seemed to enjoy his life.

“I, Soim, vow to achieve a feat in battle so great that it will be spoken of for seven generations. Rest assured, your rear guard is safe in my hands.”

“Heh. Well, if you fall in battle as the rear guard that protected both your master and Princess Carol—or rather, your queen—I can see a song or two being written about that.”

The last time I’d met Soim, he’d told me that he’d only grow weaker with time. If he deteriorated to the point that he couldn’t fight well, the battlefield wouldn’t offer him a graceful death, nor would his fight go on long enough to become a story. For someone like him, this might have been a gift from fate—a final chance to show the world his true worth.

After my conversation with Soim, I looked around the garden and saw that our preparations were more or less complete. I walked over to the captain of the cavalry, who was mounted on a plainrunner.

“Lord Yuri, I am truly—”

“There’s no time for that. Prepare a plainrunner for me.”

“What?! You intend to ride?”

That should’ve been obvious. I wasn’t just some company director who could sit and watch from inside a carriage.

“Of course. Can’t you see the spear I’m holding? I’ll be giving orders at the front.”

“It’s too dangerous. A carriage is—”

“Shut up about the carriage. I don’t want to abandon my father’s eagle, White Sunset. Is one of your men a good rider? We can trade birds.”

“I have a man in mind. But, Lord Yuri, you could ride the eagle yourself.”

*Not a chance.* “Less talk. Get on with it.”

“Y-Yes, sir! As you command!”

A direct order was enough to light a fire under the captain, who sprung into action. A moment later, he brought a plainrunner rider who climbed off his bird and declared, “Horos Yuma of the fifth detachment, at your service!”

Detachments sent to the royal capital were ad-hoc units made up of soldiers from many different permanent units. Horos belonged to the fifth such detachment to come here this year.

“Sorry, but I’ll need your plainrunner. My father’s eagle is named White Sunset. I want you to ride him to Ho Province.”

“Understood.”

“It’ll be difficult to make the journey tonight. The moon may be out, but White Sunset is already exhausted. Don’t attempt to fly the distance in one go, even if it seems possible. Get out of the royal capital and find somewhere to land a good distance from the road where you can rest until morning. You can take a little meat from our feeding ground for White Sunset. Once you reach Ho Province, go to the nearest government office and explain the situation. If you can convince them to dispatch soldiers to the border of the royal territory, all the better. Got all that? Say it back to me.”

“Understood. I’ll leave the royal capital, land in a clear area that’s not near the road, feed the eagle, rest until morning, then find a government office in a town and negotiate the dispatch of troops.”

“Good. You get full marks. I’m counting on you,” I said, patting him on the shoulder.

The soldier calling himself Horos left his bird and quickly got to work removing his leather armor—it would only weigh him down. I made a mental note to remember his name so I could compensate him later.

I jumped up onto the plainrunner and inserted my spear into a holder in the saddle. Next, I rode over to Caph.

“Hey,” I called to him casually.

“I can’t believe the mess we’re in,” Caph said. “I don’t know how we’ll recover from this...”



“I figured you’d be happy,” I said.

Caph looked at me with an expression of disbelief.

“You’ve always hated witch families. Now, we’re going to destroy each and every one of them. We’ll eradicate them all without a trace. If you’re thinking about the future, consider that.”

“Ah, I see what you mean...”

“Give me some bottles. I’ll need them in a moment.”

Caph passed two Molotov cocktails up to me. Each one consisted of a cluster of three bottles.

Lately, we’d been using cork stoppers to seal our Molotovs, but these were already unsealed and stuffed with cloth. The pieces of fabric were damp with the liquid they’d absorbed.

“Want this too? It should be useful.” Caph held out a gun with a short barrel. It would be ideal for a mounted soldier. “I’ve another one of my own. You can take it.”

There was a long flintlock rifle lying on the ground beside him. It would be harder to maneuver with it, but the bullets would fly farther and faster because they’d take longer to escape the force of the pressurized gas within the barrel. It looked as though Caph planned to help us fight.

“Thanks. I’ll make good use of it.” I took the small gun from him, checked the safety, then put it through my belt. “Now, board a carriage. They’re about to leave.”

“Lord Yuri.” I heard Beaule’s voice. “Please be safe. I pray that victory awaits you in battle.”

That didn’t sound like quite the right thing for her to say, since she was going to be right there in the battle with me, but it didn’t matter. I simply told her “Thanks” before turning my plainrunner around.

Once Caph had boarded a carriage, the garden looked clear of the noncombatants.

I turned my plainrunner’s beak toward the front gate. Beyond it, a dense

cluster of soldiers from the second order of the royal guard were occupying the road. I'd seen from above that about five hundred soldiers were blocking our escape route, yet there were even more surrounding the residence from all sides.

I had roughly one hundred and forty infantry with me, plus an additional sixty mounted soldiers. I figured it'd be enough.

As it grew obvious that we were gearing up for combat, the soldiers outside were growing tense. They kept their spears pointed at us in preparation for the upcoming fight, but so far, none of them had fired a single bullet or arrow. It was as though they had no idea how to react when faced with a real battle.

"Lend me that for a moment." I took a flaming torch from a soldier and used it to light the Molotovs' fuses.

After handing back the torch, I spurred my plainrunner forward with a gentle kick to its abdomen and threw the first cluster of three bottles. I stopped right before the enemy, then threw the second bundle of bottles toward the soldiers at the front. Without pausing to see the result, I turned around and retreated some distance away. Then, I reached for my spear, which was upright in its holder, and lifted it toward the sky.

"Infantry, clear the area in front of the gate! Then the cavalry will clear the path beyond! Lastly, the infantry will wait until the carriages are clear, then follow after them!" I lowered the spear and pointed it toward the enemy. I saw five or six men screaming as the flames engulfed them. "Show them our might! The forces of witches will learn the power of the Ho family on the battlefield!"

With their tasks assigned, the soldiers lifted their spears and all cried out at once. "Uoooooooooh!" they roared as they charged forward.

The frontmost members of the royal guard had already been eager to flee at the sight of their burning comrades. They were weaklings who'd never taken part in a war. One hundred and fifty years ago, during a chieftain family's rebellion, they'd served a purpose, but ever since they'd been little more than stooges supporting criminal enterprises. Even during that rebellion, it had been the royal guard's first order that had done most of the fighting.

Our infantry rushed forward and thrust their spears into the burning enemies

with enough momentum to push the whole force back. As the royal guard was forced away from the gate, space began to open up. More of the royal guard's soldiers, with their superior numbers, spilled into that space from both sides. If our infantry kept pushing, they'd soon find themselves surrounded.

Since we planned to charge right after exiting the gate, I wanted our plainrunners positioned slightly to the left to make our turn less sharp. When I exchanged glances with the cavalry captain, he knew exactly what I wanted and gave instructions to his unit. A charge was at its most powerful when moving straight forward.

I lifted my spear high once more and made another appeal to the soldiers. "Fearless knights of the Ho family! Raise your spears to my father, who watches over us from above! Live up to your reputation! Our power will be spoken of throughout the royal capital! Charge!"

I lowered my spear, then kicked my plainrunner in its side. By striking my feet rhythmically, I quickly made the bird switch from a walk to a trot, then to a gallop.

From my position at the front, I thrust my spear into the neck of a soldier who'd turned to run at the sight of the approaching plainrunners, then trampled the men in front of me. Given my elevated height, I checked my surroundings. I spotted someone giving out orders from atop a plainrunner to the rear left.

I disengaged the gun's safety, then took aim. The metal piece holding the flint dropped with a *click*, igniting the gunpowder inside the pan. A moment later, the main gunpowder charge exploded with a loud bang. The bullet hit the man I'd been aiming for in the chest, knocking him off his plainrunner.

Since I lacked the tools needed to reload the gun, I threw it to a nearby foot soldier.

While this was going on, my mounted soldiers were flooding in from behind me, one after another, and beginning to scatter the royal guard. Our cavalry was like a spear that forced the enemy apart, breaking the barrier they'd formed and clearing the road for us.

"The siege is broken! After me!"

I looked behind me and raised my weapon to beckon to the first driver waiting for a chance to get through the gate. He wasn't driving a wagon but a passenger carriage with Carol on board.

Beside the carriage, I saw Soim. He was almost standing, his body hovering above his plainrunner's saddle as he thrust at the faces of foot soldiers trying to stop the carriage's advance. In no time at all, he'd skewered three of them, keeping the way forward clear.

*That's some show he's putting on. I wouldn't want to get in that old man's way.*

Three carriages made it safely through the gate while the way was clear. When I heard a gunshot and saw a flash of light from the carriage farthest back, I knew it had to be Caph.

Once the last carriage had made it past the besieging forces, the infantry left the positions they'd been holding and followed behind it. As they took up new positions around the carriages, Soim let himself drop behind in the hopes of sowing confusion among the pursuing enemy. In doing so, he ensured we broke away cleanly from the residence.

"Hey! Cavalry captain!" I yelled.

"Sir?"

"Send out a detachment to scout the road ahead! Keep everyone else close together! If the enemy pursues and looks likely to attack our infantry from behind, turn around and scatter them with another charge!"

"Understood!" he responded loud and clear before beginning the task assigned to him.

Fortunately, the enemy seemed to lose interest in us as we moved away from the residence, allowing our entire party to escape safely.

I knew that members of the royal guard were patrolling the streets with flaming torches in hand like town guards, but none of them came for us. If this kept up, we'd soon be completely clear of the royal capital.

Before long, scouts returned to report what they'd seen up ahead. "There's a



barricade blocking off the city's southern exit. They shot arrows at us from a distance."

It seemed we wouldn't escape without problems after all.

"How big is the force defending it?" I asked.

"About a hundred strong. They're behind a wall made from logs with their bows at the ready."

"They can't stop us with a barricade. What are they thinking...?"

The witches were proving completely clueless on the battlefield. They'd shown competence when organizing a conspiracy, but combat wasn't their strong point. Likewise, the second order must've been completely lacking in relevant experience since tasks like eradicating bandits were generally left to the royal guard's first order.

"Cavalry captain, I'll lead the entire cavalry to it. Infantry captain, continue to move forward at a steady pace and then charge in after we've begun our attack."

"What...?"

"There's no time to explain. Those are your orders. Cavalry, follow me!"

The cavalry kept up as I increased my plainrunner's speed.

Every mounted knight had been trained at the Knight Academy, which meant they'd lived in the royal capital for at least ten years, but they might not have visited this area. For me, however, these streets were familiar. I used to visit regularly in search of raw materials for use in papermaking since many drapers operated here.

The capital wasn't enclosed by city walls. Most of the roads in and out of the city weren't suitable for carriages because they were only wide enough for two people to pass each other. The lack of a well defined boundary between the city and its surroundings meant that these minor roads formed countless exit points. The enemy might block all the major roads, but that could only stop our carriages. We'd need to attack their barricade, but nothing was forcing us to attack it head-on.

As expected, we were able to travel single file down a familiar road, easily taking us outside of the royal capital. From there, I could see the rear of their barricade just fifty meters away. The burning bonfires turned it into a well-lit target.

“Now, we’ll clear the path,” I said calmly. I couldn’t yell my orders, but my intentions became clear when I increased my speed.

A few paces behind the barricade, a man, who I guessed was their commander, stood with his arms folded and his gaze locked on the road in front of him. I got to within three meters of him before he finally noticed me approaching from behind. His eyes went wide when he saw our cavalry come charging out of the darkness.

“You can’t— Ugh!”

By the time his hand found the sword at his waist, my spear had already pierced his chest. When I felt the impact, I swung my spear to the side, casting off his corpse.

As I continued forward without slowing, the archers hastily threw down their bows and reached for spears. I cut down two of them in an instant. The rest of the cavalry caught up and made short work of the other soldiers defending the barricade. After just a few moments, their defensive position was a bloodbath strewn with corpses that were trampled beneath our birds. We’d suffered no losses.

Our infantry had begun their charge on the other side of the barrier, but we’d finished the fight before they could reach us.

“All troops, dismount! Dismantle the barricade!”

I stopped my plainrunner by the roadside and climbed down so I could help clear away the barrier. The infantry could’ve easily done the work while we remained on our birds, but every second counted. The soldiers we’d just fought hadn’t been a threat, but I worried about the enemy cavalry that might be dispatched after us once news of our escape spread. If possible, I wanted our infantry and our carriages to continue without having to stop.

As infantry soldiers arrived, they joined our efforts to pull apart the logs that

made up the makeshift wall.

I looked back at the city streets. I hadn't seen Soim since we'd cleared the residence. He'd charged at the enemy to give our infantry a chance to escape, but I doubted he'd died there and then. He might, however, have been caught by pursuers that had come later.

The cavalry captain beside me spoke as he was shifting logs off the road. "The soldiers on this barricade went down just as easily as the ones surrounding the residence. If they're all so weak, we could've stormed the royal castle tonight." Our swift victory just now had put him in high spirits.

"Don't be a fool. There are over five thousand soldiers positioned around the castle. I know because I saw them from above. There might be twice as many more inside the castle itself. It's beyond us."

"I wasn't aware. My apologies, sir. Please forgive me for speaking out of turn." With a log still in his arms, the cavalry captain bowed.

"All we can do is pray that they handle the bodies of my deceased mother and father with respect... Though I'll show them no mercy either way."

"Next time, we fight for vengeance."

"Yes, but stay focused. We might have to deal with a large cavalry force sent after us."

As we wasted our breath on this conversation, we continued to shift the logs until the road was clear enough for the carriages to pass.

## II

Since departing from the Sibiak residence, Soim Hao had been serving as a one-man rear guard.

Now, he was watching for any enemies who might've been approaching from behind while keeping the force he intended to protect just barely within his sight. If enemies appeared at the main force's rear, he'd be well positioned to execute a pincer attack.

It seemed obstacles had been set up along the royal capital's southern edge,

but the main forces broke through with ease. As Soim waited, the barricade in their path was removed in no time at all, allowing the carriages to continue on. They'd stopped for less than ten minutes.

Soim spurred his bird onward, following after them.

The corpses of a few dozen soldiers were strewn on the ground beyond the scattered logs of the barricade, staining the road's stone cobbles crimson with blood. Some of the bodies had been crushed when they'd been trampled underfoot or run over by carriage wheels. To Soim, this was the nostalgic flooring of the battlefield.

Live wood must've been thrown onto the bonfires because they made constant crackling and popping noises as they burned. Amid the sparks, dark smoke rose into the air along with the scent of blood. These were the familiar smells of the battlefield.

Soim could almost feel the presence of souls recently separated from their bodies still lingering here in the air. This wasn't an old battlefield; it was still fresh. He felt he'd finally returned to his rightful place.

Beyond the royal capital, the road ran straight. He no longer needed to keep the main force within sight.

The way before him was dark, lit by nothing but the moonlight. He'd traveled this road many times, but today it was a shining path that led to glory.

Soim slowed his plainrunner to a walk as he followed the road. His pace was equivalent to a human walking at a brisk pace, which was as slow as a bird would go.

An hour after he'd left the royal capital, he caught the sound of a flock of birds approaching from behind. A good distance away, individual torches came into view on the stone road.

Soim felt his blood quicken, but he quickly suppressed the feeling, as if dousing his own heart in cold water. Too much excitement would render his techniques imperfect. Experience had taught him this all too well.

Soim stopped his bird and found a rock the size of his fist lying by the road.



“Hah!” With a short cry, he turned his plainrunner toward the pursuers.

Soim accelerated, and by the time he was moving at a gallop, the distance between him and the enemy was rapidly closing. He chose that moment to throw the rock. The moonlight barely penetrated the tall trees on either side of the road, creating something close to pure blackness. For someone whose eyes were used to the light of a torch, it would be as though the rock had suddenly appeared out of nowhere.

The rock hit the leading knight directly on his head, sending him tumbling backward off his plainrunner. He must’ve kept a tight grip on the reins attached to his bird’s beak, because the bird came to a sudden stop as its rider fell. As the birds behind struggled to avoid their leader, five or six of them lost their riders as well.

The mysterious case of riders falling from their birds caused someone to yell out, “Halt!”

This was the outcome Soim had been hoping for. Even his skill with the spear wasn’t enough to take on a flock of birds while they had momentum.

He wordlessly charged into the group, whipped his weapon around, and slashed the necks of the closest soldiers. His spearhead cut through the throats and arteries of several men.



“What is that?!”

A soldier had spotted Soim and cried out, but Soim quickly thrust his spear into the man’s eye.

“What?! What’s going on?!”

When Soim sensed that the group had succumbed to confusion, he rose from his saddle. He’d shortened the straps holding the stirrups in place, which forced him to fold his legs uncomfortably in order to sit but allowed him to stand up high while riding. Gripping the saddle with his knees, rather than his thighs, Soim looked down on the knights from his elevated position.

He gripped the reins in his left hand, steering the bird through subtle tugs and making it take individual steps as though he were a trick rider. All the while, he was wielding the spear with his right. Such a feat was only possible because Soim and his plainrunner had formed a bond and come to know each other’s eccentricities in the three years since he’d bought the bird.

Soim killed another ten men, one after another, before the enemy managed to regain a semblance of organization.

Soim watched as the knights’ spears began pointing toward him. He backed off a little as he caught his breath, but not far enough that his opponents could gain momentum while charging him.

“How dare you?! Who are you?!” The questions came from a rider near the back of the group, who was coming forward while others moved out of their path. It appeared to be their commander, and judging by the sound of the voice, she was a woman.

“My name is Soim. I am the first retainer of Yuri Ho, and my spear once served Rook Ho. I see that these men are under the command of a witch.”

“Quite so. We are the Eulich Knights of the royal guard’s second order, and my name is Dinsche Cursefit. How dare you stand in our path? This road is within territory under the jurisdiction of Her Majesty the Queen.”

Dinsche was the third eldest daughter of the Cursefit family, which itself was part of the seven witches. She was a forty-three-year-old graduate of the Knight

Academy.

“Since the death of our former queen, the Ho family wields spears for no one other than Queen Carol. What about you? Will you tell me that your authority in the royal territory is given by a wretch who poisoned her own mother?”

“My orders come from Queen Shimoné. You are to be arrested in Her Majesty’s name. I suggest you come quietly.”

Unless this witch was making some kind of joke, Soim thought she must be incredibly stupid.

“Listen, witch. You should know that you lost your power to halt our spears with words the moment you poisoned the head of the Ho family.”

Soim wasn’t going to listen to her any longer. He kicked his bird’s flank to spur it forward, but a knight moved in front of Dinsche to shield her.

“I am Gugry of the Solnant family! A second son whose mother bears the title lady-of-insight! I will be your opponent!”

As the knight calling himself Gugry spoke, he readied his spear and charged forward on his plainrunner. The instant before the knight’s spear was about to hit, he adjusted his aim to target Soim’s plainrunner.

Soim reacted as though he’d expected this all along. He lowered his body slightly and knocked his opponent’s weapon off-course by moving his spear in a broad sweeping motion, like someone clearing away leaves with a broom. He then swung the spear in the opposite direction, cutting through his opponent’s neck.

The knight was decapitated as he passed by Soim. The man’s head rolled to the ground as his body went on without it. The plainrunner kept running as a fountain of blood gushed from the headless rider still on its back.

It had been a long time since Soim had last demonstrated his lack of fear by maintaining his ground and decapitating an opponent. In his old age, he’d come to prefer kills made by a quick cut to the throat. For the first time in decades, he experienced the feeling of his weapon cutting through the spine.

“I’m not at all surprised to learn that witches let their spears grow dull! A Ho



family retainer refines his techniques with age! Watch closely and learn it firsthand!”

Soim readied his spear again and charged forward.

“Damn! Someone! Someone do something about him!” Dinsche Cursefit screeched at the knights surrounding her. “Draw your bows! Does no one have a bow?!”

But, of course, not a single one was carrying a bow. It wasn’t common practice to fire arrows while riding a plainrunner, so it made no sense to bring one. And no one else was willing to challenge Soim with nothing to rely on besides a bird, their body, and a spear.

Soim stood up on his mount and gently waved his narrow spear to and fro. With each flick of his perfectly ordinary spearhead, it found its way into a vital area of another soldier, releasing spurts of blood. The bodies began to pile up on the ground beneath Soim. He was weaving the carpet of the battlefield and laying it down behind him as he advanced.

“What’s wrong with you all?!” Dinsche yelled. “Hold him back! Don’t let him push you!”

With his face hidden under his strange mask, Soim continued to stand above the saddle and add to the mass of corpses with his perfected techniques. The soldiers had come to believe that it was no man approaching them but a monster. They thought their path was blocked by some mythical creature they never should have disturbed. When the beast drew near, their main concern was keeping out of its path.

The Eulich Knights, numbering five hundred in total, was the strongest unit among the eleven thousand knights that made up the second order of the royal guard. Even when considering the royal guard in its entirety, only the first order’s Dawn Knights was stronger.

Since chieftains were only permitted to position three hundred soldiers within the royal territory at most, the soldiers fleeing the royal capital should have been few in number. In theory, they would have been no trouble to hunt down and eliminate. But in reality, this lone man was too much for them to handle. They were being pushed back.

Try as he might, however, Soim had taken the lives of fewer than a hundred knights. He'd killed fifty-two, precisely, while another eleven that had avoided an instant death had turned and fled with vital arteries severed.

Even a spearhead forged by a master blacksmith would grow increasingly dull each time it touched chain mail, robbing of its ability to cut. But Soim's techniques remained sharp as ever, while the weapons of those who challenged him had long since rusted.

"Enough! All knights, ignore him and continue forward! Return to your mission of pursuing the main force! Anyone who does otherwise will be punished for their insubordination!"

Dinsche's men didn't immediately respond to the orders she was yelling.

"All of you! He's just some old man! He has neither ten arms nor ten weapons! You can avoid one spear! Now go!"

The moment Dinsche finished speaking, Soim unleashed his first war cry of that day.

"Uuuuuuuuooaaargh!"

The sound echoed through the forest around them, striking fear into every soldier. They could scarcely believe that it had come from an old man.

As Soim unleashed this mighty shout, he charged straight through the enemy. There wasn't much strategy behind the decision. After fighting constantly for dozens of minutes, he was so exhausted that he hadn't even heard Dinsche speaking. But every inch of his being remained focused on his task, and he'd been watching the foe carefully.

Dinsche's words had erased what little fighting spirit had remained in her knights. Their instincts, sharpened on the battlefield, told them that they'd been given a chance for survival, and they weren't going to pass it up. When she'd given the knights permission to avoid fighting, it had been a careless decision. She'd made it so they could give up completely without having to disobey orders.

"Agh!" a soldier exclaimed as he turned his bird around to flee. Soim let him go.

Soim's battle cry continued and he brandished his spear menacingly to ward off the knights. He charged directly toward Dinsche.

Rather than get in his way, the knights cleared a path. As Soim passed them, he left his back exposed, and yet no one thrust their spear at him. Dinsche had been about five meters away from the front, but the soldiers that should have shielded her with their bodies were more concerned with saving themselves.

Soim had Dinsche fixed in his gaze. Unlike him, she wore no mask. She remained perfectly motionless as she watched Soim approach. Her shoulders trembled, and she shrank in on herself as she looked upon Death himself charging toward her. The expression on her face was unlike those Soim had seen on battlefields of the past—it was the face of a woman consumed by fear.

Once Dinsche was within his range, Soim swung his spear without mercy. Its blade hit the side of her narrow neck, and the feeling was pleasant as it cut through her completely.

"I have taken your commander's head!" Soim declared loudly while brandishing his spear.

He sensed a decrease in the density of the knights surrounding him.

Soim felt like an instrument whose strings had broken. His performance couldn't go on any longer. His mental focus was lost, and the willpower that had filled him just a moment ago drained away completely, making him no different from any other old man who'd kept himself in shape. With his spirit, technique, and physique all past their prime, he was at his limit. Soim knew that better than anyone. But his heart was filled with pride and a sense of accomplishment—he'd done enough.

"Come at me if you'd make a name for yourself! It was I who took your master's life! Anyone capable of taking the head of Soim of the Ho family in retaliation, step forward!"

### III

After we'd hurried through the night, we finally reached Ho Province the next afternoon. Upon our arrival, we found troops waiting for us near the border.

Around two thousand soldiers had moved roughly two kilometers into the royal territory where they awaited us.

“Lord Yuri, we were expecting you.”

Gino Toga, the man I’d met in a forest in Kilhina, was the one to greet me. Alongside him were a number of familiar old men who were all saluting me.

“Good work,” I told him. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“Excuse my impatience, but could you perhaps explain the situation?” an old man asked. He held the title of lord-of-estates, which was one rank below lord-supreme, and governed a wide region near the border.

“I’ll explain in full during a gathering of lords in Kalakumo, but to summarize, my father, my mother, and Her Majesty the Queen were killed by poison.”

“It can’t be...”

“It’s the witches’ doing. Expect a war.”

The hint of joy that appeared on the old man’s face for a moment didn’t escape my notice. Eradicate the witches of the royal capital and reclaim the kingdom—a cause like that was bound to tug at the heartstrings of any knight.

Our cause was a temptation that several chieftain families had succumbed to throughout Shiyalta’s history. But in each case they’d been quickly defeated, or their leaders had been assassinated. They lived on in history books only. Uprisings had been more successful in some other kingdoms that had existed in the past, but those had long since fallen.

“Then let us hurry to Kalakumo,” Gino said.

“Princess Carol rests aboard this carriage,” I said. “She’s recovering after drinking a small amount of the poison. I’d like to find an inn where she can rest before we reach the provincial capital.”

“Very well. I shall make arrangements. Please hurry onward, Sir Yuri.”

“No, I won’t leave her before she reaches an inn. Now send messenger eagles and pigeons to the lords and tell them to gather in Kalakumo.”

“As you command.”



“Oh, what about my father’s eagle, White Sunset? Where is he?”

“The bird is resting in a village nearby. He arrived unharmed.”

*That’s a relief.*

“Hm...?” Gino suddenly narrowed his eyes and stared at something behind me. His gaze was aimed along the road I’d just taken.

*Now what?*

I turned around and saw a lone knight slowly approaching us on a plainrunner. He looked like he’d bathed himself in a stream of blood. His entire body was filthy, as was the bird he rode on. Where the blood had already dried, the color had turned to a blackened red. His appearance spoke of a gruesome battlefield.

It was Soim. As he slowly made his way back to us on his plodding plainrunner, he kept glancing back over his shoulder. Once he reached me, he got off the bird.

“Soim! You made it!”

*This is great news!*

“Yes, well... Haaah.” Soim sighed deeply as he removed the strange mask he’d borrowed from the residence.

It wasn’t the sigh of an exhausted man finding a moment to rest. It was a sigh of disappointment. For him, there was no joy whatsoever in having made it back alive.

“What happened?” I asked.

“They were pathetic. My expectations were utterly betrayed.”

Now that he was back on his own two feet, Soim kept glancing behind him even more often. It was as though he still held hope that the enemy was chasing him, despite the fact that he’d already made it to safety.

“I don’t know the details, but isn’t that a good thing? You survived.”

“Haaah...” Soim once again heaved the deepest of sighs.

Judging from the state he was in, the witches had indeed pursued him. But

they clearly hadn't given him the challenge he'd been hoping for. I suspected that he'd only had to fight off five or so pursuers.

"You could have dealt with the enemy without help from me or anyone else, Your Excellency. They were the most pathetic weaklings."

"Really...?" *That must've been a letdown.*

"I'm still struggling to believe that they've retreated permanently and won't make another attempt," Soim added.

I could almost hear his thoughts: *Why didn't they have another go? What's up with these guys?* I had to wonder what had happened.

"Please forgive me, young master, but I feel I must rest. I haven't drunk in some time, but I feel the need for something hard."

"S-Sure. Rest all you need."

"Haaah, what a disgrace..." Soim muttered.

He climbed onto his plainrunner and trudged off along the road, an aura of gloomy disappointment rising from under the many layers of blood coating his body.

"We're here," I announced as I opened the carriage door. Inside, I saw Carol, the head maid, and Sham.

"Haaah... Haaah..." Carol seemed to lack the strength to respond. Her breathing was rapid and shallow, and the life was almost gone from her eyes.

"Yuri...?" Sham looked just as drowsy as she blinked her eyes.

Since the stone cobbles of the road weren't smooth like asphalt, carriages moving quickly would rattle horribly. Although our passenger carriages had a little wooden suspension, it didn't dampen the vibrations enough for the passengers to sleep. Sham had been in the carriage all through the night and into the afternoon of the next day, so it was a given that she'd be exhausted.

"I'm sorry, but I'll need you to keep working a little longer," I told the head maid.

She couldn't hide her exhaustion, but she was the only passenger still sitting up straight in her seat.

I entered the carriage and put my arms around Carol's knees and shoulders to lift her. Moving as slowly as possible, I carried her like a fragile item, out of the carriage and into the inn we'd stopped alongside.

"Th-This way please." The inn's owner, overawed by the important guests that had arrived with barely any warning, guided us into the establishment's finest room.

This inn town, known as Rossi, was a small place that most travelers passed by without stopping, so most of the lodgings were also small. This one was the only exception. The finest room wasn't all that fine, but all Carol really needed at that moment was somewhere to lie down.

I carefully laid Carol down on the bed.

"Please bring in everything she'll need," I told the head maid.

"All you wish, my lord."

She bowed her head to me before casually ushering the inn's owner out of the room and following after him. She must've known I'd want a moment alone with Carol.

I sat at Carol's bedside and looked at her. She appeared weak, but nothing indicated that her life was in danger.

"Carol. Rest here for a while."

"Okay..."

That confirmed she could hear me.

"We're in Ho Province. You're safe now. You should get some sleep."

"Yuri...go. Hurry...to the royal capital..." Carol sounded delirious. She spoke as if the matter was urgent.

"Stop talking. You'll tire yourself out."

"Forget me... Just go... Take back...Sibiak..."

"All right. I hear you. I'll go do that."

When I held her hand, it felt hot like she was running a fever. She gripped me in return with a surprising amount of strength.

“Please...”

“You can count on me. Don’t worry, I’ll reclaim the city, whatever it takes.”

I let go of Carol’s hand and left the room.

Outside, I found the head maid with her head bowed. She spoke quietly so that only I could hear her. “Please leave Princess Carol in my care. Rest assured that I’m an experienced nurse.”

“It might be a good idea to feed her some watered-down gruel,” I suggested. “And pay attention to the room’s humidity.”

“As you wish.”

“I’ll take the noisy soldiers with me to the next town.”

Even indoors, we could hear loud chatter and orders being issued outside. I couldn’t tell them to quiet down because it was just the sound of them doing their jobs. There was no way I could let them all stay here, as much as I wanted to let them rest after a sleepless night of marching.

“Before long, local soldiers will arrive to defend this inn. If they’re noisy enough to disturb her sleep, do something about it immediately. Make your demands clear to the town’s mayor.”

“Understood.”

“Pay close attention to everything around you. Remember the faces of the inn’s staff and report it if you see anyone new. The inn should be entirely ours.”

“Very well.” The head maid respectfully lowered her head again.

She never forgot about the small details when handling difficult tasks like this, so I knew she was the perfect person for the job.

“If anyone arrives claiming to be a royal sword, call the soldiers and have them arrested. The royal swords might work for the enemy now, but if they’re on our side, they won’t resist arrest. You can let Carol speak with them after they’re detained.”

“Understood. I’ll do as you wish.”

I didn’t fully understand how the royal swords operated. I knew they could be fanatical at times, so I wouldn’t be surprised if they became slaves to Carla the moment the crown was placed on her head. Carol would know better than me, but this was no time to question her. The next most knowledgeable person would be Myalo, but she wasn’t here.

That said, I didn’t know whether any royal swords were still alive. It was possible that they’d all died trying to protect Queen Shimoné. At any rate, they were a source of uncertainty.

“And lastly, the most important point.”

“Yes?”

“If there’s a sudden change in Carol’s condition, send word to me at once.”

“I will remember that. I know exactly how you must feel, my lord.” The head maid bowed to me once again.

“I’m going to fly to Kalakumo now. I’m leaving Carol in your care.”



I rode White Sunset to the Ho family manor in Kalakumo.

When I arrived, the man in charge of the birdcages waited for my eagle to land, then came hurrying to me.

“Lord Rook! I knew you were—!”

He was a commoner named Yorn whose face I knew well because I’d worked alongside him on the ranch as a young child.

There’d been an old man who’d managed the birdcages since Gok’s time, but after he retired, Rook had chosen Yorn as his replacement. Rook had gotten along with Yorn better than anyone else in his days as a rancher, and while Yorn couldn’t ride an eagle—and therefore couldn’t train them—Rook had known he could be trusted to take perfect care of them on the ground.

“Lord Yuri...” Yorn’s head dropped when he saw that it was me who climbed off the eagle.

White Sunset had a distinct appearance. Just as the name suggested, the bird had more white feathers than most eagles. Yorn must've thought that Rook was the rider.

I released my restraints and climbed down.

"Then the rumors are true. His Excellency Lord Rook is..."

There was no covering it up, so I answered honestly. "My father was killed with poison."

"Oh..."

"He entrusted White Sunset to me in his final moments. Princess Carol and I both rode this bird together when we escaped the royal castle. Can you ensure he wasn't injured?"

"Yes, sir..."

With tears running down his face, Yorn took the reins from me and led the eagle away. He petted the bird as he walked, as if expressing condolences for the loss of his master.

"Lord Yuri! Is it true that Lord Rook has passed away?!" The next voice I heard came from a female servant who'd worked at Ho Manor since long ago.

"It's true. I'm in a hurry. Can you prepare clothes for me? Something I can wear while riding an eagle."

I was still in leather armor and chain mail—not the ideal riding gear.

Naturally, it would take some time for the lords to arrive at Kalakumo, giving me a chance to take care of other matters in the meantime.

"Yes, sir. I'll find something right away."

The aged servant began wiping her tears with her sleeve. I rarely visited the manor, so I was only now learning how popular Rook had been.

I walked into the building.

Last time I'd visited, this manor had been full of life and activity, but now there was uncertainty in everyone's eyes. It felt as though no one could bear to sit here idle.



Officers, bureaucrats, and servants kept their distance as they watched me walk by. Rumors of all kinds were no doubt spreading among them.

“I’ll be back with you in one moment.”

The aged servant left me as she entered an adjoining room that served as a closet. Before long, she was back with a full outfit. She laid articles of clothing, from headwear to footwear, on the table.

“Will these suffice?” she asked.

The clothes were perhaps too fine for where I was going, but they wouldn’t stop me from riding an eagle.

“Yes, they’re good enough.”

With her help, I immediately began to change. I guessed these had once been Rook’s clothes.

“I’ll return tomorrow. When the lords arrive, have them wait for me.”

By the time I’d switched to another eagle and flown to Suomi, it was already getting dark.

I landed on an office building near the port. There was an area for leaving an eagle there used by almost no one else. It was a simplified birdcage with a large perch for a single bird to stand on and something resembling a carabiner that I could attach the reins to.

It wasn’t good to leave an eagle tethered like a dog on a leash, but there wasn’t much choice—real birdcages required a lot of space. They didn’t just have to be big enough to contain the eagle, but also to provide enough space for the bird to open its wings without injury. That required five square meters of floor space and a height of six meters at the very least.

After descending the stairs, I saw office employees heading home.

“Mr. Chairman? Good evening.” An employee named Starsha bowed her head to me. She looked young, but she was already a widow with children.

It was business as usual here, which suggested that news hadn’t yet reached Suomi.

“Is there anyone next door?” I asked. “I was hoping someone would be around.”

“In the print shop? I’m not sure...”

I left through the front door of the office and hurried toward the print shop located in the neighboring building. Holy books were printed there using a primitive version of movable type printing presses.

A powerful smell of ink hit me when I opened the door to the building. The substance used with movable type contained soot and resin, so the smell was like a mixture of ordinary ink and cigarette smoke.

The employees who used the new technology to print our heretical texts day after day were finishing up their work as usual.

“Mr. Chairman?! What brings you here at this hour?” This man who spoke was a foreman of sorts who managed the print shop.

Since the sun was setting, it was fairly dark inside the print shop. The lighting here was poor since the shop was generally closed at night.

“Don’t leave just yet,” I said. “You’re working overtime today.”

“Overtime?!”

“We already have about half of the movable type pieces needed for Shanish, right? Let’s put them to use.”

“But it’s night already...”

“Overtime pay is one gold coin per employee. Gather all the lamps and candles you can, get them set up in here, then work through the night. Can you do that?”

“Y-Yes, sir...”

I turned around and called out to Starsha, who’d followed behind me. “Starsha, could you go buy some lights too, if you don’t mind? You’ll get overtime pay. If the stores are closed, you can use the Ho family’s name to get them to open.”

“Yes, sir... I can do that.”

“You’ll have to hurry. There should be enough money in the vault.”

“Yes, there is.” Starsha turned around and ran off.

“What could be so urgent?” the foreman asked. “Whatever it is, it can’t be worth one gold coin per employee.”

“Her Majesty the Queen passed away yesterday. It’s related to that.”

“What?!” He was fairly surprised.

“Yeah, it’s a big deal. I’ll write the manuscript... How many Shanish type pieces do we have, exactly?”

“We had the most commonly used pieces made first, but there’s still a lot missing.”

“Where are the piece shelves? And give me a pencil and paper.”

I lit a lamp while there was still some light and headed to the shelves with a pencil and paper in my hand. The idea was to write something that used only the characters we could print.

Looking at the shelves, I found they were indeed quite empty. But like he’d said, the most commonly used characters already had type pieces, and that would probably be enough.

A bigger problem was my utter exhaustion. It dawned on me that I hadn’t slept in a long time.

*I hope I don’t make a mess of this.*



ON MARCH 14 OF IMPERIAL YEAR 2320, IN PREPARATION FOR THE WEDDING OF YURI OF THE HO FAMILY TO CAROL OF THE ROYAL FLUE SHALTL FAMILY, MEMBERS OF BOTH FAMILIES MET IN THE CASTLE OF THE ROYAL CAPITAL, SIBIAK, WHERE PRINCESS CARLA ADDED POISON TO THEIR WINE AS PART OF A PLOT TO ELIMINATE BOTH FAMILIES.

THE PLOT RESULTED IN THE LOSS OF HER MAJESTY QUEEN SHIMONE, AND ALSO THE DEATHS OF THE HO FAMILY’S HEAD, ROOK,

AND HIS WIFE, SUZUYA, AFTER THEY DRANK THE WINE.

WHEN SOLDIERS SERVING WITCHES WHO INHABIT THE ROYAL CAPITAL SAW THAT YURI HO AND PRINCESS CAROL HAD NOT DRUNK THE WINE AND THEREFORE REMAINED HEALTHY, THEY ATTACKED THE CASTLE.

WHEN THE PAIR ESCAPED THE ROYAL CASTLE AND ATTEMPTED TO LEAVE THE CITY, SOLDIERS UNDER COMMAND OF WITCHES COMPLICIT IN THE PLOT GAVE CHASE, MAKING IT CLEAR WHOSE SIDE THEY ARE ON.

THE HO FAMILY WILL NOT SERVE CARLA FLUE SHALTL, A TRAITOR WHO KILLED HER OWN MOTHER. CAROL FLUE SHALTL IS THE ONLY UNTAINTED SURVIVOR OF THE ROYAL LINEAGE, AND WOULD-BE USURPERS SHOULD FEAR THE HO FAMILY'S WRATH.

*That should do it.*

"Disassemble the holy book print pieces for now. Set up this text so that the same thing gets printed four times on each sheet of paper."

We could mass-produce each type piece once we had the molds, so—although we didn't have many different kinds of type pieces—we had a large number of copies for the ones we did have. That allowed us to print the same text several times simultaneously.

"We're making it into a book?" the foreman asked.

*Where'd he get that idea?*

"No, we'll separate each sheet into four pieces that a kingeagle can scatter onto the royal capital and all nearby towns. We're making flyers."

Although the kingdom's literacy rate wasn't particularly high, a good number of city dwellers knew how to read. At the very least, our flyers could limit the number of wild rumors circulating.

"What? For free?"

*Of course it's free.*

Giving away paper was an alien idea. This stuff was fairly expensive.

“It’s fine,” I reassured him. “Sometimes victory goes to whoever was the least tightfisted.”

“Okay...”

“Can I leave the rest to you?”

“Me?”

“I’d help, but I went through all of this last night.” I waved the manuscript in front of him. “Since I’ve already missed one night of sleep, I’m close to passing out. You’ll have to handle the rest without me.”

My mind felt hazy, and I knew I’d collapse if I tried to keep going.

“Of course. It’ll get noisy in here, so I suggest sleeping in the office.”

“Yeah, I’ll do that.”

After dragging myself back to the office building, I lay down on a couch in the reception area by the entrance. I fell asleep the moment I stopped willing myself to stay awake.

“Lord Yuri! Lord Yuri!”

Sunlight had already begun to enter the room from outside when a grating voice woke me up.

I felt like I’d slept for a long time. Looking at the office clock through my sleepy eyes, I saw that it was 7 a.m. Given that I’d gone to sleep around sunset, I must’ve slept for about ten hours.

With bleary eyes, I went over to the front door, where the voice was coming from. I tried to open it, but it was locked. Starsha must’ve closed up during the night.

Once I’d gotten the door unlocked, I opened it to find Jano Ek prostrating himself on the ground. Long ago, his uncle Rakunu Ek had caused a lot of trouble while Gok’s successor was being chosen. His family had since been reformed with Jano as its representative, and he was currently Suomi’s acting

governor.

“What’s going on?” I could guess, but I asked anyway.

“Please allow me to aid you in your fight against the witches! I beg you!”  
Jano’s head was pressed against the stone cobbles outside.

“Sorry, but no.”

“I beg you!”

No matter how hard he pushed his forehead to the ground, I wasn’t even going to consider the possibility. I’d gotten a fairly good understanding of what went on here in Suomi through my involvement with trade, so I knew how awful a governor he was.

The region had once been a fief belonging to the Ek family, but control had reverted to the Ho family after the Eks had been disgraced. As an acting governor, Jano was essentially here to represent the Ho family.

Jano failed to understand the economy, he engaged in nepotism by directing the courts to favor his friends and family, he showed preferable treatment to whoever would give him bribes, and everything considered, he was an all-around good-for-nothing. He was an amalgamation of all the bad habits someone could pick up at the Knight Academy, and he had no idea how much damage he was causing.

Jano was also tyrannical toward the people. At times, the townsfolk had submitted petitions to Ho Company, appealing to me as the Ho family’s heir, but there hadn’t been anything I could’ve done.

During Rook’s time, I’d made multiple requests for Jano to be disciplined in some way, but to no avail. Jano had gotten lucky because a certain company had decided to use Suomi as its base of operations, which had caused explosive growth in the local economy and created the false impression that the region was being well managed.

No good would come of restoring this cretin to his former power. The existence of idiots like him was the biggest flaw in the knighthood system. I was even less willing to let him take charge of Suomi now that I’d turned it into an economic center.



“It’s no use asking when the war’s already beginning. As I’m sure you’re aware, you won’t be able to command effectively unless you’re in charge of your own knights who you’ve trained yourself. I could restore your authority, but you wouldn’t be able to head into battle until you’d raised an army.”

These were lies. I’d already decided that finding an excuse to fire this guy would be one of my first acts after taking charge of the Ho family, but telling him that would just create further headaches. For now, I wanted to avoid trouble; I’d deal with him once we were in a time of peace.

“I’ll find a way!” Jano Ek began scraping his forehead against the cobbles.

He’d certainly convinced me of one thing—he was incredibly desperate. But I knew he was rotten to the core.

“Sorry, but there isn’t time. A day will come when I’ll have use for you. For now, please be patient.”

I ignored Jano Ek and headed over to the print shop next door.

“M-Mr. Chairman, here’s what we’ve printed so far,” the foreman stuttered, trying to suppress his surprise.

I accepted a cloth bag from him, which contained several bundles of paper that had been cut and bound together using twine.

“Oh, and here’s a sample.”

The foreman handed me a loose flyer so I could see how well they’d turned out. As was typical of relief printing methods, the ink creating each individual character lay within a precisely shaped depression.

“Thanks. Once you’ve made about three times as many, stop and go back to printing holy books.”

“Got it,” he replied.

“Starsha.”

Starsha was looking at the noble next to us, his face still pressed to the floor. She seemed unsure how to react.

“This way.” I urged her to follow me.

Once we were back in the office, I began writing on the back of the sample flyer.

“Remind me when there’ll next be a ship returning from the Albio Republic,” I said.

“In three days...”

That was ideal timing. These schedules were awfully unreliable, so she might’ve been off by a day or two, but it’d be soon enough nonetheless.

I went behind the reception desk and helped myself to the office stationary. As expected, I found some envelopes. I put the flyer that I’d just written on inside an envelope, then sealed it by melting the wax with my lighter. Then, on the front, I put my signature and the recipient’s name.

“Have the ship carry this,” I told Starsha.

“Yes, sir.”

After handing her the envelope, I headed up to the roof and flew back to Kalakumo.

## IV

The afternoon after I’d returned from Suomi, the most influential of the local lords were gathered for a succession council in the Ho family manor’s large conference room. The twelve of them were regional rulers who each held the title lord-of-estates.

I now sat where Rook once had. Much like before, Satsuki was sitting beside me. The biggest difference was my father’s absence.

“... And those are our circumstances.”

The room fell silent once I’d finished explaining what had happened at the royal castle.

I continued, looking at everyone’s faces as I spoke, “One thing I’d like to make clear is that I intend to slaughter all those who took part in this plot. That will begin with an attack on the royal capital. As per our custom, there’ll be a vote

to decide whether I'm recognized as the new head of the Ho family, but there are things I need you to hear before you make your decision."

In ordinary circumstances, there were many matters that could be settled carefully after I'd received the title of lord-supreme, but I had to rush things. I stood up from my chair.

"I won't bow to any of you in order to become head. Some of you, perhaps today or perhaps yesterday, will have spoken to the widow sitting beside me. She likes to do things by making deals with people."

As I spoke, Satsuki stared at me, wide-eyed. I suspected my words had made her angry, but I didn't care.

"I don't know what she might've said, but if she promised special treatment for you or any other sort of promise, I have no intention of honoring it. Let's start fresh.

"You've all heard of Ho Company and should know that I built it myself in just three years without any financial assistance. If you don't give me your support today—if I don't become the head of the Ho family—I will achieve my aims someday regardless. That is why I refuse to bow to any of you in order to become head—I'll assume the role because you believe in me.

"If anyone among you worries that I'm a man of ingratitude, please rest assured, those who stand by me will be adequately compensated. I reward those who show me devotion. A high salary at Ho Company is ten gold coins per month, and many earn even more than that. However, I don't provide a thing to those who do nothing for me. I'll also ask you to give up whatever special privileges you might already have.

"In essence, you should side with me if you believe I'll win. If not, then stand back. These are the times we live in. If you choose not to support me and don't want the protection of the Ho family, I'll accept that. But be warned that I won't offer you promises of nonaggression or noninterference. The matter is simple—this is always how it's been for those of us in the business of waging war. As our kingdom enters a time of great upheaval, I can't bind you to me through arrangements that apply only during peacetime.

"That's all I had to say. Take thirty minutes to think about it. Consider the

matter carefully while Satsuki and I are out of the room.”

Once I’d finished talking, I moved away from my chair and looked at Satsuki. She was looking back at me like she couldn’t believe my arrogance, but she stood and followed regardless.

We both left the conference room.

Once we were in the corridor, Satsuki tried to talk to me, but I ignored her and told her I’d hear it later. We spent the remainder of that time waiting in silence.

We only caught fragments of the conversation going on in the conference room. It wasn’t boisterous, and nor did it sound like a heated argument. That boded well. If each lord wanted to consider the benefits to their own family, then that wasn’t a matter for debate—they’d each have to decide for themselves.

After thirty minutes, Satsuki and I reentered the room. We walked behind the gathered lords and returned to our original seats.

“Although I’m sure some of you would like more time, let’s hold the vote. Satsuki, if you would.” I gave my instructions casually, as if this event held little importance.

“We’ll have a show of hands,” Satsuki announced. “Those who recognize Yuri Ho as the new head of the Ho family.”

Every hand in the room rose swiftly. I’d expected nothing less.

A small part of me had worried that the misfortune I’d suffered over the past few days might not be over, but I’d known this would be the likely outcome. I’d given no one here a reason to hesitate to vote for me.

“Now, Satsuki, please give everyone one of these bundles.” I gave her some of the flyers I’d brought.

Each bundle contained fifty flyers bound by a metal clip. Once Satsuki had handed them out, she sat back down.

“I had two thousand of these flyers made yesterday evening. A thousand of them were given to eagle riders who’ve already been dispatched to the royal

capital. They'll be raining down on the city from above at this very moment."

Though none of the lords voiced their surprise, they exchanged glances with one another.

"More are being printed, and more riders will set out to distribute them over the cities of other provinces later. I'd like you all to take these copies back to your own territories and display them for your people to see. Don't change a single word—though, if you wish, you may add your own seal."

They began flipping through the bundles. For many of them, it would be their first encounter with printed materials. No one here besides Satsuki had graduated from the Cultural Academy. The others had never come into contact with the academy's erotic literature.

"We'll end for today. Return to your territories and prepare to raise your armies." I had nothing else left to say.

One of the lords raised his hand. He was a mature man with experience on the battlefield. I saw a strange intensity in his eyes.

"Sir Dimitri Daz, isn't it? You may speak."

"Your Excellency, how do you intend to capture the royal capital? If you have no plan in mind, then I propose we declare war and begin our assault immediately."

That was a basic, albeit entirely sensible suggestion. It was as if he doubted my ability to lead. I supposed that was a given, however—I was just nineteen, a youngster.

"There's no need to worry. I have no intention of taking things slowly. I'm also quite sure that the Ho family army is more than strong enough to defeat the second order of the royal guard."

"Then—"

Dimitri rose slightly from his chair, but I raised a hand to still him. He couldn't disobey me, so he fell silent. *That's what I like to see.*

"I'd like to know more about the situation within the royal capital first," I explained. "And I'm sure it will take everyone here several days to prepare their

soldiers. I can investigate in the meantime. I'd rather not form a specific strategy until then, but as I say, I won't take things slowly. Within a week, our assault will have begun."

*Dimitri, was it? Dimitri Daz.* If memory served, his territory was on the border with Noza Province.

"Ah... The three families based furthest from the royal capital, yours included, should move their armies to Kalakumo as soon as they're ready. We can provide food for them here at the manor during the wait. But Sir Dimitri, leave a thousand of your soldiers on the border. They can hold back the Noza family."

It would impact our strength if their forces didn't make it here on time, and it would be a real shame for them if they got left behind.

"The Noza family... You think they'll march south, Your Excellency?" he asked in all seriousness. He knew that a battle fought on two fronts could result in him losing his territory completely. "If that were the case, just a thousand soldiers wouldn't—"

"You have Seamia. It may be a small city, but its fortifications are excellent. Prepare yourself for a siege, just in case."

"But of course."

"I doubt the Noza family will come. As I see it, they've nothing to gain by attacking us. But if the border were to be left completely defenseless, some might see our current troubles as an opportunity for looting. Placing a thousand soldiers in Seamia is simply a precaution."

"Yes, I see the wisdom in that." Dimitri smiled, then sat back down.

*I think that covers everything.*

"Does anyone else have anything to say?" I asked. "If not, we can adjourn."

I was about to turn and leave, but I stopped when I realized there was something else I needed to say. "War lies ahead. This is what we've been living for. I expect a passionate effort from all of you."



When all was said and done, I retired to the study. Satsuki was waiting for me.



“You certainly did well,” she said, sounding slightly annoyed.

“It went all right,” I replied.

Naturally, this room had comfortable chairs. I wondered whether Rook had often sat here.

Various items were strewn on the desk, as if he’d been working here just yesterday. There was a note written on a piece of parchment, along with a crumpled collection of Ho paper scraps in the wastebasket. Each discarded piece had a similar message written on them. I wished I could preserve it all, but it would soon be cleared away, and—with it—Rook’s presence would gradually fade from the room completely.

“I expected things to get tricky... You haven’t graduated from the Knight Academy, after all.”

I didn’t have a single realistic competitor. Satsuki was worrying too much.

“There’ll be tough fighting ahead,” I replied. “I can’t let anyone think the head of the family’s weak.”

“Even so, you shouldn’t—”

“Warriors will follow the strong. I couldn’t bow to anyone before taking charge here.”

Following the strongest person meant betting on the winner, which was how nobles generally became nobles in the first place. When any knight family was traced back to its origins, the story was always the same.

Rook’s reign had been different. He’d been accepted because it had been a time of peace. I, however, had to lead an army into war.

“The Ho family is about to capture the royal capital and eradicate all the witch families. The Knight Academy and its qualifications might be a thing of the past already. My lack of a knight medal is trivial.”

“Well... You may be right about that.”

During Gok’s time, Satsuki had probably kept out of politics. But in the ten years since Rook’s time had begun, she’d been one of his most trusted associates. She might’ve been a lady of leisure offering occasional assistance to Gok, but

she'd worked like a government official for the whole of Rook's headship. Those ten years had no doubt shaped her current thinking. Her opinions would often differ from mine, and she'd try to act on them independently.

Satsuki's involvement might've been a minor nuisance, but I needed people like her whom I could trust to remain loyal to me. But it wasn't military affairs where her help was needed—I had another job for her.

"More importantly, I'd like you to refurbish my home as quickly as possible."

"What? Your home? You mean your parents' home?"

"That's right. I've been thinking, and I decided I can't bring Carol to Kalakumo. Somewhere less populated will be easier to defend, and there's so much noise here. It's no place for recuperation."

Things would've been different if there'd been a major hospital here where she could receive the best treatment, but there wasn't. Since there was no antidote for red canolia, the best thing for her would be a peaceful place to rest and rebuild her strength. She'd still be close enough that Kalakumo's best doctors could visit her regularly. If she was here, there'd be people asking to see her and no end to rumors about the state of her health. She wouldn't relax while people surrounded her.

"Very well. I'll take responsibility for that."

"Order that the building be refurbished for my personal use without any mention of Carol. I'd like to keep her whereabouts a secret."

"That sounds wise."

"There's a room with a nice view on the second floor. You might want to focus your efforts there. Replace the bed with the finest bed available and change the carpet as well. Make the window bigger too."

"Very well. I'll give the task to a local carpenter right away."

*A local carpenter? Ah, there must be first-rate carpenters here in Kalakumo who work on this manor.*

"Please see to it at once."

Satsuki left the room.

With another job done, I sighed to myself.

As I idly began reading the documents scattered across the desk, I realized that they were orders related to the development of a town a little south of Kalakumo. Just a few days ago, someone had sat in this chair writing with the pen lying in front of me.

It was as though Rook's breath still hung in the air.

Dark feelings welled up within me, threatening to spill out. They were difficult feelings to describe, but they weren't too far from a mixture of rage and hatred.



"Your Excellency, a woman claiming to be a royal sword has arrived accompanied by a woman from a witch family."

The report was given to me in the study by the manor's captain of the guard. I rose from my chair without a moment's hesitation.

I'd expected a royal sword to show up, but not a witch.

*Could it be Myalo?* I wondered. "Where? Guide the way."

The captain of the guard reacted quickly when he saw the look on my face. "They're being held in the foyer. I was told that she wished to meet with Princess Carol in Rossi, but she surrendered herself to us without resistance and was transferred here. She carries a black blade."

*So she came quietly. If they brought her straight here, does that mean she never saw Carol?*

I hurried to the foyer, where I found Myalo and a woman I recognized as Tillet both tied up.

"Myalo! You're safe!" I exclaimed.

"Yuri."

"Untie her immediately. She's a friend."

At my command, the soldier holding Myalo's rope swiftly untied her.

"Um, the dagger..." Myalo said nervously.

The soldier who'd untied her looked at me. I'd asked for her to be unbound, but he wanted to be sure before returning her weapon. When I nodded, he handed Myalo a familiar dagger. It must've been taken from her because it was a dangerous weapon.

"Yuri, allow me to return this."

"Oh, thanks."

I took back the dagger I'd given her in the castle. I felt like I'd left it with her for a long time, but it had only been three days.

"I worried you might not make it out," I said.

"I escaped with the royal swords. There was a window to the third floor directly below us that we were able to reach with a rope."

"Hey," Tillet said, breaking her silence. "Aren't you going to untie me too?"

"I don't trust you yet. You could be working for Carla now."

"Not a chance. Just hear the witch out."

I looked at Myalo.

"I think we can trust her," Myalo said. "I was there when Her Majesty ordered Tillet to serve Carol, and then when Carol ordered Tillet to serve you... Though I do fear that she'll switch sides if Carol dies."

An ominous warning.

"Even in that event, I wouldn't follow Carla," Tillet said. "When someone becomes queen by killing the former queen, they lose authority over the royal swords."

*They do?*

"If someone could simply kill the queen and command the royal swords, there'd be rampant usurpation," Tillet explained.

That made sense. Otherwise, someone in Carla's position could attack the queen while they were alone, giving her instant authority over the royal swords. Then she could warn any chieftain family that they'd better accept her as queen, or else she'd send the swords after them. But it wasn't as though

queens had never died as a result of some internal dispute, so maybe Tillet was lying. I was hardly a history scholar, but even I knew of two such events within the Shiyaltan royal family.

“But there are historical cases of that happening, right? What do you do after losing your master? Do all the swords hold a vote or something?”

“The new queen has to seek forgiveness from the royal swords. If the former queen was eliminated as a means of cutting a disastrous reign short, then the royal swords might accept her successor. Needless to say, Carla doesn’t deserve forgiveness.”

Carla—not Princess Carla. Apparently, Tillet no longer respected her enough to give her that title.

“And what if a usurper *does* take the throne for their own gain? What do the swords do then?” I asked.

“There aren’t any examples of that in history, but the procedure would be for the royal swords to step down and return a generation later. If Princess Carol were to pass away, we might serve Carla’s daughter someday. But you don’t need to worry about that now.”

*Okay. That all sounds sensible.* “Well then, how about you release yourself?”

“What...?”

“I mean your binds. Can’t get out of that rope without help?”

“I gave up all my concealed weapons to avoid arousing your suspicion. I’m not a snake—I can’t slither out of a rope coiled around both my wrists.”

*Whoops, I think I made her mad... I was just curious.*

“Untie her,” I ordered.

The soldier, who’d been listening with some amusement, undid Tillet’s binds.

“Good grief.” Tillet rubbed her wrists where the ropes had been.

“Let’s not stand here. Come talk in my study.”







There were couches for visitors in the study, which was where I chose to sit. Myalo and Tillet both sat down on an opposite couch.

“What happened to my mother and father?” That was the first thing I wanted to know.

“I don’t know,” Myalo replied. “We spent half a day lying low in the royal capital after our escape, but we learned nothing.”

Since I’d survived, the enemy might’ve considered Rook and Suzuya important bargaining chips. Rather than killing them and treating their bodies with disrespect, they might’ve even given them medical treatment.

My hopes for Rook were incredibly slim given how bad his condition had been, but Suzuya might’ve still had a chance. I’d declared them both dead for the sake of rousing my soldiers, but I didn’t know it for sure.

“And what happened to Carla?”

“In the end, Her Majesty couldn’t kill her,” Tillet answered. “I believe Carla still lives.”

“Great...”

I didn’t want to criticize the dead, but Queen Shimoné had created a real headache for us there. I could guess how she had felt, given that Carla was her daughter, but now I was the one who’d have to kill her to put the kingdom in order. It felt like the queen had dumped her responsibilities on someone else.

“Tell me how you escaped.”

“Her Majesty called Tillet over and instructed her to lead the royal swords to safety. She wanted them to survive and serve Carol. Someone had to stay behind to hold Carla as a hostage, though. Henrique took that role.”

*She stayed behind? Sounds awful.*

“As I mentioned a moment ago, there was a third-story window directly below the balcony. You probably hadn’t noticed it, since the balcony extended outward, but I knew it was there because I’d seen it from outside on my eagle.”

I'd looked down from that balcony countless times, but not once had I spotted a window. Maybe if I'd leaned farther over the edge, I might've seen it.

"Henrique held a dagger to Carla's throat while we climbed a rope down to the third floor, then we fought our way to the kitchen. The kitchen is only two doors away from where the dinner took place. It's on the third floor, which ensures outsiders can't reach that area, at the cost of inconvenience. Since carrying ingredients and charcoal up the stairs would be a lot of work, there's a hand-powered elevator that connects to the first floor. We used that elevator shaft to reach the ground, then we climbed out of a window and broke through the soldiers surrounding us to reach the river."

I hadn't imagined an escape route like that.

"Then why did we go up to the sixth floor rather than escaping that way in the first place?" I asked Tillet.

"The shaft was too narrow. You wouldn't have fit."

"I barely made it through myself," Myalo added. "I'm not sure Carol would've made it."

Carol did have fairly broad shoulders compared to Myalo, but Tillet wasn't any smaller.

Tillet guessed what I was thinking. "I can dislocate my shoulder. That's how I got through."

"Okay. Can we be sure that the seven witch families were behind the assassination?"

Myalo's expression was heavy with regret. "There's no way to justify my failure. If only I'd learned of their plan..."

It was hard to argue with her. Maybe I should've blamed myself for visiting the royal castle without taking precautions, but if Myalo or the royal swords had realized something was up, none of this would've happened.

Still, I couldn't criticize Myalo over this. I'd given her the task of misleading people about our discovery of a new continent, which hadn't really left her with any time to gather information about the witches. The royal swords, however,

had no such excuse.

“It was definitely the seven witches who organized this plot,” Myalo said. “But they left the Gudinveils out of it. I’m sure the witches realized that the information might leak to me via my family connections.”

*I see...*

I’d been assuming that Luida, the old woman in charge of the Gudinveil family, was heavily involved in the plot. She knew how Myalo operated and could see through her tricks. I’d imagined that she’d been somehow keeping Myalo distracted, preventing her from learning the truth even as she monitored the government’s inner workings.

“Is it common for one family to be excluded like that?” I asked.

“It’s the first time such a thing has happened in Shiyalta’s history. The seven witches are bound by a pact.”

I’d never heard anything about that.

“The Seven Witch Promise states that the seven families must strive for coexistence and mutual benefit. If one family could be excluded while the others conspired, it would lead to suspicion and a breakdown of trust. There would be no end to the infighting,” Myalo continued.

*Coexistence and mutual benefit...* It sounded like they’d all promised to play nice with each other. By agreeing not to fight over the juiciest prizes, they ensured there’d be no competition between them, making the group akin to a cartel.

“But how come you didn’t notice anything? Was their planning too well concealed?”

“That’s right. It was completely secret, in fact. I think the plot was only known to ten or so people until the afternoon of the assassination, and that’s including heads of families. Still, I overlooked signs...”

“What sorts of signs?”

“There were witches serving at the castle who constantly supplied me with information, but half of them weren’t there on the day before the

assassination. They weren't killed, just sent off to carry out business elsewhere. I had a feeling something wasn't right, but I never expected to be blindsided."

It sounded like they'd identified Myalo's intelligence sources before anything else. Once the individuals had been identified, they'd simply been allowed to carry on with their duties. It meant that the witches hadn't worried about their assassination plot leaking out during the planning phase. If they'd been determined to destroy her information network, their behavior would've tipped Myalo off. They must've had full confidence that nothing would leak out until the day they executed the plan.

The surest way to keep information confidential was to avoid consulting with anyone. Fewer informed people meant fewer mouths that could speak to outsiders. No level of espionage was enough to uncover a plot formed within the mind of a single person who kept it to themselves.

"I didn't realize anything was wrong until you were already in the castle. I learned that a certain witch had been told she couldn't work overtime as normal. I'd been too much of a fool to suspect anything until then. I decided I'd head to the castle myself to get to the bottom of it, only to discover that the second order had blocked off the bridge."

That must've been when she'd hurried over to White Birch Dormitory.

"Okay. I understand it all now."

"My incompetence is to blame. I'll accept whatever punishment you see fit." Myalo lowered her head. I couldn't see her face, but the sorrow was clear from her tone of voice.

"Perhaps you're right that you should've investigated more thoroughly at the first sign of suspicion," I began.

Myalo didn't reply.

"But I made mistakes too. The witches acted timid over the past year; they didn't attempt any serious attacks on me. I should've known it was a sign of a larger plot brewing."

I'd grown complacent. I knew the witches' backs were up against the wall, but I hadn't guessed they'd been sharpening their knives, waiting for the right

moment.

“Not at all! This was my job! And you could never have known that they were in league with Carla!”

I could’ve decided not to place the blame on anyone and simply concluded that no one could’ve prevented what we couldn’t have foreseen. I didn’t want to look at it that way, though.

“You brought me an eagle. That was enough. It’s thanks to you that Carol and I are still alive. I also owe you my deepest gratitude for saving Sham and Lilly. Thank you.”

Without Myalo, it would’ve been the end of us. That much was certain.

“No, it was nothing...”

I turned away from Myalo to look at Tillet. “But what were the royal swords doing? You were in charge, weren’t you?”

If someone were to shoulder responsibility, it fell much more heavily on the royal swords than on Myalo.

I’d chosen to visit the castle since I planned to marry Carol, but Rook and Suzuya had been invited as guests. Anyone inviting guests into their home had a responsibility to ensure their safety. Rook and Suzuya hadn’t done a single thing wrong by drinking that wine. They’d simply accepted an invitation and consumed the meal served to them, only to learn it was poisoned. It was clear where the blame lay—with those who’d extended the invitation.

“Isn’t the food in the royal castle tested for poison? How did this happen?”

“Of course we taste everything,” Tillet replied. “If the poison had come from outside, we’d have stopped it. But Carla added the poison herself after the bottle had already been sampled.”

It would take a better excuse than that to satisfy me.

“Then you should’ve tasted it twice.”

“We trust in our queen, and unless our queen instructs otherwise, we trust the princesses too. If I insisted on leaving a peaceful dinner table to repeatedly try all the wine in the kitchen, I’d look like a drunkard. No one could have

guessed that poison would be added in the kitchen without us noticing... At least, that's what the sword responsible for tasting the food told me."

"And now your queen's dead because of that lack of suspicion."

It did no good to berate her like this, but I couldn't help myself. Rage was driving me mad, and I had to take it out on someone.

"You've got every right to be angry. If killing me would make you feel better, then do it."

Tillet looked me right in the eye as she spoke. I knew she wouldn't resist if I drew my weapon.

"Don't be stupid... Killing you won't fix anything. It won't bring anyone back. It won't ease Carol's suffering."

"I'm truly sorry."

Tillet lowered her head once more. She'd lost her master too. I knew she was grieving.

"Let's forget about all that. Tell me why you weren't monitoring the witches."

"We were busy monitoring you and your people."

*Huh? Me and my people?*

"It was a real struggle thanks to Myalo here, and we'd been ordered not to take any drastic measures."

"Haaah..." I heaved a great sigh.

"Her Majesty had grown suspicious of you. You're a man of many talents. Yet, in the face of an impending crusade, you remained calm and did nothing to prepare. We began watching you and realized that dozens of people at a time were vanishing from Suomi in Ho Province, but we couldn't figure out where they went. It was hard to learn anything because we'd been ordered not to kidnap your sailors for questioning."

*Is she serious? This is unbelievable.*

It sounded like they'd been so concerned with distant threats that they hadn't noticed the danger in their own home. To think that this was what had left

them vulnerable to an assassination plot taking place in the royal capital left me astounded all over again.

“Then Queen Shimoné never trusted me?” I asked.

I lifted my hands to my head. The queen must’ve thought I was out to get her all along, yet she’d reacted with delight when I’d asked to marry Carol. I knew that those in politics tended to be two-faced, but I’d never imagined another such side to her.

“Because you hid things,” Tillet said. “It makes people nervous.”

I’d done many things in secret, but I’d done so with my own company and funded by my own coin. I hadn’t been obligated to inform anyone. And when I had shared information, such as what we’d learned through espionage in the Albio Republic, I’d never asked for praise or payment.

Yes, I was always under the Ho family’s protection, but I brought in extra taxes. I was the one who bore the expenses associated with moving soldiers to our residence in the royal capital. Whatever protection I gained, I always paid for it.

I’d only hidden what I’d been worried others might steal.

Things would’ve been different if I’d told Queen Shimoné about the new continent. She’d wielded a lot of authority, but that authority had been steeped in the toxic influence of the witches. She’d rarely acted independently of the witches, because then she’d lose most of her power. Needless to say, if the witches had found out about the new continent, it would currently be developing into another hotbed of corruption.

“So you got to the bottom of it and reported everything?” I asked.

“No, we didn’t learn a thing. Her Majesty disapproved of us even going to Suomi.”

If they’d been ordered to find out about the new continent without ever visiting Suomi, it sounded like an impossible task.

The queen must’ve taken great care to avoid doing anything that might’ve made me her enemy, but it’d turned out to be incompatible with both her ends

and her means. Likewise, the royal swords had been following the same approach. The situation must've posed a troubling dilemma for Queen Shimoné.

"Haaah... What a mess. And now you're working for me."

"That's right. The royal swords are currently under your command."

"And so you've come to me because you're their leader?"

"Exactly. After I protected Princess Carol during the happenings in Kilhina, I was chosen to succeed the previous leader."

Apparently, Tillet was running the show. She'd most likely shown great potential even before our visit to Kilhina, or else she wouldn't have been chosen to accompany Carol.

"How many of you are there?" I asked.

"Five close by. Another twenty in Sibiak. Seven others undercover in various different regions. Of the twenty in Sibiak, five are too badly injured to be of service."

There were thirty-two royal swords in total. I'd expected more. I assumed some of them had been wounded in the escape.

"What happened to the royal guard's first order? Did they stay out of it to the very end?"

"It seems they were bribed," Tillet replied.

*I knew it.*

"Metina Arkhorse is a close friend of Theresia Cursefit," Myalo added, her tone scathing. "They might not have been in the same year group, but they attended the Knight Academy at the same time. That means they spent four years washing each other's backs in their own bathroom. I don't know how you ever trusted her."

Metina certainly sounded like a problem. Now I was left wondering why Tillet had assured me that the first order would never betray the queen when we'd been trapped in the castle.



“That’s just how it is... The first order’s commander is always chosen from the Arkhorse family. The royal family has no say in the matter.”

“And that’s why you trusted her?” Myalo asked. “Well, no wonder things turned out this way.”

I had to agree with Myalo. If the first order had taken immediate action, things would’ve been very different.

“Then the first order’s another enemy?” I asked.

“No,” Tillet replied. “Although their commander’s always a member of the Arkhorse family, the soldiers beneath her are utterly devoted to serving the queen. She can give commands, but they won’t be followed. The first order won’t turn against us.”

My thoughts turned to Galla, and I wondered what he was doing at that moment. “Dolla’s dad was one of their officers. He’s a good friend of my father.”

“Yes, Galla Godwin,” Myalo added. “He’s the vice captain of the Dawn Knights.”

“Is he? Isn’t that a big unit?” I asked.

If my memory was correct, Galla should’ve reached the highest rank accessible to men within the first order a long time ago. The Dawn Knights was the strongest unit within the first order of the royal guard. Many considered them the face of the royal guard because they occasionally patrolled the royal capital in flashy uniforms.

“Yes. It’s a permanent legion of one thousand knights, often divided into two regiments of five hundred. Galla Godwin used to be the vice captain of one of those regiments, but by Her Majesty’s recommendation, he was promoted to vice captain of the whole legion.”

“Why did that happen?”

“I don’t know the details, but I suspect the intention was to boost Dolla’s career,” Myalo suggested. “Carol holds Dolla in high regard, and he made a name for himself after the fight on the bridge.”

*Wow. They promoted him for Dolla's sake...*

Given Dolla's incredible strength, it didn't sound like a terrible idea. Knights needed muscle much more than they needed brains.

"The royal guard is fundamentally flawed," Myalo explained. "Women take command of each unit, but it's male officers who form the strongest bonds with the men making up those units. Both on the training ground and on the battlefield, it's generally male vice captains accompanying them and giving out orders, so ordinary soldiers naturally put their faith in their vice captain. It's a horribly warped command structure."

"Ah, I see."

It did sound problematic.

"This tends to turn the unit's captain into a mere figurehead. That's why all ranks above a certain point are available to women only. If the commander of each legion was to turn into a figurehead, it would be an army completely controlled by men."

I understood why men couldn't be in control. For reasons both practical and historical, it would be a problem.

It was two thousand years ago now, but long ago the Shantila Empire had suffered an internal conflict known as the Mutna Rebellion where a coup by military generals had brought the empire to the brink of collapse.

The empire had been a matriarchy ruled by an empress, with invasions of Kulati-held territories being commonplace.

During the Mutna Rebellion, a general who'd made a name for himself through victories in battle gathered up the Kulati slaves he'd taken during those campaigns and turned them against the empire. His attempted coup ended in failure, but he'd come very close to capturing the imperial capital of Shantinion, located on the Crimean Peninsula by the Black Sea. It was said that the empress had been left traumatized, and she began to believe that allowing male generals to invade foreign nations would lead to the empire's downfall.

The events had shown that men could gain considerable power within the empire owing to their control over territories they'd captured. But the empire

needed an army in order to defend itself, and that army had to be kept strong.

The empress had concluded that a general's pride must never be wounded, lest they lead another rebellion. And so, she ensured that military men would be indulged when they boasted of their prowess as warriors, lauded when they successfully defended the empire, and given medals for their accomplishments.

At the same time, she had made sure that generals would never again instigate conflicts for the purpose of expanding the empire's territory.

All this led to strange changes occurring in the Shantila Empire. The nation's military was powerful, yet it never invaded other nations. The events also explained why slavery was seldom tolerated within the empire.

It turned out that these changes came with certain benefits. The empire's territory was more than vast enough already, and halting its uncontrolled expansion made it possible to manage the whole more effectively while avoiding the risk of frontier regions breaking away as independent nations. The empire's focus shifted to careful development of the land it already held, which had resulted in a time of prosperity.

Over time, a strong connection developed between the Shanti people and their home nation, such that their offspring hadn't spread throughout the rest of the world.

All this had given rise to our current situation. In essence, the events of history had left the royal family viewing the male-dominated military as a threat. Military units led by women were designed to protect the concept of matriarchal government. If the first order of the royal guard—the queen's last defense—became a male-dominated force, it wouldn't be fit for purpose.

All things considered, Galla's promotion really had been exceptional.

"Then Metina Arkhorse must be under pressure from the soldiers beneath her," I said.

Considering the soldiers had been held back by the leadership when they'd been needed most, they had to be dissatisfied.

"I'm sure she is," Myalo agreed. "The Arkhorse family might have fallen from grace recently, but the first order has always been managed by a family that

demonstrates loyalty to the queen. The soldiers won't accept the current state of affairs. And from what I've heard, flyers like the one posted outside this manor were raining down all over the royal capital."

"That's right. We've probably dropped a thousand of them already, and another thousand will drop today." I looked at the study's clock. "Two hours from now, they'll start raining down again."

"Splendid work," Myalo said. "Now there's no chance of the leadership deceiving anyone. The first order must be completely immobilized."

It was hard to be sure, but from the witches' point of view, the first order was unreliable. Nothing could be more terrifying than heading into battle with an ally that couldn't be trusted. At the very least, the first order wouldn't have a large role to play.

"Tillet, return to the royal capital and make contact with Galla. See if you can convince the first order to turn traitor... Though maybe that's not the right word." The first order should've been on our side in the first place. It was obvious to anyone that Carol was the rightful heir to the throne.

"Got it. The second order will be left fighting on two fronts."

*What? No. Where'd she get that idea?* "I want you to convince him *not* to fight the second order. As weak as they are, their soldiers should be useful with a little training."

"You don't want them to fight?" Myalo looked at me in surprise. "How can we win without fighting?"

"I don't want to waste the second order. Our attack on the royal capital should end with a brief skirmish."

"A skirmish...? And then you'll focus on bringing the other chieftain families to your cause?"

*That's not it.* "Do you think the witches are stupid? A crusade force will probably reach us this year."

"What...?"

Both Myalo and Tillet were left speechless.

“Do you think the witches did all this just to rule the kingdom? How do you think they’re planning to survive the crusades in the years to come?”

“Well...I’m not sure. There’s no way to stop the crusades,” Myalo replied.

*Exactly.*

If Shiyalta wasn’t under threat from crusaders, I would’ve taken the witches’ usurpation at face value. But with an invasion guaranteed to happen within a few years, the timing made no sense.

“The witches aren’t stupid. They’re desperate for a path to survival, just like everyone else. Destroying the royal family and the Ho family is pointless if it means losing to crusaders. They couldn’t have forgotten that.”

Queen Shimoné had at least been pouring her efforts into warding off the next crusade.

The kingdom had a long-established system that ensured the chieftains would band together as a united front against invaders, but even that would be thrown into doubt under a witch government that used Carla as a puppet. The chieftains would be divided, internal conflict would ensue, and the kingdom’s armies wouldn’t come together as one. Any fool could see that coming.

The witches surely knew that overthrowing the royal family couldn’t produce a new government that offered them greater protection. Their plan had been to defeat the royal family, place Carla on the throne as their puppet, wipe out the Ho family, and leave the kingdom weakened. Even if it had gone flawlessly, it seemed it would only shorten their lifespans.

On top of that, the risk of failure had been too high. It *had* failed, in fact. The assassination at the heart of the plan had relied on Carla—a complete idiot who didn’t understand the weight of her own actions. There’d also been a major risk of the plot coming to light. It was only through good luck that they’d gotten everyone to carry out their roles without letting a single piece of information leak out.

Given how careful the witches normally were, any plan of theirs had to be worth the risk. All in all, it appeared completely illogical. Their reckless acts would do nothing but shorten their own lifespans.

“They have to be working with someone within Yeesusdom,” I said. “The only question is what they’ve been offered in exchange for handing over the kingdom.”

The witches’ thinking was shaped by a history of nine hundred years spent holed up in the royal capital. In a sense, they’d developed within a bubble of safety provided by the royal family, leaving them ignorant of the world outside. For them, it made perfect sense to cut a deal as a means of ensuring their survival.

If all had gone to plan, Carla would’ve been crowned as a matter of course, and then the chieftain families wouldn’t have had an excuse to interfere. The kingdom would’ve fractured, but it would’ve been easy for the witches to create a stalemate in which the chieftain families spent half a year arguing over what to do next. In that time, a crusade force would’ve rapidly assembled. The plot would’ve left our defenses weak. Nations—seeing a chance to plunder our kingdom with barely a fight—would’ve been eager to join the invasion.

Perhaps the Rube family to the north would resist the crusaders, but one family couldn’t hold them back alone. And with the royal territory under enemy control, invaders could be welcomed in the ports of the royal capital. We’d be wide open to attack.

The witches’ plan would’ve been close to perfect, except that it meant trusting the crusaders to uphold their side of the deal. My own experience told me that it was a fatal mistake, but the witches were grasping at straws—this plan had been their last ray of hope.

The crusaders had likely guaranteed the safety of a hundred or so individuals in exchange for an opportunity to capture the entire kingdom without effort. It was a small price to pay for a kingdom. No wonder, then, that the witches expected the crusaders to honor the deal.

“But Lyrica’s reports said there won’t be a crusade,” Myalo said.

“No one knows that for sure. Perhaps they won’t come once they see the witches’ plan has ended in failure. The problem is, the witches might not admit that they’ve failed when they report to the enemy.”

Now that the witches had let me escape, they’d gone too far to turn back.

They had to make sure a crusade happened now, even if it meant lying in their reports. To the witches, crusaders were reinforcements capable of liberating them from a siege set by chieftains.

“I see... Now that I think about it, it makes sense,” Myalo agreed.

“It’s just speculation based on our current situation, but nothing else seems to add up. It’s the only explanation I’ve got.”

For now, we had to assume crusaders were on the way and prepare our defenses.

The second order included about ten thousand men. Destroying one of our own armies by encircling them, then slaughtering the soldiers would be utter folly at a time like this.

“I’ll need the royal swords. Assign ten of your members to the task. We have to start making initial preparations right now.”

## V

Galla Godwin wore an exhausted expression as he returned to the office in the fort on Royal Castle Island.

The royal capital had been in a state of crisis ever since the incident five days ago, and now the disorder was reaching new heights.

Amid it all, he’d gotten a taste of the woes that beset middle management. Galla’s superiors had been bribed—that much was certain. Younger soldiers felt compelled to express their outrage with strong words. His job was to stand in the center and bear the brunt.

The sun was finally setting on what had been a long day. After entering the pitch-black room, he reached up to hang his lamp on a hook in the ceiling.

Exhausted as he was, he couldn’t return to his home in the city’s northern sector to rest because war was underway. To make matters worse, he had no place to sleep in the barracks. His bed was at home. Instead, he was forced to sleep here in the office.

There was a couch for guests to sit on, but he couldn’t lie on the accursed

thing because it had an armrest in its center. Instead, Galla had to rest in a sleeping bag on the hard wooden floor.

He removed his uniform's jacket, folded it in two, and draped it over the couch. Next, he began undoing his belt, ready to remove his uniform's pants.

"Hello."

"Whoa!"

Someone else was in the room.

When Galla looked to the source of the voice, he saw a lone woman standing by the door. He readied his body for a fight.

"Wait—I'm a royal sword. I'm here to talk."

Regardless of whether she was a royal sword or not, he was surprised he had almost taken his pants off without noticing her. He decided his exhaustion had to be to blame. Feeling slightly awkward, he refastened his belt.

"A royal sword? Who do you work for these days?"

"Princess Carol."

"I see... Then Her Highness survived."

He decided to put his jacket back on too. When he reached for it, he felt the gritty texture of dirt on the palm of his hand. His uniform had gotten dirty over the past few days of turmoil. Galla lost interest in his jacket and instead sat down in his shirt.

"Well, what are you here to talk about? Let's hear it."

Galla had very little contact with the royal swords, but they were familiar to him. In terms of status, they were close—like soldiers assigned the same responsibilities but in different departments.

Tillet was standing with her back resting against the wall. "I'll put it bluntly. Defect to our side."

"Whew..."

"Defect's the wrong word, isn't it? Serve your rightful master."



“What do you mean, ‘rightful master’? Queen Carla isn’t an impostor, is she?” Galla knew how foolish his words sounded as he tried to argue.

“The royal swords have recognized Princess Carol as the true heir. The witches may have declared Carla queen, but there can be no argument as to which daughter carries on the will of Queen Shimoné.”

“Haaah...” Galla was exhausted.

He was tired of hearing this kind of reasoning from his subordinates. These past five days, he must’ve heard the same thing a hundred times—maybe a thousand if he counted the times he’d overheard it.

“Rook Ho’s dead,” Tillet said. “Don’t you care that they killed your friend?”

“Of course I care, but there are lines that a soldier can’t cross.”

A soldier carried out the will of his commander—it was a rule that Galla had engraved on his heart. The superior commanded and the subordinate obeyed. It was an absolute rule within a military organization. If he was ordered to die, he would naturally obey without question.

Execution was the only fitting punishment for someone who failed to follow this rule. Since the first order mostly concerned itself with eliminating bandits, battles were generally fought under the assumption that there was a huge disparity in power between the two sides. Instances of soldiers fleeing in the face of the enemy were therefore low, but it sometimes happened. Since Galla himself had punished young soldiers for deserting, he couldn’t turn his back on the rule now.

But these were just the justifications that lived at the surface of Galla’s mind. For a long time now, he’d followed irrational orders from his female superiors on a daily basis until the chain of command had become part of his very being. Galla had to follow every order he received, no matter how idiotic. Even when he felt he knew better than his superior, or if the lives of his subordinates were at stake, he could never deviate even slightly.

In the course of decades of living with this reality, Galla had surrendered himself to it. Since he knew that an order given in a military context was absolute, his mind always came up with some reason he couldn’t question it.

Though he appeared motivated in the presence of his friends and subordinates, that was how his thinking worked below the surface.

“Then you’ll never turn against Metina Arkhorse?” Tillet spat the name as she asked.

“That’s right. You’ve come to the wrong person.”

Tillet stopped resting against the wall and began walking toward Galla. Without warning, she snatched up the jacket he’d left on the couch and tore off the knight medal affixed to its front pocket. She threw it to the ground and trod on it in an exaggerated fashion.

“What do you think you’re doing?!” Galla cried out in rage as his honor as a knight was being trampled underfoot.

He reached out to grab Tillet, and rather than dodge, she let him grab her collar.

“You’re no knight. You don’t deserve that medal.”

Tillet continued to crush the medal beneath her foot as she gripped Galla’s broad arm with an unusual hold. Her thumb dug into his skin at a single point with a level of force that seemed beyond what any woman should’ve been capable of, sending a sharp burst of pain rushing through his arm and causing him to release her.

“Who did you offer your spear to when you joined the royal guard? Metina Arkhorse? I don’t think so. No, you knelt before Queen Shimoné and offered it to her. If you’ve turned your back on our late queen, then you’re no knight—you’re Metina’s dog.”

“Ngh...” Galla clenched his teeth. He had no response.

Royal swords became such by swearing a vow of absolute devotion to the queen. They weren’t merely chosen for their bloodline. Most were orphans, and they only became royal swords following a grueling training regime that some of them didn’t even survive. They’d slaughter a baby if their queen ordered it, and none had any aversion to giving their body to a man in the course of their duty. But the devotion they’d sworn to their queen made them fiercely proud all the same. Even when murdering babies or acting like whores,

they remained confident in the knowledge that they were serving their queen. It was what allowed them to keep their pride. None of them would've been conflicted in the way that Galla was now.

Galla was different. Unlike her, he knew he hadn't stayed true to the vow he'd made when offering his spear to the queen. He really did feel he'd ceased to be a knight. He was just a petty underling in service to the witches now.

Galla shook his head to ward off these unpleasant thoughts and sat back down on the couch.

"Why'd you come to me? The first order's immobilized already. Rank-and-file soldiers are prepared to disobey orders."

Galla looked down at the papers lying on the table between the room's two couches. They were directly beneath the hanging lamp where they lay in its shadow. But even without light, he knew what was written there. By now, every single person in the royal capital must've learned the contents of these papers. Even those who couldn't read had heard it from others.

Galla had already been struggling to keep his subordinates calm when the papers had rained down from above. They'd been enraged ever since, and Galla's control over them was slowly slipping.

Many of the soldiers fully believed the flyers.

"How come we did nothing while this was going on? Why did we just sit back and watch when the second order raided the royal castle and our queen was murdered? Aren't we Her Majesty's knights? Then what are we?" The soldiers had demanded answers, weeping with such intensity that it had seemed their tears might turn to blood.

This very day, a younger soldier had come to Galla with a list of names and proposed gathering a few trusted men for a raid on the first order's headquarters with the aim of killing anyone who worked for the witches. Galla had seriously considered throwing him in a dungeon, but that would've risked inspiring a full-scale mutiny.

The first order was unfit to fight in its current condition.

"The second order's no better," Galla said. "They lost the will to fight before

the battle even began. I don't know whether it's true, but they say that a single elderly knight from the Ho family attacked the Eulich Knights and killed their captain. The survivors ran off to spread rumors about the ferocity of the Ho family. It sounds to me like the battle is already decided."

As Galla saw it, the Ho family couldn't possibly lose, so it didn't particularly matter whether he switched sides or not. The Ho family had no need to approach with caution. A lion needed no assistance when hunting a wounded hare. Likewise, a battle against the second order of the royal guard would be no contest at all—it would be a massacre.

"The boy Yu—" Galla stopped himself. Yuri was old enough to graduate from the Knight Academy, and he'd probably assumed control of the Ho family already. "Sir Yuri is overthinking things. He can win here without my help."

"Yuri expects a crusade force to reach us within a few months. He suspects the witches have sold our kingdom to the crusaders."

"What...?" Galla sat there, stupefied, as all of his thoughts came to a halt.

"If the witches' plan had been more successful, Yuri and Princess Carol would've both died in the royal castle, leaving Carla to serve as a puppet. But Yuri says they won't gain anything from that. Under Her Majesty Queen Shimoné's rule, the kingdom would've banded together to fight the crusaders, but that won't happen under Carla. If a crusade force is likely to arrive within the next few years, then all the witches have done is assure their own deaths. But what if they were in contact with the crusaders and have agreed to sell our kingdom to them in exchange for their own safety? Then their plot makes more sense."

Galla's mind cleared of all other thoughts. The sluggishness caused by his exhaustion faded. His head began to hurt as he forced himself to consider what he'd been told, but he kept thinking regardless of the pain.

For a long time—it might have ten whole minutes—he pondered over it. All the while, Tillet silently waited for him.

It made sense. There were various factors that made it hard to be sure, but now that it had been pointed out to him, he could see that there had to have been a motivation behind the witches' drastic plot.

*If it's true, then the kingdom's finished, he concluded. And does this mean we're fighting for the very traitors who sold out our kingdom?*

Tillet spoke again when she judged that Galla had reached a conclusion. "I believe Yuri wants the second order at full strength to fight against the crusaders," she said softly. "Naturally, every one of the top officers will need to be replaced. No family soldiers can fill the roles. After a few months of whipping the second order into shape, the force should be at least somewhat useful."

"Got it. The first order will stand down. If anyone gets ideas, I'll stop them before they do anything."

"Haaah..." Tillet heaved a great sigh. "Yuri told me that you'd side with us because you were a friend of his father. He said you two had crossed spears with Her Majesty bearing witness. Was he wrong?"

Tillet wasn't being entirely truthful. Yuri had said no such thing. It was a lie that she'd quickly put together based on the information she'd gotten from Myalo.

"Don't overestimate me. I'll do what I can, but I doubt I can put the first order under my command. I won't make any promises I can't keep. I wouldn't want to ruin Sir Yuri's strategy."

"You're telling me that you can stop the first order from fighting, but nothing beyond that?"

"Basically. That much I *can* promise you."

"All right. I'll relay that to Yuri. I trust you not to betray us, so I'll tell you Yuri's plan. Listen closely."

Tillet began to share everything with Galla.

## Chapter 2 — The Battle for Sibiak

I

“Your Excellency, I implore you not to go! The danger is too great!” Dimitri Daz, a lord-of-estates, cried out as he ran over to me to make this demand.

“I’m going,” I told him. “I’ll be fine. We know their soldiers aren’t positioned over there.”

“The first order can’t be trusted! Nor can the royal swords!”

I climbed onto White Sunset and rapidly secured my harness.

“If the situation looks risky, I’ll get on my eagle and fly back. All you have to do is keep the second order here until you see the flag go up, just like we planned. If they show signs of retreating before my return, charge in with your plainrunners and sow some confusion.”

“Very well. Please stay safe!” Dimitri took a step back to give my eagle’s wings enough space to expand, then saluted.

White Sunset began to beat his wings when I pulled lightly on the reins to instruct him to take off. I could feel the uplift.

“All right, here I go!”

I couldn’t wave goodbye because I was holding the reins with my right hand and a spear with my left.

Once in the air where I could view the world below, I saw the Ho family army deployed on the grazing land to the royal capital’s south. There were sixteen thousand soldiers in densely packed formations with plainrunner cavalry at left and right flanks.

Up ahead, on the southern edge of the capital, the second order was positioned and ready to meet them. Their rearmost soldiers were near the spot where we’d broken through a barricade ten days ago.

Similarly to the Ho army, the enemy was densely arranged into square units, but the shapes were smaller and less well-defined than ours.

There was no sign of the first order whatsoever. If its soldiers were mixed in with the others, then there would've been almost twenty thousand of them in total, which would've made their army larger than ours overall. Since that wasn't the case, the intel stating that the first order had been left to guard Royal Castle Island appeared accurate.

Other eagles began to take flight after they saw me ascend. I traced small ellipses through the air while I waited for them to catch up. More and more of them took to the sky until the spectacle above the Ho army was like nothing I'd seen before.

Five hundred massive birds now filled the sky like crows circling over a slaughterhouse. Many of the second order's sky knights, meanwhile, abandoned their reconnaissance efforts and returned to the ground when they realized they were hopelessly outnumbered.

I put an unusually large whistle to my mouth and blew hard. A shrill sound reverberated through the air—*piiiiiiiiiii!*

Whistles like this were inaudible over long distances, but as long as the riders closest to me heard it, it would be enough to trigger a chain reaction. They all understood the plan already.

I turned White Sunset's beak toward the royal castle.

In just a few moments, White Sunset and I passed over the troops on the ground and neared the castle. That's when I saw the royal swords on the drawbridge, performing their role just as we'd planned.

They were throwing bottles, which had been smuggled into the royal capital in advance, onto the bridge. Even from a high altitude, I could see the black fluid that covered everything—it was crude oil.

I'd chosen this particular substance because I didn't want to waste the light oils that we used in the Molotovs. Those lighter fractions were easier to ignite, but they tended to burn up quickly. That meant crude oil was a better choice for creating a long-burning fire anyway.

As the bridge became soaked with the liquid we'd smuggled into the capital over the course of several days, a kingeagle rider rapidly descended toward it to drop bottles of his own. When those hit the black substance covering the bridge, the whole thing erupted into bright red flames.

Rather than descend just yet, I flew around the castle in a circle while blowing my whistle twice—*piiii, piii!*

The castle's occupants appeared at the windows, gazing outside to see the cause of the commotion. As I got close to the upper floors, I saw her.

Carla's blonde hair fluttered in the wind. She stood on a balcony just like the one Myalo had landed her kingeagle on a few days prior. For a moment, I was tempted to land there just like Myalo had, but I thought better of it—there was no need to attempt anything so dangerous.

Other eagle riders, fearless in the face of death, descended toward unoccupied verandas. Chairs and tea tables were kicked aside as their eagles touched down, or—if the pieces of furniture were sturdy enough—they landed right on top of them.

As we'd planned, no one attempted a more dangerous landing on a balcony railing. The larger verandas were safer, and there wasn't the risk of an eagle being impaled upon landing—as long as there weren't guards there defending them, at least.

I looked to the bridge on the island's north side and noticed that the blaze had grown powerful enough to send up thick plumes of black smoke. That was when I descended on my landing point.

Once on Royal Castle Island, I quickly released my harness and climbed off White Sunset. I vacated the space quickly to clear the way for the others coming down after me and tethered the reins to the first object I could find.

A total of five hundred kingeagle riders landed in various places on the island, each armed with a spear.

We began running together toward the castle. Just as my intel suggested, barely any soldiers from the second order had remained here.

"Your Excellency!" a knight shouted as he hurried over to me. "Every member



has landed safely—all ten squads!”

This was the captain of one of the many ad hoc landing squads, and behind him were his fifty subordinates. He’d been under my direct command since the start of the operation, and his squad had been tasked with escorting me as I made my way through such a dangerous location with only my basic equipment. Given that these men were all sky knights who’d graduated from the Knight Academy, this whole operation carried a dizzying financial cost.

“Good work. We’ll storm the royal castle as planned. I saw Carla upstairs by a window.”

“Carla...? Then she’s here. Please allow us to accompany you.”

I slowed to a walk as I led the way.

The castle’s entrance had already been forced open by others who’d charged in ahead of us. The doors could be barred from the rear with a wooden beam that rested in metal fittings, but that beam was lying uselessly on the floor inside the building. It looked like the doors had been closed, but forced open again before anyone could bar them.

In any case, this building wasn’t designed to be defended. The windows near the ground ensured we’d have no trouble entering. That said, an open door certainly made things easier.

The castle—normally a place of order and security—now looked entirely unfamiliar. I could almost smell the ravages of war.

Inside, witches were jostling each other in an attempt to escape and save themselves. These were essentially women and children fleeing a war zone.

My soldiers didn’t pursue them. We lacked the numbers to detain everyone, but there was no escape from this island anyway. The river grew strong at this time of year as waters from thawing mountain ice joined the flow. A woman without proper training stood little chance of making it across. Maybe some would attempt it anyway and die in the process, but I wouldn’t lose any sleep over it.

I walked through the door without a pause.

Once inside, I heard cries of anger. Some occupants had taken up weapons and were fighting. Naturally, the royal castle would never be completely unguarded, though my intel had stated that only about fifty soldiers had been left here to defend it. Still, this wasn't going to be a sweeping victory—we were lacking in numbers too.

As I began running toward a staircase, a soldier—who I assumed was from the second order—appeared from around a corner and locked eyes with me. With his spear held near his waist, he charged toward me specifically, perhaps having noticed that my armor was higher in quality than the men around me.

“Traitors! You’ll pay!” he yelled.

*So the second order does have some enthusiastic soldiers after all.*

His expression told me that anger drove him. It was possible that his face always looked that way, but I judged that he was wild with rage—perhaps motivated by lies he’d been fed.

“Defend His Excellency!”

The captain was rushing to my aid, but I quickened my pace toward the enemy soldier. *If anyone needs defending, it’s not me. I can handle this.*

“Urooooooh!” The man roared as he charged toward me, then thrust the spear forward.

I sidestepped his attack at the last moment. Then, with the back of my armored left hand, I deflected his spear while it was still in motion. With my opponent left open, I plunged my own spear into his abdomen. Our combined momentum as we charged toward each other helped my weapon penetrate deep into his body.

“Ghh...” With a muffled groan, the man slumped forward.

I’d expected him to be wearing chain mail, but I’d felt little resistance as I’d driven in the spear. He was wearing no more than thick cloth. Even a soldier with a comfortable post within the castle should’ve known not to take war so lightly.

I pulled my spear free. “A commonplace spear bearer. He’s nothing.”

The man grasped at his abdomen with both hands. He'd completely given up on holding his weapon. It was a disappointing show for someone who'd come at me with such enthusiasm. Soim had taught me never to let my guard down, even when an opponent had collapsed to the ground—a great warrior would go on fighting even after being thrice impaled.

“Let's keep moving. I don't want to waste more time.”

I made my way to the sixth floor amid the sounds of soldiers' weapons clashing vigorously.

When I reached the corridor leading to the dining room that I'd once walked through with my parents, I paused. There was blood everywhere.

The first thing that caught my notice were the wounded Ho family knights slumped on the floor. It looked like they'd retreated from fighting up ahead. There were five of them. Twenty more knights were standing farther along the corridor, but they'd come to a complete halt.

“What's going on?” I asked.

The knights looked at me in surprise as they saw me approach from behind. It was as though they'd never expected me to venture this deep into the building.

“Your Excellency! Th-There's a powerful knight defending the corridor!” The man who answered was repeatedly glancing back at whatever lay beyond him.

*So they've got someone special here?*

“Clear the way,” I ordered.

“But...”

“I said clear the way!”

The knights reluctantly parted to make a path for me.

As I moved forward, I saw a huge man standing in the corridor. He was best described as a great mass of muscle. His body, which had to weigh three times as much as any ordinary man's, was covered in plate armor that must've been made especially for him. He was tall too. Overall, his build was radically different from mine. He held a battle-axe in each hand.

The axes were clearly designed for combat. Each had just one ordinary blade, but also a thick conical point at the top that was ideal for stabbing an opponent, and similar sharp point on the side opposite the blade. Such weapons required no skill to wield. If flailed around with enough force, any part that made contact with an opponent would pierce them.

He didn't look like a knight to me.

The huge man had already cracked the skulls or opened the abdomens of five or so knights, whose bodies were strewn across the floor.

Though the corridor wasn't particularly narrow, it wasn't an ideal place to swing a spear. His axes, meanwhile, were short enough that he could wield them with ease. To make matters worse, we were all dressed in light armor because we'd been riding eagles.

We were at a major disadvantage. This was an opponent I would've rather avoided. I could guess who he was.

"Bronx the Breaker?" I asked. "They've got you defending a princess? You've really moved up in the world."

I'd never heard anything about him wearing plate armor, but everything else matched what I knew.

"Ngh... You know my name, knight? Ah... I'll bet you're that Yuri." He spoke surprisingly slowly.

"Yeah, that's me."

Bronx the Breaker was one of the witches' most feared minions, known to every merchant in the royal capital. Though he wasn't an assassin, he was hardly a stranger to violence. His usual duties involved barging into stores and destroying everything they contained at the command of a witch while store owners threw themselves at his feet and begged him to spare their livelihood. If he was under orders not to kill the owner, he'd ignore them completely, otherwise he'd cleave their skull. Guards proved useless against him—he could use his overwhelming strength to cast them aside with one hand without pausing in his complete rampage.

From what I'd heard, he served the Charleville family. Since his visits sent such

a powerful message, though, the other witches would hire him too. His name was known throughout all of their territories. His notoriety was so great that nothing he could do would increase it.

Now here he was, tasked with protecting their princess—or should I say their queen?

The world would be better off without him.

“Ngh... Always wanted to smash up your place... Never got asked to do it.”

If he’d targeted Ho Company, a battle between him and the soldiers standing guard outside the Ho residence would’ve ensued.

“Just to check, you’re not going to stand aside for us, are you?” I asked.

“No chance. I wanna fight you so bad.”

Bronx the Breaker rubbed together the axes he held in each hand with a series of metallic scraping sounds. I could only see his eyes through the large helmet on his head, but I sensed he was licking his lips. He was eager for a fight.

“Your Excellency!” a subordinate behind me cried. “It’s too dangerous! Please stand back!”

That was when Bronx came at me, as if some instinct had warned him that his prey might escape if he hesitated.

In what looked like an attempt to keep me trapped between his massive body and my own men, he loomed over me menacingly and swung both of his axes. He looked like a bear about to seize its prey.

*Boom!*

The explosion that shook the corridor felt wholly out of place.

I’d drawn the pistol holstered on the back of my belt. After taking rough aim at my target, I’d fired from the hip. The high-caliber gun’s recoil felt like it had almost ripped my arm off.

The lead bullet hit Bronx from close range, tearing a hole through his armor’s chest plate.

“Urooogh!”

Bronx couldn't help but stagger backward half a step after being shot in the chest, but then he took another step toward me.

Before he could take another, I stabbed him with the spear I held in my other hand. It passed through a small gap in the plates around his neck.

"Guohhh..."

Even as his throat filled with blood, Bronx somehow managed one more step forward as he swung his axe.

My spear sank deeper into his throat as his weapon weakly connected with my forearm. It was a powerful shock, but not enough to break the bone. The axe merely scraped the surface of my leather armor before falling away.

Bronx the Breaker collapsed toward me, and I found myself unable to support his weight with my spear. I directed his weight sideways, pulled my weapon free, and stepped to the side to avoid being crushed by his body.

*Crash!* The thud we heard as his body hit the floor seemed too loud to have been caused by a person falling.

He hadn't gone down easily. He was a crude and unruly man, but I'd felt the power he'd emanated in battle. I wouldn't go so far as to say he'd earned my respect, but there was no denying his strength.

Behind me, the knights had watched with wide eyes. "Your Excellency!"

It was a good thing I'd decided to bring a pistol. Even I wouldn't have known how to deal with such an overwhelmingly strong opponent otherwise. It had been a decision inspired by my memory of the fight I'd had with Canka. For a long time, I'd wondered how best to deal with opponents like him. It seemed I'd found my answer.

"There won't be any more like him ahead. Head up the tower and raise the flag like we planned. And remember—the Ho flag should be below the royal family's."

"Yes, sir! As you command!"

Carla would be in one of the rooms up ahead. I owed her a visit.

I found Carla in the third room I checked. Our eyes met the moment I opened the door.

She'd no doubt heard the sounds of fighting in the corridor. She was here alone, staring at the door and waiting.

She wore a pure white dress with painstakingly embroidered frills and a glittering necklace adorned with an extravagant set of beautiful jewels. It was an outfit fit for a queen, but she was far from majestic.

I looked around as I stepped into the room to check we were alone. There was no one here besides Carla. Everyone must've deserted her. The attendants that should've been by her side were gone.

"Carla's in here," I told a knight outside. "Stand watch and make sure we're not disturbed."

"Yes, sir."

I closed the door.

"Yuri..." Carla watched me fearfully, like a prisoner waiting to be sentenced to execution.

"Carla." I took a seat as I said her name.

I could've killed her right away, but I felt like talking a little first.

"Thing is, you know, I didn't do it on purpose... They gave me an antidote. How could I have known it was fake?"

"Carla—"

She went on talking before I could tell her to stop. "Oh, I should say sorry first, shouldn't I...? I'm sorry. I hope you understand that I'm not lying to you. You know I'd never try to kill you, don't you? When I put it into the wine, I was planning on giving you the antidote... So, you see, it wasn't on purpose."

She wasn't making any sense. It didn't even matter what she'd intended to do, or what anyone had told her. The fact was, she'd done it.

*Rook and Suzuya died coughing up blood, and Carol's still sick in bed right*

*now. How do you think she feels? Don't you understand the enormity of what you've done?* I wanted to say all of this to her, but I held my tongue. Nothing was going to get through.

"So, well, I'm sorry. I know I can't undo what I've done. But even so, I want you to know. I really do love you, so—"

"Stop!"

Overcome with rage, I slammed my fist down on a tea table. With a great cracking sound, it splintered into two and collapsed to the floor. It had only been a delicate little folding thing. The collection of pots on it, which had contained tea powder, shattered and stained the crumpled tablecloth with their contents.

Carla cowered in fear. "I'm s-sorry."

"I didn't mean to scare you."

Everyone had things they could and couldn't do. Surely there was someone out there, probably a woman, who could understand how Carla's mind worked—down to the most subtle details. Maybe there was even someone who could reason with Carla and get her to understand. But that someone wasn't me. I'd never get through to her. I'd never make her feel remorse. It was partly because I wasn't patient or accepting enough. I didn't want to draw out this meeting with her.

I doubted I could even convince Carla that it was already too late for her. She'd killed the queen by her own hand. She'd live for as long as the witches governed the kingdom, but once Carol took control, Carla would have to be executed. No matter what she did now, she had to die for what she'd done.

Her crimes would normally be cause for some horrific form of execution. There was still a chance for her to avoid that fate, but she'd be executed nonetheless. After a week living in a comfortable cell, she might be dragged out before spectators, a rope placed around her neck as she wailed and wept, and hanged.

But she was still Carol's little sister. News of her execution would leave Carol distraught and add to her suffering.



If Carla wanted to take responsibility, then suicide was her best option. It was a far more honorable way for her to die than whatever execution was in store for her, and it would lessen the pain her death caused Carol.

“I’m only angry at my own lack of compassion,” I said. “I’m sorry too. I made light of your feelings and said things I shouldn’t have.”

“Huh? Um, what...?”

“After losing so much, it made me stop to think about how I really felt about you.”

Carla’s eyes lit up as I spoke. “You mean it?!”

“What happened between me and Carol was an accident. Once she was pregnant, the queen pressured me into marriage. I’m sorry that I couldn’t tell you back then.”

“Really? That’s what happened?! Well, you really took your time, but...now that we both know how we feel about each other...”

She was proving herself a genuine psychopath.

*I never said anything about loving you. You killed my parents in such a horrible way. Can’t you guess how I feel about you?*

Since Carla had hated her mother and lost her father at a very young age, the concept of love for one’s parents might’ve been alien to her.

“What did the witches tell you?” I asked.

“They said that if I became queen I could make you mine. They told me to make you promise before I let you have the antidote. I had no idea they’d tricked me... And I was going to let your parents have the antidote too, of course! You believe me, don’t you?!”

She was repeating herself. We were going round in circles. I really couldn’t stand conversations like this.

“Yeah, I get it. They’re awful people. We’ll punish them for it. They have to pay for manipulating you into doing something so terrible. Then we’ll arrest anyone who spreads awful rumors about you.”

“You mean it?! Please promise me!”

“I won’t let anyone else hurt you. I’ll call off the marriage with Carol.”

“And the baby?! Can you make my sister abort the baby?!”

For a moment, my anger was so strong that I couldn’t think. I’d gone beyond seething with rage—this was more like an explosion.

“Just between you and me, Carol isn’t going to make it. Don’t worry, she’ll never have that baby anyway.”

I was impressed at my own ability to keep a straight face and feed her lies while rage consumed me so utterly. I felt like I’d lost my sanity. *Is this the sort of man I am?*

“Really?! Then you’ll marry me instead?!”

“Of course. To be honest, I always liked you better than Carol.”

“I’m so happy!”

Carla put both hands to her mouth and began to weep, looking genuinely overwhelmed with joy. For a while, she just looked at my face, but then she seemed to tire of that and spent several minutes looking at the floor. She was overcome with emotion the whole time.

Once she’d calmed down a little, she lifted her tearful face. “Will you hold me?” she asked while spreading her arms wide, ready to embrace me.

Carla was much shorter than Carol, and she looked much lighter too. Perhaps it was because of the difference in their upbringing.

I reached out and lifted her up as I held her. As Carla wrapped her arms around my neck, my face came to rest next to hers, and we held each other tight.

“Yuri, I love you.”

I detected no hint of dishonesty. It sounded like the truth. I didn’t doubt her.

While holding Carla with my left arm, I drew the dagger at my waist with my right.

“I love you too.”

I turned the blade sideways and drove it into a gap between her ribs, just above her abdomen. I aimed the dagger upward so it would graze her lungs and most likely reach her heart.

“Ugh, kgh...”

The freshly sharpened blade avoided ribs, sliding into her with barely any resistance.

Carla didn't struggle, nor did she shake much. She simply continued to hold me at my neck, keeping her body close to mine, as if savoring my warmth.

“I know you're lying, but I'm still happy. Thank you.”

After whispering her final words into my ear, Carla twitched, then ceased to move at all. The strength went out of her arms around my neck, and I felt her body grow heavy in my left arm.

After lying her down on the bed, I looked at the dagger that was still embedded in her rib cage. Blood was pouring from the wound, staining her white dress a deep crimson.

I'd hoped that leaving the dagger in place would lessen the bleeding from her pierced heart. Perhaps the excessive bleeding was because I'd stabbed her from the side and punctured her lungs, allowing air to escape.

No one would mistake this for suicide.

Carla's final words had made an impression on me. Before I'd entered the room, my plan had been to stab her, then throw her body outside. Since this was the sixth floor, no one would ever know whether she'd died by a stabbing or by deliberately jumping to her death. I still had that option, but it just didn't feel right.

I covered her body with the bed's blanket, then left the room.

“Your Excellency! Did all go well?” a soldier who'd been waiting outside asked.

“Carla killed herself,” I lied as I closed the door behind me.

Not that it would cause any great problems for me if the world knew I'd killed her. She'd killed my parents. People wouldn't blame me—they'd sympathize.

Although I didn't have to worry about people learning the truth, calling it a suicide made matters more convenient for now.

"I'd like her to be treated with respect. Let a woman handle her body."

I walked slowly along the corridor, back to where Bronx lay dead, and picked up one of his axes. It was heavy. The thick handle also made it difficult to hold.

I went back to the door, gripped the axe in both hands, and swung it downward to destroy the doorknob.

"Stand guard here. Don't leave until a woman comes."

The royal swords would arrive soon after the second order surrendered.

### III

As I left the royal castle, I found a new group on the island that didn't look like Ho family sky knights.

The first order of the royal guard had arrived. They were lined up neatly and looking at me, showing no signs of attacking. Among them, I spotted a familiar face.

"Yuri. Or should I say, Your Excellency?"

It was Galla Godwin—Dolla's dad.

"Please don't embarrass me with titles. You don't serve me, Galla."

"That's true. Not yet, at least."

*Not yet...? Oh, maybe he's right.*

"Members of the first order, thank you."

I hadn't fully grasped the situation, but if they'd come to us, it meant that they'd gone beyond their promise of not taking action.

"Our highest-ranking officers are all in custody," Galla explained. "I couldn't get the entire first order under my control, but there were enough willing soldiers to assemble a unit of a thousand. I fear we're not much use, but we're helping where we can."

I could hear women shouting incessantly somewhere behind these soldiers. I guessed those were the officers who'd been arrested.

"You didn't face any resistance from the second order?" I asked.

"Not much. There are three hundred of us gathered here, and the other seven hundred are patrolling the island. We're getting everything in order gradually, and I haven't heard any reports of tough battles. I ordered them not to fight with Ho knights, but if any clashes did occur, then I apologize in advance."

"That's fine. Clashes are unavoidable."

Even when two armies were on the same side, accidents on the battlefield were inevitable. The soldiers would be in a tense situation as two opposing sides constantly tried to kill each other. If someone appeared before a soldier brandishing a weapon, the soldier might panic and attack before realizing their mistake. That would result in some accidental injuries and perhaps even some deaths. We couldn't prevent such incidents, and we'd be arguing forever if we treated every case as an act of hostility.

"What about Metina Arkhorse?"

"We got her too. She's confined to her quarters. We have someone watching to ensure she doesn't kill herself."

"All right. That sounds perfect. Thank you."

Tillet had told me that it was uncertain whether the first order would take action, but that they probably would. It looked like they'd done their fair share of work after all.

"We took an additional twenty prisoners along the way, but our garrison doesn't have its own dungeon. There's one nearby that serves all of Royal Castle Island. We've got our hands full keeping watch over the prisoners right now, so I was planning to put them in there after talking to you."

Given that someone would have to watch over the process as they were carefully untied and placed into cells, I personally thought it would be better to leave them bound. Though there was always the risk of them being lynched if they weren't inside a cell. It was hard to imagine that members of the first order would do anything as barbaric as raping their former commanders, but I

couldn't rule it out.

"All right. Let's do that. Even if they're going to be executed, we might need them in the meantime."

"Right. You should make them stand trial."

*A trial...?*

Since our kingdom had a court system based on rule of law, I'd have no influence over the judgments delivered, but it would be worth it. At the very least, I had to follow proper process so that the upcoming transfer of power would be recognized as legitimate.

"Now, I don't suppose you've seen my fool of a son?" Galla said, changing the topic.

"I'm afraid not."

"He told me he was going to go see you after the assassination. He probably headed for Ho Province. If you two didn't meet, then you must have missed him somehow."

*Seriously?*

"I suspect you're right. My men might've arrested him," I replied.

*"I wanna see Yuri! Where is he?!"*

*"Who do you think you are?"*

*"I'm the son of Galla of the royal guard. Now, where's Yuri?"*

*"I don't trust this guy. You're under arrest!"*

I could just picture the scene. The whole idea was way too realistic.

"If they did, I hope you'll release him," Galla said. "He doesn't mean any harm. He just tends to forget himself whenever Princess Carol's involved."

"I'll see to it."

*Looks like I'll have to pay him a visit, but I'm not looking forward to what he'll say after all that's happened. He'll probably punch me.*

Somehow, the thought wasn't an unhappy one. I was just now realizing that

no one had blamed me for anything. Perhaps I actually *wanted* someone to criticize me.

“Now that things are in order here on Royal Castle Island, I need to check on the main body of my forces. I’m not sure what happened to them,” I said.

I had no worries about them losing.

Unfortunately, I couldn’t leave without talking to a royal sword first. There’d probably be one or two of them near the burning bridge. I needed to ask them to take care of Carla’s body before I went anywhere.

“Your Excellency! I bring news!”

Just as I was about to say goodbye to Galla, I heard someone calling to me. It was a young man with a handsome face and well-groomed hair. He was wearing a messenger’s uniform.

The Ho family had a unique uniform worn by specialized sky knights that we referred to as messengers. Since their job was to deliver information quickly, they had to be easily recognizable so that everyone knew not to get in their way. For example, if people were waiting in line to enter a place, a messenger could cut in front. If a road was blocked with traffic, then even high-ranking officers would stand aside to make way.

The man that had just run up to me didn’t need to stop and salute.

Since a messenger had appeared just as I was in need of information about our situation, Galla used it as an opportunity for flattery. “I see the Ho family has all the finest soldiers.”

Compared to the soldiers of the royal guard, ours might’ve been special. Their experience in actual combat meant they knew when a situation demanded proper discipline. I’d gotten the impression that the second order was particularly lax in that regard.

“Go ahead and speak,” I said.

The man stood perfectly straight before me. “I bring news! The second order of the royal guard has been eliminated! Our forces are victorious!”

I quickly delivered a powerful kick to his knee. The sensation I felt through my

foot was unpleasant as his leg buckled.

“Whoa!” Galla cried out in surprise.

“Hah?! Agh... Urgghh!” The kick sent the man falling to the ground.

The suddenness of it all had left Galla and the knights of the first order behind me watching in disbelief.

“Throw this one in the dungeon with the others,” I said. “He’s probably working for the witches.”

We weren’t here to eliminate the second order. They’d surrender long before it came to that.

Though I couldn’t rule out the possibility that a full-scale battle had broken out somehow, resulting in the enemy’s annihilation. Maybe what the man had said was true, but if he was working with the enemy, he’d be an assassin, so I had to strike before he could.

“How can you be sure? Did you already receive word that the second order had surrendered?” Galla asked.

“His hair’s too neat.”

“What...?” Galla didn’t seem to understand. The significance was lost on him since he wasn’t a sky knight.

“His hair wouldn’t be that tidy if he’d flown in on an eagle. He looks like he was sitting at home grooming himself just a few minutes ago. Well, he’s not so polished now.”

His hair had already gotten messed up as he writhed around on the ground.

I had no idea where someone would get the uniform needed for such an underhanded trick. He’d probably put some effort into his appearance thinking it would make him more convincing, but he should’ve thought a little harder about what sky knights do.

“But he could’ve just—”

“A messenger’s job is to deliver information as quickly as possible. They might flatten their hair with their hand, but no real messenger would stop to pull out



a comb in the middle of their duties.”

Maybe there really *were* messengers stupid enough to do just that, and this was all my mistake. But if that were the case, the Ho family would be better off without this guy.

“I have to go. I’m sure he bears a grudge against you too, Galla, so please handle him carefully.”

“R-Right... I’ll do just that.”

After my discussion with Galla, I walked toward White Sunset.

It felt odd to see eagles resting here and there along Royal Castle Island’s familiar road. Some riders must’ve been unable to find anything to tie the reins to, so they’d left them pinned under rocks. Fortunately, none of our birds tried to escape and fly away. Since the eagles around them weren’t taking off, they might’ve felt compelled to remain on the ground with the others. Maybe future animal behavior experts would have a thing or two to say about the social nature of these birds.

With these thoughts going through my mind, I reached the spot where I’d left White Sunset. A royal sword stepped out from the shadows as I approached. It wasn’t Tillet, but Henrique.

“Hey there! It’s your favorite girl, Henrique!”

“What’s wrong with you?” I replied, sounding a little more grumpy than intended. Her choice of greeting had been downright bizarre.

*Since when did she act like this? Is she definitely a royal sword?*

“Ah, that figures... You’ve already made your first impressions of me, haven’t you?” Henrique suddenly sounded less excited. “Ahem... I’ve been watching the royal castle under Tillet’s command. How did it go?”

She’d transformed back into the Henrique I’d encountered during my previous visit to the castle. It wasn’t as though she’d suddenly gotten depressed. It was more like someone had lowered the tension on the string of an instrument, restoring it to its proper tuning. When we’d first met, she hadn’t

been putting on a cheerful act. If I'd never met her before, I would've just thought she was cheery by nature. It was odd seeing how rapidly she could switch from one personality to another.

Henrique looked around in all directions in an exaggerated fashion. "I've been waiting here for Carla to come falling down," she said, lowering her voice.

"I decided not to throw her. I laid her down in a room on the sixth floor with a missing doorknob. I need you to change her clothes and somehow make it look like she poisoned herself."

Henrique narrowed her eyes like she was sizing me up. "What? You took pity on her? You're softer than I thought."



There was something strangely alluring about the way she tilted her head and narrowed her eyes. It helped that she had large breasts, albeit not on Lilly's level. She was pretty too. Despite being baby-faced, there was something seductive about her expression. It felt like she'd just reached out and touched some sensitive part of my heart, and I was a man seeing her as a woman.

*Oh, I get it.*

It struck me that certain missions required a level of subtlety that Tillet lacked. And unlike Tillet, Henrique had just the right level of body fat. Now I understood why she'd been the one left behind in the castle—she had the skills needed to ensure she'd live through it. In terms of survivability, she might've ranked above any other royal sword.

"Carla had her flaws, but I'd known her for a long time," I said.

I turned away from Henrique and approached White Sunset.

For some reason, Henrique followed. I had no more to say, so ignored her as I took White Sunset's reins and began leading him to open ground.

"How'd it feel when you finished off Carla?"

*What's wrong with her? I don't even want to answer that.*

The royal swords must've had mixed feelings about Carla, but this one was acting like she had no qualms about seeing her killed.

"I tried to be graceful about it. I'd known her for a long time."

"Did she suffer? Did she die cursing you? How do you feel after killing an old friend?"

*What...?* I was growing irritated, but a sense that something wasn't right was enough to drown out my anger.

There was no point to her questions. She had to be testing me. *It's like she wants to get me mad. But why would she...?*

I gave her a flippant response. "Dunno. Don't remember."

"Come on. Get angry. You can tell me to shut up and hit me."

"What are you talking about?" *Has she got some sort of problem?*

“You’re so boring. Your anger was enough to give me chills last time.”

“If you want entertainment, try a theater.”

By now we’d reached an open space, so I climbed onto White Sunset.

“What a weak comeback. Where’s all the intensity you had before? Were you always this dull?”

*Who cares whether I’m dull or intense?* “Maybe.”

“Say you’ll kill me right now, like last time. Please.”

I didn’t mind saying it, so I did. “I’ll kill you right now.”

“Dull...” Henrique looked incredibly disappointed.

*Who cares?*

I’d finished harnessing myself to White Sunset.

“Look, I don’t care what you’re into, but make sure you do your job,” I told her.

White Sunset began to beat his wings, ending our conversation.

Once I was in the air and looking down on the battlefield from White Sunset, I could see that the second order was no longer functional. The two wings of the Ho army had formed a semicircle around the second order to envelop them.

The enemy soldiers farthest back were trying to escape via the main highway, while a few others were taking refuge. Try as they might, it looked like our plainrunner cavalry would soon have them trapped. The enemy was effectively surrounded.

Battlefield theories dictated that a commander had to position their troops in a way to prevent this sort of encirclement. The reason their commander hadn’t was because the entire force was too nervous to move as an orderly unit.

The second order’s basic strategy was to defend the royal capital and, if they failed in that aim, take up defensive positions on Royal Castle Island. The royal guard had used this same strategy for generations, and it had played out multiple times in the Shiyaltan royal family’s history whenever Sibiak was under attack.

Royal Castle Island had originally been designed as a place where people could take refuge while waiting for reinforcements. It wasn't designed to be defended for years at a time. The island was in the center of the city, and it held several commercial facilities and offices. Unlike a fortress in some remote location, it wasn't well equipped with as many storehouses as space would allow. Instead, the island had a few small buildings tucked away behind the castle, which stored just enough provisions to provide some peace of mind. And since it was a river island, any underground areas were too damp for storing food.

The first and second order combined had eighteen thousand soldiers, and witch families would have to be fed as well, which meant that their supplies might not even last a month. This was why the royal family and the witches had chosen to take the fight to the capital's edge by placing their defenses in the city's commercial districts during every single internal conflict. In a way, it was beneficial if they lost a lot of soldiers before any attempt to move their forces to Royal Castle Island.

The witches couldn't be certain of their defeat until they'd attempted a battle, so they certainly weren't going to simply hand over the royal capital—their base of operations and main source of revenue—without any resistance. Their strategy was ruined, however, because Royal Castle Island had fallen before anything else had.

The Ho family's flag flew on the castle's spire as clouds of black smoke rose from the bridges to the island. With nowhere to run in the event of defeat, the only three options the soldiers had were to fight to the death, raise their hands in surrender, or throw down their weapons and flee. Few were willing to fight to the death.

As our forces enveloped them tightly, the enemy had started to huddle closer and closer, with nowhere to run.

I descended slowly, heading for the main body of our forces.

"Your Excellency! I've been waiting for you."

Dimitri came running over as soon as White Sunset had stopped beating his wings. He was in command of the ground army.

“Dimitri, good work. You’ve enveloped the enemy beautifully.”

“I’m pleased to be of service.” Dimitri dropped down on one knee to give an exaggerated salute.

I climbed off of White Sunset. “I see you had to use the plainrunners already, but did you at least seal off the north road leading to Bof Province first?”

“As you instructed, three hundred knights were sent to block the road, and another hundred are blocking the route to Noza Province.”

It seemed everything was going as planned. Winning the battle wouldn’t do much if we allowed the witches to escape. We had to block every way out.

“From the sky, it looked like the fighting was done. Did the enemy surrender already?”

“The situation is quite complicated in that regard. Please follow me.”

*Complicated? But how?*

“Explain while we’re walking,” I instructed, moving away from White Sunset.

An eagle handler had appeared to take the reins without me having to ask.

“Keagul Cursefit was taken into custody. However, she didn’t surrender beforehand.”

Keagul Cursefit was the current head of the Cursefit family. I’d heard she was quite old, so I’d be surprised if she’d personally taken command on the battlefield. In any case, I certainly hadn’t thought we’d capture her this quickly. Our progress was suspiciously fast.

“How’d that happen?” I asked.

“It seems there was a traitor. Someone put a dagger to her throat and threatened to kill her unless the other soldiers stood aside as he brought her to us.”

“Ah... That sort of treachery takes some guts.”

Not every soldier in the second order had lost the will to fight. Even with defeat looming, those loyal to the Cursefits would’ve continued to fight hard and demand that other soldiers do the same. Taking Keagul Cursefit hostage to

negotiate a surrender meant making it through those other soldiers. It sounded simple, but it would take some real courage to pull it off.

Dimitri stopped before a small tent. “She’s in here.”

When Dimitri parted the curtain-like opening, I saw six people inside—a frail old woman, a man, and four knights surrounding them.

Keagul Cursefit was wearing a gag that looked like it would prevent her from biting her tongue.

*So this old woman’s the head of the Cursefit family?* Given her advanced age, I could only imagine she’d been giving commands from a palanquin.

The man was wearing a second order uniform. His face was unusually thin and his nose too large. It was a bizarre, unique face for a Shanti. His body looked slender, yet muscular. He was probably the man who’d put a dagger to Keagul Cursefit’s throat and brought her to us.

*I can’t get over that face. He certainly looks gutsy, but— Oh, hold on a second.*

“How come the man’s not tied up?” I asked.

“We took his weapons away,” Dimitri told me. “He’s expecting a reward. We told him he might get one if he behaves.”

The strange man had certainly performed a great service.

“Hmm. If he tries anything, make sure to hold him back.”

“Yes, sir. As you command.”

I got closer to Cursefit. When she lifted her gagged face and glared at me, I studied her closely. “Hmmm... I wonder. Could be a body double. It’s hard to tell since I’ve never seen her.”

“You think she may be an impostor?” Dimitri asked. “I’ve met this woman and seen her face firsthand myself.”

I ignored Dimitri and addressed the old man who’d brought her. “Hey—witches can’t put all their faith in the second order, can they? When it comes to the *real* dirty work, they can’t trust an army. No, it has to be some pawn who’s used to getting his hands dirty. When a witch needs someone strong to rely on,



it's always a pathetic, lowdown thug."

I didn't overlook the way the man's eyebrows twitched as I spoke. If it wasn't for the impression Bronx the Breaker had left on me, I wouldn't have noticed.

"Dimitri, there's an assassin in this city known as the Silhouette. He's a killer whose true identity is a mystery. Sounds like something from a novel, right?"

I continued after a short pause.

"Well, when I dealt in commerce, the assassin killed the owner of a retailer we worked with. The victim had been planning on quitting the parchment business to sell Ho paper exclusively. He'd even bought large sheets of Ho paper that other retailers weren't interested in. He said they looked good on display in his store. He died so young...it was tragic. We made sure his family was taken care of, at least. His wife now works in an office in Suomi."

Dimitri had, of course, realized where I was going with this. He aimed a threatening glare down at the man.

So far, the man hadn't made his move.

"So I did a little research on this assassin known as the Silhouette," I continued. "It's a funny story. They used to call him the Rat Face until he started wearing a mask. As his career took off, he started to hate the name so much that he'd kill anyone who used it. People in the royal capital's darker corners won't even say the name aloud these days. You see what I mean, right?"

The man's slim face combined with the big nose really was reminiscent of a rat.

Just as I finished speaking, Dimitri stepped in front of me and yelled, "Tie him up now!"

"Kreeeh!"

There was a shrill cry followed by a glint of silver that danced in my vision.

*A concealed weapon? But it's so long.* With Dimitri standing in front of me, it was hard to tell what the shiny object was or how the man was wielding it.

There was another flash of silver, followed by the sound of metal scraping against metal—*ka-shing!*

He'd somehow concealed a weapon with a blade made from a flexible iron ribbon—probably from within his belt.

“Kreeeeeee!”

But his weapon had a weakness—he had to swing it around like a chain as he fought. With each swing, his arm had to move through a sizable windup. The advantage of his weapon was that a single swing could target all five people around him at once, but it was too slow for a fight one-on-one.

The four knights around him held spears, while Dimitri had drawn a dagger. Dimitri was poised, ready to lunge at the assassin the moment he tried to get his limp sword into position for the next swing. It was obvious who'd strike first.

If I was the rat's target, he couldn't waste another moment on Dimitri. He dropped the strange weapon he'd been holding, leaped into the air, and hit Dimitri with a flying kick.

“Ngh!”

The man made contact with Dimitri's head. Though it seemed that Dimitri had been hit hard, he somehow managed to drop his dagger and catch the man's ankle with both hands.

“Hngh!” Dimitri curled his back and turned, tossing the rat in the style of a judo throw.

I stepped aside as the rat came flying at me. He'd been thrown so powerfully that he bounced when he hit the ground.

Dimitri grasped the man's ankle again and watched him closely. The rat tried to rise, but his entire body simply trembled—likely the result of a concussion.

Dimitri had proved himself. The way he'd dropped his dagger to perform the throw demonstrated quick thinking.

“Should I kill him?” Dimitri asked.

“Strip him and tie him up.”

If he was willing to testify, we could potentially execute a few extra witches. Alternatively, we could publicly execute him in the city later to appease its residents.

“Mmh. Understood.” Dimitri sounded dissatisfied, but he released his grip.

The rat was still dangerous. We’d be in trouble if he got up. I recollected all the suffering he’d put Starsha through, then kicked the trembling rat in the head as hard as I could. His head rose from the ground, then dropped back down limp. With a twitch, he stopped moving completely.

*Damn, did I just kill him?*

Dimitri had the same thought. “Is he...dead?” He didn’t sound happy about it—probably because he’d wanted to kill the rat himself.

“He’s probably still alive. If he’s not, it doesn’t really matter.”

“Very well.” Dimitri didn’t seem overly concerned either.

“The question is what to do with the body double.” I looked at the old woman who was still staring at me with the gag in her mouth.

“I’m terribly sorry. I should’ve known it wasn’t her.”

“No, it’s fine. Actually, maybe it *is* her.”

“Could it be...?” Dimitri appeared to doubt the idea.

“I’m just saying it’s possible. The second order has no way of winning. It makes sense that a witch might come to me with one of her trusted assassins hoping for an opportunity to kill me. If they’re going to be captured after their defeat anyway, it looks like a good deal.”

“Ah... Yes, you’re right. But would a witch really have the backbone for such an attempt?”

“I’m just speculating. In any case, I’ll take care of her. Encourage the second order to surrender. A victory by nightfall might be quick, but not quick enough.”

Once night arrived, we’d have a hard time stopping witches from escaping the royal capital under the cover of darkness. I wanted the second order to surrender while there was still light so that we could position our soldiers to block all ways out of the city.

“Yes, sir! I’ll get right on it.”

“Counting on you.”

Now I needed to find Myalo.

## IV

I boarded a carriage and headed for the royal castle together with Myalo and the body double.

According to my watch, it was 3 p.m. The battle had started in the morning, but now sunset would soon approach.

To the south, Dimitri had already begun accepting the second order's surrender. There'd been some resistance, but the overall force had lost its morale. There was no way they'd continue fighting when the enemy that surrounded them had offered an alternative.

The surrender was proceeding at three posts we'd set up for disarming the soldiers. Aside from those guilty of crimes—particularly atrocities—each soldier would be offered a pardon in exchange for agreeing to a year of military service, effective immediately.

“Haaalt!” a loud voice cried as we neared the drawbridge, bringing our carriage to a stop.

I opened the carriage door and got out to deal with it myself.

“Y-Your Excellency! My apologies!” cried the voice's owner.

“No, it's fine. I wanted to take a look at the bridge anyway.”

Royal Castle Island already had a new bridge made from large logs that we'd had prepared in advance. The logs were bound to one another with flat planks laid on top, and there were also ramps on either end to make it easier to climb the additional height the new bridge created. It was a crude thing made of bare wood, but it probably wouldn't slow down traffic. We'd be using it until we had the drawbridge repaired.

“Continue to inspect traffic as you are. I appreciate your work.” After a few words of gratitude, I boarded the carriage again.

When the coach driver cracked the whip, we immediately began moving.

“...And that’s why His Excellency would like cooperation from the witches.”

As the carriage rattled over the hard ground, Myalo continued giving her explanation to the gagged body double—assuming that was what she was.

“The witches ensure that the royal capital functions as a city. That’s clear to everyone. Without the power of witches, Sibiak would have never grown into a flourishing city, nor would its prosperity have persisted. His Excellency holds those efforts in high regard. The sole problem is the lack of an open market. If commercial entities had better freedom to operate, it would be more in line with His Excellency’s desires.”

As expected, Myalo was proving herself ideal for this task. She was able to string together an explanation without needing time to prepare a script.

Meanwhile, I did my best not to ruin her efforts. If my face said, “You’d have to be an idiot to believe that,” it would give the game away, so I did my best to keep my face straight.

“Now, I hope you’ve understood what His Excellency envisions. He has no desire to go door-to-door and arrest every witch that’s hiding. Ideally, those who cooperate and serve him will be given the same jobs as before. Witch families will accept money from merchants in good conscience, and Sibiak will function more efficiently than at any time in history. Cooperation from the witches is an essential part of this vision.” Myalo turned to me. “Isn’t that correct?”

“Exactly. We might be fighting today so I can settle a few scores with witches, but I can’t deny that they serve a useful function. You might say they’re a worthy opponent. And when I’ve got strong enemies, I get them on my side. It’s how I operate.”

This ruse would’ve been a lot easier if I hadn’t shared my true feelings inside the tent.

“We’re escorting you to the northern side of the city where we’ll release you unconditionally,” Myalo continued. “In return, we hope you’ll act as our messenger and set up peace negotiations. Please do us this favor.”

Royal Castle Island’s north bridge was still under repair. Only three logs had

been sent to replace the burned bridge, making it far from complete.

“Your Excellency! My apologies! The repair works are behind schedule.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I told the carpenter as I climbed down from the carriage. “Is it still possible for someone to cross? It looks like it’s all nailed together.”

There were three logs at the right side that were secured with nails and large staples so that they wouldn’t roll around while someone walked over them.

“Yes, sir. I believe it’s safe.”

“Okay, Myalo. Get her across.”

“Yes, sir.”

Myalo took the body double by the hand and began walking over the makeshift bridge toward the city’s northern half. That was where Witches’ Forest lay.

“Watch your step,” Myalo said as she carefully guided the body double.

“Hey,” a woman waiting by the side of the road called to me.

“Is that you, Tillet?” I replied quietly. “I trust you know what to do.”

“Just leave it to me. Her accomplices are already waiting for her on the other side. I’ll wait a moment before crossing.”

It would look suspicious if a royal sword followed directly behind the old woman, so Tillet was being a little careful.

“I’m counting on you. I won’t accept failure here.”

“As if I’d fail.”

I sensed a quiet anger burning within Tillet. She held feelings that she couldn’t conceal completely.

As we were talking, Myalo had finished helping the old woman across and returned to us. In one hand she held the gag that had been in the old woman’s mouth.

“Good work, Myalo.”

“Thank you.”

“I never got the chance to ask. Was that really her?”

We’d kept her gagged and hadn’t questioned her to confirm her identity. We’d figured it would give her more trust in us that way.

“I believe she’s the real thing. It’s difficult to prepare a body double with such a close resemblance... Though I can’t say for sure, since we didn’t interrogate her.”

“Sorry. I’m not sure how I would’ve reacted if I’d heard what she had to say.”

I was the one who’d asked to keep her gagged the whole time. I’d worried I might explode with rage on hearing her speak and kill her immediately. That was also why I’d let Myalo take her over the bridge. I didn’t know what I might’ve done the moment I felt her hand in mine.

“That’s quite all right. This is all part of my job.” Myalo smiled.

“Her accomplices are gone. I’m off.” Tillet gave us a short goodbye, then casually set out across the makeshift bridge.

## Chapter 3 — The Last Sabbath

I

The northern region of the royal capital was divided into numbered blocks, with the thirteenth being home to the Witches' Forest. Few people ever referred to it as Block Thirteen. The commonly used name was Grand Witch Square.

Manors belonging to the seven witch families and their associates stood side by side around the forest that occupied most of the block. It turned the forest on the inside into a courtyard for use by witches. Naturally, ordinary people couldn't gain access.

A thousand years ago, in the days of the empire, this spot had belonged to a general who was stationed on the White Wolf Peninsula. Back then, there'd only been one manor with fencing surrounding the wide swath of trees. The general and his subordinates had released animals on the land so they could enjoy hunting there whenever they had free time. In other words, it had once been a hunting ground.

After Shiyalta Shaltl had taken control as queen of the region, the forest had been offered to her. Later, she'd bestowed it upon the witches who'd accompanied her, and ever since then, it had served as a base of operations for witches and their like.

In the distant past, there had been seven witches who'd supported the empire's founder, Shamo Shaltl. They'd worked as apothecaries, making medicines using animals they'd bought from hunters and herbs they'd collected from a forest north of the Black Sea. They had been revered as the wise inhabitants of the forest and had offered their support to Shamo Shaltl as her advisers, eventually becoming a key component of the empire.

A forest was a source of natural remedies. The seven witch families descended from those original seven witches considered it important to keep a



bountiful forest close to their home, lest they forget their proud origins. While the warthogs and other beasts that had once been set free in the forest had been eradicated once the witches had inherited it, deer and small creatures, such as squirrels, remained—though those were also periodically culled.

The reason the deer hadn't all been killed was because the newly budding antlers of fawn were an important ingredient in certain medicines. The witches' justification was superficial, however, given that the more recent generations hadn't preserved the practices of their founders in any meaningful way. The last group to hold the old traditions dear by making any medicines at all was the Yurumi family in the Kilhina Kingdom, but since such families were given no protection by the Shiyalta Kingdom, their old practices were now lost to history.

In the center of the Witches' Forest, a space had been cleared among the carefully managed trees to make way for a small wooden house.

Closer examination revealed that the house was the work of a skilled carpenter who'd used the finest quality wood and lined the outer walls with cedar bark. Even the roof was special, in that it was covered with naturally flat stones rather than wood planks or tiles.

The stones had once been a famous export of the now-defunct Yalta Kingdom, collected from a place known as Beard Valley. The valley was home to a geological joint in a cliff face that was a source of pieces of andesite with a highly uniform thickness. The pieces could be used as roofing tiles without much further refinement.

But, of course, there were no longer any residences that used the stone because the Yalta Kingdom had fallen long ago. Such roofs had all since been replaced, or the buildings had been torn down entirely, except for this one remaining house. The stones it used had been bought in large quantities and stockpiled by ancestors of the current witches around the time of the Yalta Kingdom's collapse.

It was a minor source of pride for the witches that they could maintain a building that used construction techniques from the days of the empire, despite the high cost. The house had a timber construction that lacked the durability of stone, which meant it had undergone many repairs and had even been

completely rebuilt multiple times. However, for all that effort, it still looked much the same as when it had been built nine hundred years or so ago.

What *had* changed was one of the rooms within. Once known as the concoction room, it no longer contained medicinal ingredients or the tools needed to compound them. Now, it was known simply as the storage room.

Six witches were gathered inside the house: Vivila Marmoset, Sharun Charleville, Keagul Cursefit, Julia Lacramanus, Ghulah Temper, and Kiki Enfillet. They were all gathered under the same roof. Only the head of the Gudineil family was absent.

The aged Keagul Cursefit was just finishing her story. "...And then he set me free telling me to carry this message."

She wasn't speaking in contemporary Shanish. They spoke Ancient Shanish here. It was customary to use the old tongue whenever they gathered for a sabbath in this building. Witches had long maintained traditions from the days of the empire, so it was a given that members of the seven witch families, being the highest ranking witches, had to be able to speak Ancient Shanish. Anyone too uneducated to speak the language had no right to be heard here.

"Well now... Sounds like you went through an awful lot," Kiki Enfillet mused.

Kiki Enfillet would turn fifty-three that year. If Keagul Cursefit had spoken the truth, the disruption to the Enfillet family's main line of business would be minimal. They held many offices in the royal castle, so it appeared a secure future lay before them.

"So what will we do now?"

"A good question. I don't know."

The Cursefit family's business chiefly involved the second order, which would most likely be disbanded in the near future. The possibility of it being kept was so far removed from common sense that it wasn't even worth considering. The Cursefit family's business would be coming to a complete end. Once their savings ran out, it was possible they'd all be out on the street along with their associates.

"Can't we create a private army?" Vivila Marmoset suggested. "We might be

able to employ a few of the soldiers.”

The second order was responsible for security in the Witches’ Forest and for maintaining order throughout the royal capital. It looked as though hired soldiers would be needed to replace them.

“I think it’ll be more accurate to call them mercenaries. I suppose everyone can expect their job to change to some—”

“Who cares about any of that?!” Sharun Charleville cut Vivila’s sentence off with a shrill cry and a slam of the table.

The others had seen enough that this outburst didn’t shock them—though the group’s youngest member, Jula Lacramanus, did wince a little.

“Ugh.” Sharun Charleville was in the process of rising to her feet when, as a result of her advanced age, she suddenly found it difficult to breathe and had to sit back down.

She’d turned one hundred twenty that year. Ninety years prior, she’d been considered a genius by those familiar with conspiracies in the royal capital, but now she struggled to breathe.

“Haaah, haaah. Has Yuri Ho learned of our deal with the Papal State, or has he not? That’s what we need to discuss. Too many people know already. The six of us, as well as Bof and Noza...” Sharun Charleville frowned. “I said it then, and I’ll say it now—we shouldn’t have gotten them involved.”

“What good does it do to say it now?” Ghulah Temper shot back. “Even you reluctantly agreed at the time, did you not? You knew we needed some way to face the Ho and Rube families after the assassination.”

At seventy years old, Ghulah Temper was still young. She struggled with Ancient Shanish and tended to finish every sentence in the same way.

The Temper family held a powerful authority over the royal capital’s ports. Ghulah Temper had been the one who’d suggested including the Bof and Noza heads in the plan.

“I should’ve ignored you. We’ve no use for cowards who’ll never come to our aid anyway,” Sharun Charleville retorted.

“We agreed that we’d have no other chance of victory if we found ourselves attacked from either side by the Ho and Rube families, did we not? Without a contract, the Bof family would let the Rube army through. We’d be done for then, would we not?”

It had been Ghulah Temper’s opinion that wiping out the Ho family with a single strike would still leave another tenacious chieftain to deal with in the form of the Rube family. Since it wasn’t possible to assassinate the key members of both families at the same time, the next best thing was to leave the Rube family unable to intervene.

Fortunately, the Bof family’s province ran across the land like a barrier, separating Rube Province from the royal territory. If the witches had the Bof family on their side, the Rubes wouldn’t be able to march their army this far south.

However, they’d made their deals under the assumption that all the targets of the assassination would be successfully killed. Ghulah Temper’s efforts were backfiring now that the Ho family had conquered the royal capital.

“Sharun, don’t complain about what’s already done. We were all in agreement when we discussed it at an earlier sabbath,” Vivila Marmoset said.

Vivila Marmoset was sitting at the head of the table and held considerable power at this sabbath.

Though she claimed that everyone had been in agreement, there’d been no one there to represent the Gudineil family. The women here considered it taboo to violate the Seven Witch Promise for any reason, but their customs also said that witches could be purged after betraying their own kind. A broad interpretation of the rules said it was acceptable to leave the Gudineils out of their planning.

Queen Shimoné had welcomed Yuri Ho to the political stage with open arms. Even if the Ho family had a way to defeat the crusaders, there would’ve been no future for witches. The only family likely to survive was the one whose daughter had become one of Yuri Ho’s close associates—the Gudineil family. The heads of the other six families had agreed that their conspiracy could only succeed if the Gudineils were kept out of it.

“I agree that our deal with crusaders must never be exposed,” Vivila said while looking at Keagul Cursefit. “The second order is gone. There’s no one standing between us and Yuri Ho now.”

It had been Keagul Cursefit’s own idea to risk her life by going to Yuri Ho in one final attempt to assassinate him, but Vivila had hardly believed she’d go through with it.

“Noza and Bof will share our predicament if all this comes to light, will they not?” Ghulah Temper reassured her. “Lord-supremes rank above everyone, and information doesn’t leak downward. Our situation is less precarious than you’re making it out to be, is it not?”

“Quite right,” Vivila agreed. “We’d be wise to assume that the others will keep their mouths shut. They’re smart enough to do that.”

“Wh-What about running away...?” It was the first time Julia Lacramanus—the youngest witch in attendance—had spoken.

Julia Lacramanus had only recently graduated from the Cultural Academy, and she’d lived only half as long as the second-youngest attendee, Ghulah Temper. Her face bore a scar that appeared to have been made by a sharp blade.

Sharun Charleville clucked her tongue, which made a sort of sucking sound due to her multiple missing teeth. “Neither the Bof family nor the Noza family will welcome us in. Can’t you see that? Or do you think you’ll convince Yuri Ho to send you to Aisa Island?”

Since Yuri’s Ho Company had full control over all voyages to Aisa Island, no one could go there without his family’s cooperation. His ships used celestial navigation, so their voyages were far less likely to end in disaster than those using traditional seafaring methods. It had only taken half a year before all the other ships had given up on the voyage entirely. Ho Company’s competitors had to charge passengers a premium to offset the risk of losing ships at sea, but no one was willing to pay extra for an alternative that put their life at risk.

“B-But...Y-Yuri Ho is...”

“He’s what? Oh, just look at you. Rouge’s departed soul must be weeping right now. How I pity her.”

“Sorry...” Julia Lacramanus hung her head.

She was no match for the sharp and cunning witches that surrounded her. What’s more, her grandmother, Rouge, had died and made Julia the new head of family while the memory of her humiliation at the Academy Togi Tournament had still been fresh. At every sabbath, she made herself small as the others ridiculed her.

“You had so much spirit when you brought us that letter. What happened to you?”

“Yes, I liked your spirit back then. You relished the opportunity to exact revenge on Yuri Ho, but now you’re cowering in fear.”

As the old women of the Charleville and Marmoset families both taunted her, Julia hung her head even lower. It was getting to be more than she could take.

Kiki Enfillet spoke next. “You visited Yuri Ho’s parents in the morgue to stab them in their stomachs, even though you knew the boy was at large, didn’t you? I know you’ve got a grudge against him, and for good reason, but what do you think he’ll do when he sees those bodies?”

Kiki Enfillet valued friendship more than the others here. She didn’t like to see the veterans bully the newcomers, so she’d always been the one to offer Julia some support during each sabbath. This time, however, she felt the need to confront Julia directly.

“Haaah,” Ghulah Temper sighed. “So that was your work...?”

The Enfillet family had gained the information because they had such a strong presence in the royal castle. It was still unknown to everyone else, besides a few Marmosets and Charlevilles, who’d spoken with Kiki before this meeting.

“When you heard Yuri Ho had escaped, you should’ve realized that we might end up in this situation,” Ghulah Temper said. “If you’d do a thing like that after you’d already heard the news, then you really are hopeless, are you not?”

“Ugh...” Julia put her hands to her head like it was aching. It was as though her existing fear of Yuri Ho and the pressure being placed on her by the other witches was enough to split her skull in two.

Just then, there was a creaking sound as the door to the house opened. The other five women looked toward the door and saw an old woman standing there, supporting herself with a cane. It was Luida Gudineil.

“You...” Vivila Marmoset said.

“You’ve been having an awful lot of fun without me. Excuse me while I take a seat.”

Luida appeared in good health as she took the only empty seat that remained. It was the lowest-ranking seat, positioned closest to the door, which meant she barely had to step into the room to reach it. That particular spot hadn’t been left empty just because the Gudineil family’s representative had been missing. It was the place where Luida always sat. Her family ranked below the others represented here because it was the least powerful.

“What did you come here for?” Vivila asked. The two women had long-standing disagreements and had never gotten along.

“I wanted a front-row seat to watch you make fools of yourselves. It’s like they say: a drowning man will clutch at straws. Heh heh heh. Yes, I often hear the phrase when a merchant loses his livelihood, but I never thought it would apply to a grand witch.” Luida cackled happily, finally having found an outlet for the resentment she felt toward the others.

The Gudineil family was looked down upon in recent times, but it hadn’t always been that way. The family had once been in the real estate business. When their ancestors had arrived on the peninsula nine hundred years ago, they’d claimed land on the undeveloped outskirts of a town that would later become the royal capital, correctly predicting that the settlement would grow into a thriving city.

Fears about the future had been rampant back then, which had left people wanting to invest in assets with higher liquidity than real estate. The Gudineils had poured all of their wealth into real estate regardless, and once Sibiak had expanded into their territory a generation later, the family had gained a stable source of revenue. The Gudineil family’s success had begun from there. They’d continued to buy properties in the royal capital, sell off others, and let some out, taking their prosperity to new heights.

It had been Luida's predecessor who'd ruined it all. She'd gotten it into her head that trading goods was where the *real* money was. The properties that had been a limitless source of wealth were sold to other witches, one after another. The money from the sales had then been poured into shipbuilding, but those ships had never turned a profit. She'd charged into the trading business blindly without considering what goods to buy or where to sell them. Then, rather than cutting her losses and closing shop, she'd persisted in her doomed trading efforts until their fortune had dwindled to almost nothing.

All Luida's generation had left were a few disconnected scraps of land in the royal capital and a few important posts in the royal castle that were customarily granted to members of their family. Luida had relied on these meager sources of income as she'd tried to rapidly restore her family to greatness.

In her younger days, soon after assuming the family headship, she'd built billboards large enough to fill someone's vision on her plots of land, and then she'd solicited advertisers. Meanwhile, she'd corrupted offices held by her family and used thugs to threaten owners of stores, all with the intention of forcing people to use her advertising business.

But without much starting capital, she'd never been able to catch up to the other witches. The Gudineils had reclaimed some of their former glory, but they remained the weakest of the seven witches.

More recently, Luida's granddaughter had betrayed her by refusing to succeed to the family headship and instead choosing another career entirely. The disappointment Luida felt had gone beyond what her words could express.

"Sorry for not keeping the Gudineil family informed," Sharun Charleville said. "But you have your granddaughter to blame. We couldn't take any chances."

"I don't care about that, Granny Sharun. No, I'm thankful for it. You've spared my family from harm."

Sharun Charleville was only five years older than Luida. A few years should have meant nothing to these elderly women, but since the two had been neighbors in their younger days, they got on well enough to joke about who was older. When Luida called her Granny Sharun, it was a throwback to their youth when they'd gotten on so well that she'd called her Big Sis Sharun.



“‘Spared from harm’? Your family’s a shadow of what it was.”

“But yours won’t exist at all after this. And it serves you right, I say.”

“No, it won’t come to that,” Vivila Marmoset said with a frown. “Sorry to disappoint, but Yuri Ho’s offered to make peace with us.”

The Marmosets had considerable power over the city’s merchants, and they’d grown wealthy by using threats to extort them. Vivila had become head of her family ten years sooner than Luida, giving her time to buy considerable amounts of land from the Gudinveils.

When Luida had taken charge, she’d demanded a trial take place to determine whether the ridiculously low sums paid for Gudinveil land had been an attempt to exploit her predecessor’s vulnerability and thus a violation of the Seven Witch Promise. The two families didn’t quite become enemies, but it had birthed a rivalry between them that would last a generation, souring their relationship.

“Hah! You sound so confident. Don’t you know anything about Yuri Ho? I’ve spoken to him in person. I’ll bet you’ve never even met him.” Luida looked at Julia Lacramanus. “This girl may be a pitiful fool, but she’s seen Yuri Ho for herself. She knows to fear him. She might be the wisest among you.”

Julia flinched as she became the topic of conversation. She’d been full of confidence herself once, but not anymore. It was as Luida said—she’d seen something that the other five witches hadn’t.

“What are you trying to say? Stop wasting our time and say it.” Vivila Marmoset was growing irritated. Something about Luida’s triumphant smile was bothering her.

For just over seventy years, Vivila had held the upper hand, always keeping Luida down. The gulf between the two may have shrunk, but the tables had never turned, and Vivila wasn’t about to let Luida look down on her now.

“Strike that youngster and he’ll strike you back,” Luida explained. “You think he’ll just let you hurt him?”

A nervous look appeared on each of the six witches’ faces.

Luida was clearly enjoying herself. “He’ll punch when punched, and he’ll kill those who kill his own. He’s no different from us in that regard. And yet here you all are, gathered together to make things easy for him. Heh heh heh. All you need to ask yourselves is whether you’d prefer a punch to the right cheek or the left. I’ve never seen anything so amusing.”

Vivila knitted her brow and glared at Luida. “Have you betrayed us?”

That made Luida stop laughing. With a short sigh, she looked back at Vivila as if she found the question idiotic. “I’m as much a witch as you are. Abiding by the Seven Witch Promise, come what may, is a matter of pride for all of us. No, I didn’t have to betray you. My favorite granddaughter serves the youngster, and she knows all about the Witches’ Forest. It’s where she grew up playing.”

Luida hadn’t lifted a finger, nor had anyone told her anything. She’d simply drawn her own conclusions based on what she’d learned from her underlings, then she’d come straight here. Luida, excluded from the conspiracy, had been able to view the bigger picture with a clearer head than the others.

“No...” Jula rose from her chair and looked out the window. “No! What if he’s here already?!”

There weren’t any torches burning outside. The only light reaching the grass that lay between her and the forest was the faint white light of the waning half-moon. Still, that was enough for her to make out glints of metal that looked out of place within the trees. Shadowy figures were surrounding the building.

With a long, drawn-out creak, the door to the house slowly opened once more.

## II

Half of the house was occupied by a single room containing a large elliptical table with chairs positioned around it. The table was made from a type of wood I’d never seen in Shiyalta. Many years of use had left the thick varnish on its surface marred by dark stains. It was likely a piece with a rich history that had been made somewhere farther south.

“I see a familiar face.”

I entered and approached Julia Lacramanus. There was an old grudge between the two of us. I'd heard that she was now head of her family, but it hadn't occurred to me that I'd find her here.

The arrogant expression she usually wore was gone now. She was so consumed by fear that I could hear her teeth chattering.

I stopped near her chair and softly touched her thin neck from behind.

Her shoulders twitched powerfully. "Eeeek!"

I looked over at the old woman sitting at the opposite side of the table. "Luida Gudineil. I didn't think I'd see you here either."

Luida looked at me without a hint of amusement in her eyes. "Yes, I came along."

"Were you conspiring with the others? It changes things if you were."

"No. I came here hoping for some entertainment. I'm just visiting."

*I guess she doesn't matter.*

"We're short on seats," I said.

"I believe there's one in the next room," Myalo replied from her position near the entrance.

I walked around the table and opened the door to the other room. It was dark inside because there weren't any lamps.

As I was looking around for one, Henrique—who'd come along with Tillet—knelt before me and offered up a lamp in an overblown gesture. I didn't feel like thanking her, so I accepted it wordlessly.

Now that there was light, I found that the other room was a strange place full of bookshelves and display cases. It was a veritable cabinet of curiosities. I couldn't tell what most of the objects inside the room's glass cases were. One held a brooch with a gemstone, while the case next to it contained a dirty necklace apparently made from a chain of flimsy iron pieces. It must've had some historical value to be worth putting on display.

There was also a chair to sit on while admiring the items. I picked it up with

one hand and returned to the main room.

On reentering, I headed to the top of the table.

“Move aside,” I told Keagul Cursefit, who I recognized as the woman from that morning.

The woman to her left or right would have to move too, but Sharun Charleville on her left looked very old, and I couldn’t be bothered to wait for her.

“Come on. Move along,” I said to Vivila Marmoset, who was sitting in the most conspicuous place at the head of the table.

“You can’t order—”

I grabbed the back of Vivila’s head and slammed it hard into the table. It felt like I’d just smashed an overripe piece of fruit.

“Is that some old witch belief? You think knights like me can’t harm you? Maybe it was true once, but things changed ten days ago.” I spoke as I peeled Vivila off the table, still holding her hair. “We only held ourselves back while Her Majesty was around. Maybe you never realized it, but you were under Queen Shimoné’s protection. Well, not anymore. Don’t expect any mercy from me.”

The Ho family had offered their spears to the royal family. We’d sworn our loyalty and stayed true to our word. It was what had stopped us from occupying the royal capital to eradicate those we didn’t like. Even when a second son’s promising career had been ruined because of some false accusation, no one had made a fuss about it.

But now the royal family was gone, and so too were the laws that shielded witches.

“Ugh...” Vivila sat down in her chair with blood flowing from her nose. “If you’re going to kill me, then get it over with.”

“I will, but I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t want to talk first. Now get yourself and your chair out of my way, you old bag.” I released her head like I was casting it aside.

Vivila didn’t try to hide her displeasure as she moved for me. I put my own

chair where hers had been and sat down.

“Tillet, tie them all up except for the Gudinveil woman. A simple rope around the chair and their stomachs should be enough.”

“Yes, sir,” Tillet replied. She took a rope and began by wrapping it around Kiki Enfillet’s abdomen.

“Don’t bother,” Kiki Enfillet said. “We won’t try to run.”

“I’ve got no patience for you right now,” I told her. “Keep your mouth shut and maybe I’ll make your death a little less painful.”

“All right...” Kiki Enfillet was relatively cooperative. She didn’t argue any further.

“Before I get to the main topic, the disrespect shown to the bodies of my parents was...”

Halfway through the sentence, my emotions got the better of me and I couldn’t stop my nose from running. I couldn’t bear to embarrass myself in front of these people, but the more I tried to quell my emotions, the stronger the flow of mucus and tears became. I just couldn’t hold myself together once I started thinking about Rook and Suzuya.

*I must look pathetic.*

“Which one of you was responsible? I was told that a grand witch used her authority to force her way into the morgue.”

As I spoke, three of the other five of the witches glanced over at Julia.

*Okay... Should’ve known it was her. Who else would go so far out of their way to do a thing like that?*

I stood up from my chair.

“Eek! No! It wasn’t me!”

“Shut up.”

Julia hadn’t been tied up yet, so as I approached her, she went tumbling backward out of her chair.

“Stop! Get away from me!”

“What are you crawling on the floor for? Come on, get up.”

I grabbed Julia by the collar and forced her to her feet.

“Sit. Relax. I won’t kill you yet.”

“Ah... Ah...”

Julia remained standing and simply trembled. She was staring into space, as if she couldn’t process anything, and both of her hands shook violently as she held them out to protect her head.

*She thinks she can hide from reality? No chance. Even if she faints, I’ll shake her awake.*

“I said sit.”

Henrique picked up the fallen chair and placed it against the rear of Julia’s knees. At the same time, I pushed Julia’s shoulder downward, forcing her into a sitting position. She didn’t try to resist.

“Ah... D-Don’t kill me...”

“I just said I’m not going to.” This was just going to be an appetizer. I wasn’t going to ruin the main dish. “Though I might hurt you a little. Got that?!”

With that, I drew the dagger at my waist and plunged it into Julia’s thigh. I’d deliberately brought a cheap weapon with a notched blade. It passed straight through her leg, nailing her to the chair.

“Aaaaghhhh!” Julia screamed. She curled up in pain, both hands holding the wound where the dagger had entered.

“Now, why are you sitting over here? You ought to be at the table.”

I grabbed the back of the chair and lifted it up, Julia still affixed to it, and put it back where it had originally been.

“Aah! Ngh... It hurts!”

“Tillet, get this one tied up and gagged, would you?”

As ordered, Tillet stopped tying up witches in sequence and skipped to Julia.

Tears were flowing from Julia’s eyes, like she considered herself the most

unfortunate person in this world.

I returned to my seat and sat down.

“That’s the minor matters out of the way... Now, let’s move on to the main topic. I’ll warn you in advance that I’m feeling irritable. Anyone who interrupts me will end up like her.”

After this brief warning, I began my speech.

“I’ve been thinking about how the government will work from now on. I’m ashamed to admit that I never imagined you’d go to such extreme lengths, even after knowing you all so long, but I learned something from it. Your strength is in personal connections; they’re your roots here in the royal capital.”

I looked at each of the witches. None of them spoke as they listened to my odd speech.

“Witches are like stubborn weeds: you can cut them down, but as long as the roots remain, they’ll always grow back. They’re festering growths, living off this kingdom like parasites. I learned the hard way just how foul you all are. I know that if I let you go free, you’ll return to those roots. I can’t afford to give you freedom the way Queen Shimoné did.”

Queen Shimoné hadn’t failed to control the witches as a result of incompetence—their roots extended into our customs, formalities, and government offices. They went so deep that pulling them up would be too disruptive.

It wasn’t that successive queens had considered the witches essential to manage the kingdom. Most likely, Queen Shimoné knew the kingdom could operate without them, and that they did more harm than good. But while they weren’t essential, they were necessary. Their eradication would bring the kingdom to a standstill, such that any queen was forced to rely on them as a temporary measure at the very least. Reliance on witches had become a bad habit that each queen had found hard to kick.

Once a custom was established, it would gradually be normalized, and the practices of witches had been so long before Queen Shimoné had been born. She’d questioned the wisdom of the current system and tried to change it, but

whenever she'd found a way to improve things, obstacles had sprung up. The old ways were like an addiction, and she hadn't been able to free us. Looking back, I realized how difficult Queen Shimoné's position had been.

I continued my speech. "The kingdom has fractured, exposing your roots to the surface. If you're going to be eradicated, it has to be now. If I wait for the conclusion of lengthy trials, you'll ingrain yourselves even deeper. That's why I have to kill you all on this day.

"Sadly, I can't give you a chance to see your family one last time. You have to die here in this little room—be ready for that. Though even if you're not, I'll be killing you regardless.

"But I'm sure you're all wondering, 'Why's he giving us this long speech if he's going to kill us anyway?' You might suppose that I felt the need to explain why I'm going to kill you. But that's not it. If I didn't have a good reason, I'd treat you all to a torturous death without a word. Then, having taken my revenge on those who killed my parents and left my wife bedridden, I'd return home satisfied. I wouldn't bother with speeches."

I looked at them all again before continuing.

"I'm here to talk about what's going to happen *after* I kill you. Specifically, I've been thinking about what to do with the other witches. Once I've killed the witches in this room, the others will try to lay down new roots. Even if I strip them of the offices they hold at the royal castle, I worry that the kingdom will be in the same situation again two or three generations down the line.

"That's why I'm prepared to capture and kill every last witch to eradicate your kind completely—even if it means being remembered as a tyrant. Do you understand me? Picture it. I'm going to kill every last one. I'll dig a hole on the outskirts of the royal capital—or maybe I'll make witches dig it themselves—then kill every last one of you, both the good and the bad, and fill in the hole with your corpses.

"This isn't an idle fantasy. Once I give the order tomorrow morning, it'll become a reality. I'll have my forces thoroughly cleanse the royal capital while they're hunting down the last few holdouts from the second order. What's left of the second order will be sent to Ho Province while the witches are sent to a



mass grave. We have to round up what's left of the second order no matter what we do. We might as well look for witches while we're at it.

"I'm sure you feel as though I forced you all into a drastic attack on me because I grew too bold. Well, now it's your bold actions that have forced me into an act of barbarism. I have to admire the level of skill you displayed by successfully carrying out your plot without Myalo or the royal swords finding out. But that's exactly why I can't take any chances. Unless I receive the answers I want, then I promise you, this slaughter will take place. I'm telling you beforehand because you have a chance to stop me."

I'd finally gotten to the point.

"I'm fairly certain that you've made contact with the crusaders and sold out our kingdom. What I don't know are the terms of the deal."

This was enough to get at least a slight reaction out of each of them. Sharun Charleville's eyebrows merely twitched a little, but Julia Lacramanus stared at me like she couldn't believe I'd learned their plan. Luida Gudineil must've been hearing this for the first time, because her eyes went wide as she studied the reactions of the other witches. I'd remained suspicious of Luida until now, but it seemed she hadn't been involved after all.

"I want the documents. Give me the written declaration that your families signed while selling out our kingdom to crusaders. That's how you can stop the massacre."

That was the reason I'd come here today.

There were some among the witches, such as Lyrica Kuklillison, who belonged to minor families and hadn't committed any crime worthy of an execution. I didn't really want to kill them along with the rest.

"The evidence will be like a salt that wilts the parasitic weeds known as witches. I will, of course, make the documents public. Witches as a whole will be recognized as traitors to our kingdom and persecuted for it. You'll lose the ability to ingrain yourselves in any city ever again."

They'd sold our kingdom to save themselves when not just one nation, but the entire Shanti race, was in a state of peril. They'd betrayed our kind by

thwarting the efforts to protect us, and they'd done it knowing that their fellow citizens would be enslaved and treated as subhuman cattle. Witches were already hated, but now they'd be abhorred above all else.

"You don't have anything to lose from this deal, and it'll spare me from having to spread exaggerated tales of your evil deeds. Think carefully before you decide. That's all I had to say."

With that, I stopped talking.

The first to reply was Ghulah Temper. "I can't accept it. This talk of crusaders is nonsense."

She was a mature woman with short hair. I could just picture her being popular with members of the same sex during her days at the Cultural Academy.

"Then you've made your decision? Did you think it through?" I asked. "Remember, the deal is designed to benefit you, not me."

"Y-Yes..."

*Fool.*

Sharun Charleville, who was to my left, spoke next. "Don't listen to her. She's no more than a manager who oversees our longshoremen. Forgive her."

Although she ranked below the Marmoset whose head I'd slammed against the table, I judged she was the oldest here.

"Yuri, may I ask you a question?" Sharun Charleville continued. "Are you offering to pardon all of our kind, besides the six of us here, in exchange for those documents?"

*What a stupid suggestion. Of course not.*

"Kill the six of you, then pardon everyone else? How stupid do you think I am?"

Maybe it was down to the convenient lies I'd told Keagul earlier, but it seemed some of them were still feeling optimistic. In her mind, it might've been normal for a witch to commit all kinds of awful deeds and never face any consequences. That was only because of the rights the late queen had granted

them. They couldn't expect anyone to protect them now that they'd killed the queen themselves. It was as though they'd barely understood what had kept them safe.

Still, parasites didn't like to think of themselves as parasites. They believed they were self-sufficient people surviving thanks to their superior talents. They'd deluded themselves into thinking that their own wisdom, ability, and competency were on par with those of chieftains, only to succumb to superior might when put to the test—thus creating their current predicament.

"Take Cursefit here, for example," I said. "She's guilty of using the second order to invade the royal castle. That's high treason by her and her army. This old woman has no legal defense. The penalty for high treason is death. But can the rest of you claim that you made an earnest effort to defend your queen? The invasion of the castle was awfully well timed.

"No, it wasn't just the Cursefits. Each and every member of your families is guilty of murder, instigation of murder, or abetting murder. Or I can just as easily charge them all with robbery and extortion. Either way, they'll have to answer to accusations at trial. Obviously, I'll replace our current judges with some more level headed people beforehand. Don't think the old corrupt judiciary can save you."

Whether they understood the weight of their crimes or not, their close relatives would probably all be executed.

"Even the Gudinveils will face trial," Myalo added. "We make no exceptions."

I expected Luida Gudinveil to say something in response, but she remained quiet.

"I'm against this. This may be our downfall, but I can't allow witches to lose their honor so completely. If you'll make all our relatives face trial even after we cooperate, then it's out of the question." Vivila held an embroidered handkerchief stained red with blood to her nose as she spoke. It was hard to make out her muffled words.

"That's because you don't have children. You can't understand how the rest of us feel," Sharun retorted. It sounded like she was trying to provoke Vivila.

“What do you mean?” Vivila replied, sounding offended.

“I’ve borne five children,” Sharun continued. “Those five all have children of their own. I’ve got more grandchildren and great-grandchildren than I can count on my fingers. If we include branch families, then I’ve got more relatives than anyone can count. Most of them haven’t done anything particularly bad...besides perhaps collecting a little protection money and skimming a few profits here and there. The question of whether our children will live or die means everything to us.”

That sounded reasonable.

“Yuri, if you’re offering them fair trials, then I trust you won’t punish them excessively? And when the most powerful witches are dead, you won’t lay claim to all our assets, then demand that our children find some other way to pay their fines?”

Sharun Charleville’s questions felt a little desperate. She wanted assurance that her fortune could be used to pay off whatever massive fines and compensation were demanded from her descendants. If I started levying fines after I’d already taken away all their wealth, the surviving witches wouldn’t just have to rebuild from scratch—they’d have to work their way out of debt. They’d be financially ruined.

“I won’t do that. Rest assured,” I said.

“Yuri...” Myalo said.

“It looks like Myalo has something to add.”

“I intended to confiscate the major witch families’ assets.”

It wasn’t what any of them wanted to hear. But since I was entrusting Myalo to clean up after the witches were dealt with, the decision was going to be hers.

She continued, “First, I should point out that we’re entitled to seize assets in the form of war reparations. You might have assumed that that’s unnecessary since the Ho family army has remained virtually unharmed, but any war on this scale will necessitate some form of compensation.

“In addition, I can’t fully accept what you just said, Sharun. You see, if the

assets aren't seized, then they'll be passed on when you die. That will create all sorts of problems. If we simply follow witch customs, your fortunes will be inherited by your closest relatives, and it would be up to them to decide how they're used.

"Suppose several of your closest relatives survive the trials and inherit all of your assets, while everyone else is left to handle the payments themselves—that is, of course, unless the inheritors are generous enough to help them. Those with the highest ranking would be left with money, while those beneath them would be left with debts.

"For every witch left with debt, there's a victim who didn't get the compensation they're entitled to. I dislike that idea on the grounds of fairness. If Yuri permits it, I'll seize all of your assets and place them in a foundation that can later divide them equally between everyone who's owed compensation. That way, even if some of your relatives are left with debt, it'll be spread evenly among them. If there's anything left over after paying out compensation, it will go to the national treasury.

"That said, I will consider every family on a case-by-case basis. Not all witches participated in the war, and some may have considerable assets left over after compensation is paid. I accept that it might not be fair for us to keep it all. Of course, if we do decide to kill every last witch, then their assets will be seized in full and this discussion becomes moot. That's all I have to say."

Myalo made it clear she was finished speaking by stepping back against the wall.

"What she said. It'll have to be good enough. I won't instruct the courts to apply unusually harsh punishments," I added.

Sharun Charleville sighed deeply. "Haaah... I can't argue with that. Your underling really knows what she's talking about. All right, I accept your offer."

With Sharun in agreement, I hoped we were about to reach a deal.

But Vivila Marmoset had more to say. "What about our pride as witches? Our kind would be better off dead than live as victims of such slander."

"You're only thinking about yourself because you don't have children. No

one's better off dead. What if he offered to spare *our* lives as part of the deal? Would you still reject it? I'll bet you'd save your own skin. You talk about pride, but you're just thinking about yourself in the end."

"How daw you?!" Vivila's nose was still blocked.

"And what pride does it leave us if we reject the deal and let all our kind be massacred? Do you think we're all going to have fancy tombstones with 'Witches had nothing to do with the crusade that came' carved on them? That's not how it works."

Sharun was right. She was just saying whatever I wanted to hear to save her own relatives, but she made a good point. Without definite proof of their crimes, it would be harder to blame the witches, but their fate wouldn't change. Besides, I might find all the evidence I needed when I searched their hiding places anyway.

"Looks like I've got this old woman's agreement. I don't need every one of you to accept. Just tell me where the documents are and that'll be enough. I'd rather not spend all night listening to a bunch of witches argue."

"Sorry, but we'll need to hold a vote," Sharun said. "The Seven Witch Promise demands it. Let us follow it to the end."

*A vote? What a pain. What's wrong with them?*

"Geagul, what do you think?" Vivila Marmoset asked in a nasal voice.

"I'm against it. The lack of proof makes all the difference to how our future generations are treated. And all my family members will be executed no matter what I say," Keagul replied.

That might've been true for the Cursefits. Even if I were to let them live, female officers, whose only responsibility had been to ensure women controlled the royal guard, would have no more role to play.

"Ghulah, what about the Temper family?" Vivila turned to the other witch. She was acting like the meeting's chairperson or facilitator.

"I'll accept. We kept our business strictly limited to the ports. Unlike your family, we rarely killed, kidnapped, or engaged in cruelty."

“Pfft. Ah ha ha!” Luida Gudineil laughed like she couldn’t contain herself any longer. “Hah... Sorry, please go on.”

Something must’ve really amused her.

“Kiki, what about the Enfillet family?”

“I’m in favor... Just think about it, Vivila—everyone wants to live. Is pride important to the dead? Only our descendants themselves can say whether their lives are worth living. It’s not for us to decide—we owe it to them to let them choose.”

Hearing her make that argument filled me with anger. For a moment, I rose from my seat, intending to kill her. *How can she say that after all she’s done? I’ll make sure she never speaks again.* But I couldn’t reduce the seven to six just yet. *I’m going to kill her later anyway,* I reminded myself, which helped cool my head. I let my tense muscles relax and slowly sat back down.

“Kiki, the youngster came close to killing you just now. You might want to watch your tongue,” Luida Gudineil said.

*You should watch yours too.*

“Oh, I see... I’m sorry.” Kiki Enfillet was quick to apologize and bow to me while still bound to her chair.

“How two-faced you are,” Luida spat. “All meek and apologetic, but I’ll bet you were the one who used your connections in the royal castle to talk the idiot princess into doing what she did. Though I don’t know whether you voted in favor of the plot.”

“I voted against it. Ghulah and I both did. Her Majesty and I were close, and Ghulah’s experience in trade told her that Kulati can’t be trusted.”

They must’ve voted in favor four-to-two.

As meek as Kiki Enfillet sounded, I knew she was responsible for ruining the patent system. She’d put pressure on the personnel, ensured that one of her underlings took charge of the Patent Monitoring Office, and generally made a mockery of the system others had carefully developed. Thanks to her, patents filed by aspiring inventors throughout the city had been torn up, and even my

own Ho paper had to compete with blatant knockoffs. Maybe all that interference had occurred after votes had been held here as well.

They were a rotten bunch.

“Does it matter?” Luida asked. “The plot itself wasn’t a bad idea.”

“Ha...” Myalo laughed mockingly at her. I’d never seen her laugh like that before. “Let me just say that the plot was pure foolishness. Let’s not forget that you’re dealing with the Papal State.”

She must’ve gleaned that from Lyrica Kuklillison’s reports. I’d made the same conclusion. The attempts to assemble crusade forces at the end of last year and during this year had started within the Papal State. Although the Tyrelme Holy Empire was also passionate about crusades, they hadn’t been actively encouraging a new crusade. It was easy to conclude that the Papal State was at the center of the conspiracy.

Myalo continued, “There was no chance of them honoring their promise. I can tell you that for certain. The Papal State army we fought in the previous war cut up the bodies of our soldiers who’d died on the battlefield, then hanged them. The full list of atrocities they committed in the vicinity of Reforme is endless. If you’d witnessed the war in Kilhina, you never would have even considered such a deal.

“The Kulati don’t even consider our people *human*. It’s true of all Kulati, but the people of the Papal State despise us the most. Who would think twice before breaking a promise with a wild beast?

“If the Papal State’s broken promises came to light, their reputation among the Kulati wouldn’t be harmed—in fact, they’d be praised for betraying you. I don’t know exactly what your agreement was, but the probability of them sticking to it has always been zero. You failed to realize any of this and celebrated your doomed deal regardless. That level of incompetence is truly exceptional, and it will forever be a stain on the last chapter of witch history. We’re talking about people willing to tear apart this kingdom’s children, and yet you—”

“Myalo.” I cut her off.



“Oh... I’m sorry for getting carried away.”

“I’m sure you have a lot to say, but they’re going to die soon. Your words are wasted on them.”

Although Myalo’s feelings toward witches were complicated, there was no point in speaking her mind now. It no longer mattered.

“You’re right...” she muttered.

“We’ve talked enough. Go on and hold your vote.”

Vivila Marmoset merely glared at me.

“What’s wrong? Aren’t you leading the meeting? Get on with it,” I urged. I couldn’t stand the way she was reluctant to cooperate at every step. I hated dealing with her.

“Let’s hold a vote in accordance with sabbath rules,” Vivila said. “Those who would accept Yuri Ho’s offer and provide him with documents related to our negotiations.”

Four hands went up: Sharun Charleville’s, Ghulah Temper’s, Kiki Enfillet’s, and Luida Gudinveil’s.

“We have a majority. The matter’s settled.”

Three of them hadn’t raised their hands. We hadn’t even heard Jula’s objections, even though everyone else had gotten a chance to speak—not that her opinion mattered.

“The documents are in the safe house on the third floor of my home,” Sharun Charleville told me. “Ordinarily, we’d keep things in this house, but the Gudinveils were kept out of it. The bookshelf with a ‘7’ written on it is a secret door to our safe house. Examine the contents carefully, and you’ll find a lever. Pulling it will open a latch that causes the whole thing to swing open.”

They’d taken thorough precautions as always.

“All right. I’ll look for it later.”

I believed what she’d told me. If she was lying, I’d just have to kill every witch instead.

“Now, how do you intend to kill us? Will you tear us apart with your own hands?” Vivila Marmoset asked.

I’d made my decision already. “There’s no better way to execute a witch than burning them at the stake. I’m going to burn you along with this house.”

I studied their faces as I spoke. Some tensed up, others remained calm, and some reacted with fear. The most extreme reaction came from Jula, but to my surprise, Vivila Marmoset appeared afraid too.

“What’s wrong, Vivila? What’s got you so scared?” I asked.

“Is there something wrong with me being afraid?”

*Yeah, something very wrong.*

“Isn’t the Marmoset family famous for their torture? I’m sure you’ve sentenced others to deaths far more painful than burning at the stake. And I’ve seen the victims you’ve set free after you’re done with them—destined to eke out a miserable existence in the royal capital to serve as a warning to others. Each one has the same brand burned into their forehead. It’s no laughing matter.

“I would’ve loved to gather them and let them do whatever they pleased with you. It would’ve been quite fitting if they’d torn out your tongue, extracted your fingernails, cut you, cauterized your wounds with fire, and prolonged your suffering up until death. Unfortunately, there’s not enough time, so I’m burning you at the stake. You should be crying tears of joy and thanking me.”

The Marmosets were particularly notorious, but there were instances of the other families doing similar things. Even if they hadn’t murdered members of my family, I’d still want to see these witches dead.

The second worst after the Marmosets were the Charlevilles. They had a tradition of executing people by drowning them in the royal capital’s river. They weighed the victims down in such a way that the gas generated by the bloated corpses would make them float back up. They’d put considerable research into their methods and found a way to ensure that when they killed whole families, the men, women, and children would all surface on the exact same day. When victims emerged as a group, it was clear that they’d been punished by the

Charlevilles.

It was astounding that these witches felt entitled to talk about the value of their own family members' lives after all they'd done to others. It gave me a vague sense that even a cold-blooded killer could have another side to them.

"Youngster," Luida Gudinveil interrupted.

"What? Got a problem, you old hag?"

I knew she'd done plenty of wicked things herself, but I didn't want to kill her in front of Myalo.

"No, I don't have any complaints. But if you're going to burn down the house, at least get your soldiers to empty out the other room first."

That sounded like a ridiculous demand. It was as though she was telling me to take the valuables for myself.

"Why?"

"It's full of treasures from the days of the empire. It might look like unremarkable junk to the uneducated, but every piece had some important role to play in our history. You don't have the right to burn it all. That collection doesn't even belong to us—the course of history merely placed it in our keeping for the time being."

*Oh...*

"Maybe you're right. I'll do as you say."

She'd just taken the wind out of my sails, but I knew she was right. I had to preserve our cultural heritage. Future scholars would forever curse me if I burned it all.

Luida looked over at Myalo from where she sat. "Myalo, you should look after it all. You're going to be the leading witch, after all."

*What's she talking about?* "Have you lost your mind, old woman?"

"Nothing's wrong with my mind. That girl's a witch, through and through. She might be the most exceptional witch alive, whether she likes the idea or not."

"There won't *be* any witches after today. Don't you realize that? I'm ending

the Gudinveil family's business. It's all over."

The most I'd allow them was to live out their final years quietly.

"It's not that simple. You know that anyone raised by a knight family will be a knight until their death. Well, girls raised by witch families are witches until their death. I don't mean it in a bad way."

*What could possibly be good about it?*

"If you insist on being a witch, do it alone. Keep Myalo out of it."

"Her father was a knight until his death," Luida said while looking at Myalo.

*Her father...? What's she talking about?*

I looked at Myalo and, for reasons I didn't understand, saw her staring back at Luida, her face full of emotion.

"Listen Myalo, it doesn't mean you're going to be like us. Witches have served many different roles through the ages. Now it's up to you to be the witch you want to be."

"As you wish, dear grandmother."

*What? Dear grandmother? Is that really what she calls her?*

"Youngster, I'll be retiring with the others. It'll end the current era of witches."

*Retiring? With the others? Does that mean...? Didn't she come here for entertainment?*

"Don't tell me you came here to die, old woman."

Given the risk of becoming another target for my anger, I'd thought Luida had been stupid for showing her face.

"That's right. I've done so many wicked things that I don't dare face trial for them all. Spare me now, and I'll only be a burden on my descendants."

She had a good point.

"But I'd prefer something less painful than being burned alive. And death by the sword would be too dull. Use a rifle. I expect it'll be a quick death."

Though she was making demands for her own execution, conveniently enough, we had a firearm with us.

“Someone outside has one... But are you sure?”

“Today’s a good day to end on. I’ve looked up to this lot since my youth, and now I finally got to look down on them. I’ve lived long enough already. I’ll die without regrets.”

Luida might not have regretted anything, but I was concerned about Myalo. “Killing you now would certainly suit me, but...”

“It works out well for the girl too. This way, the Gudineil family can prosper.”

I hated to think that I was going along with Luida’s plan, but I couldn’t argue.

“Now tell your soldiers to carry the items out. I doubt you have much time to waste.”

“All right, I will.”

I went to call on the soldiers waiting outside.



Once the items had all been moved out, nothing remained in the adjoining room besides a few empty shelves.

The number of things in the main room, however, had increased.

Beneath the table lay a large pile of firewood, which had been cut into small pieces with some twigs and dead leaves thrown in. It was ready to burn.

We’d also placed the witches, still tied to their chairs, on top of the table.

I approached Jula Lacramanus from behind and undid her gag. This was her last chance to speak her mind. I knew she’d have a thing or two to say.

But even with the gag removed, Jula merely glared at me, wordless and full of hate. I’d thought that all the abuse she’d received from her fellow witches must’ve turned her into a shadow of her former self, but she clearly had some spirit left. Maybe the dagger to the leg had restored her to her old self.

I put my hand under Jula’s jaw and held her face still so I could examine it. “This brings back memories. That wound on your cheek never did heal, did it?”

Jula didn't reply.

"Yuri, there's something I forgot to mention," Sharun Charleville spoke up. "If you're assuming that we approached the Papal State with this plot, you'd be wrong. It was Jula who brought the plan to us. She said a Kulati approached her."

*So that's how it started...* I didn't know whether to believe the old woman, but if the Kulati had chosen Jula out of these seven, I doubted it had been by chance. They'd naturally approach whoever had the biggest score to settle with me. Needless to say, they'd need a thorough understanding of the goings-on here in the royal capital before they could make that choice.

*I guess I'd better question her about it.*

"I'm glad you told me," I said to Sharun. Then, I asked Jula, "How did you communicate with them? Is your contact still here in the royal capital?"

Jula's lips remained sealed.

"It's not like you owe them anything. It'll be easier if you talk."

"Don't be stupid. Why should I talk if you're going to kill me anyway?"

"Hah." I couldn't help but laugh. "Heh... Ha ha ha."

Even now, she didn't understand her situation. I'd never known anyone so naive. I lifted Jula's chair off the table and moved her to a clear space.

"Yuri, let me do it." Tillet was trying to interfere.

"What? And let you steal my fun?"

Tillet leaned close and whispered in my ear, "That wound in her thigh—I know you avoided the artery, but she's lost a lot of blood regardless. If you draw any more, she'll die easily. We'd be better off taking her with us and stopping the bleeding first."

*Ah. She might be right. But still...*

"It's fine," I replied. "It won't take much to break this one."

Jula wouldn't save any of her family or loved ones by keeping her mouth shut. She had no real motivation to keep quiet. It was just a matter of pride, and a

little pain would make her forget all about that.

“Then use this.” Tillet gave me some folded parchment. It was the same packaging apothecaries used for powdered medicines. “We normally throw it in an opponent’s eyes, but it’ll cause extreme pain if you sprinkle it over her wound.”

“Got it.”

I took the package from her and carefully opened it.

It was fine-quality parchment, scraped clean until it was thinner than Ho paper. It was the sort generally used in books that needed a lot of thin pages. Letters and contracts, on the other hand, used thicker parchment for the sake of robustness. The inner surface was wax-coated and held some minute granules. An extremely fine powder like this was ideal for throwing into someone’s eyes.

As I examined the substance, Tillet tied Julia’s arms behind her back.

“What are you doing?! If you’re going to kill me, then get it over with, you savages!”

She really was energetic. After losing everything and having the other witches turn against her, it was like she’d returned to her old self. It made me realize that some people never changed deep down, no matter what they went through. That only made it easier for me.

I sprinkled a little of the powder onto the wound in Julia’s leg.

“What are yo—Aaarrrgghh!” Julia screamed as pain shot through her. “It’s hot! It hurts! Ah, aaaarrrrgh!”

As she screamed, she went half mad, desperately throwing her body from side to side as she tried to endure the pain. It was worse than a little salt in the wound—it had to be some powerful acid or alkali. I had to wonder how it was made.

“Stop! Get it off me! Get it off!”

“Talk.”

“I will, but get it off me!”

*How's she expect me to get the powder out of her wound anyhow?*

"Fine, I'll put it in your eyes next."

I moved behind Julia and wrapped my left arm around her head to hold it firmly in place. With my right index finger, I forced her eye open while holding the parchment close.

"Stop! I'll talk! I'll talk!"

*Don't tell me she cracked already?*

"Then talk fast."

"A man named Luke Moretto on the seventh block! An exile!"

"Liar." I poured the powder into Julia's eye.

"Ngh! Graaaarrrrgghh!"

The agony became too much for her, and she used her whole body to thrash around. Her reaction was so extreme that I thought she might've clawed out her own eye if her hands weren't bound. The pain must've gone way beyond what she'd felt when I'd put it on her leg, because she was stomping her feet despite the extra damage it was doing to the stab wound—she'd forgotten about her leg entirely.

"It hurts! It hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts!!!"

Tillet's grip on the back of the chair was enough to stop it from falling over, but even that wasn't enough to stop the chair's legs from rising off the ground.

After about five minutes, Julia stopped thrashing around and sat there, exhausted. The tears streaming from her eye must've finally washed away the powder.

"Now for the other eye."

"Eeeek!" Julia looked at me, terrified. Her right eye was so red that there was no hint of white left. "Stop! I told you! I said it already!"

"You lied to me."

"I wasn't lying! It's the truth!"



I held Julia's head firmly.

She resisted much more fiercely than she had earlier. "Stooooooooop! Stooooooooop!" she cried in desperation.

"Then give me the real answer." I slowly tipped the parchment.

Strangely, Julia didn't attempt to close her eyes this time. Instead, she kept them wide open as she watched my hand. Either she was in panic, or the idea of losing sight of me scared her more.

"I'm not lying! I'm not lying! I'm not lying! I didn't lie! Stop!"

I released Julia's head just as the powder was about to spill from the parchment. It sounded like she'd been honest.

"Ah... Ha... Ha ha..." When I let her go, Julia laughed dryly, like she'd lost her mind. The tension she'd felt, followed by a sudden release, must've been too much for her to process.

*Stupid woman.*

"What was it you said?" I asked her. "There's no point in talking if I'm going to kill you anyway? You could've avoided this if you'd talked when I first asked."

Though the truth was, if she'd talked too easily, I'd have wanted to confirm it anyway.

"You should...go to hell," Julia said.

*That's a funny thought.*

I stared at Julia's face again. She looked terrible.

"Sure. I'll be right along after you. Wait for me."

Julia responded by spitting at me. It hit my cheek.

"Heh." She grinned now she'd finally gotten one over on me.

"Haaah..." *She never changes, does she?*

I made my right hand completely flat, then thrust it into Julia's mouth.

"Ahguh?!"

Before she could bite down, I thrust in my other hand to pull her jaw open

further. There was a sort of *clunk*, and then her resistance disappeared as her jaw dislocated. Her mouth was left hanging impossibly wide open, but I kept applying force. As I wrenched her jaw downward, I heard her bones crack as the joints gave way. That was when I finally took my hand away.

“No more talk from you.”

Jula made a few incomprehensible noises before realizing that she’d never be capable of speech again. She might not keep her mouth shut, but she’d keep quiet, at least.



“Yuri...your hand,” Myalo said.

I examined the back of my right fingers and noticed blood dripping from wounds where they’d scraped Jula’s teeth. The adrenaline had stopped me from noticing. The injuries seemed likely to get infected unless I cleaned them with alcohol.

“It can wait. Right now, I’ll need you to step outside, Myalo.”

“Why?”

*Because I’m about to kill Luida Gudineil. “Reasons.”*

A rifle with a match cord was already in the room, leaning against the wall.

But the old woman had something to say before she died. “Spare us your nonsense. What a stupid thing to say. Myalo, you’re going to pull the trigger.”

Her suggestion caught me completely off guard. “Have you gone mad, old hag?”

“Myalo, you have to do it. It’s an ideal opportunity for you to kill someone.”

Unless this was some sort of Spartan training that Gudineils went through, her reasoning made no sense at all.

“Yuri, please let me do it.”

For some reason, Myalo was all for it.

“No way.”

“Please.” Myalo lowered her head. “We have to settle this as family.”

“As *family*”...? I wasn’t totally convinced, but I began to think it might be for the best.

“Are you sure? You won’t regret it?”

“I won’t. Please. For me, it’s like a trial I have to overcome to surpass my grandmother.” Myalo still had her head lowered, like this request meant everything to her.

“All right... Do you know how to fire it?”

“Yes, I do.” Myalo slowly walked over to the corner of the room and picked up the rifle. With its long barrel, it looked oversized in the hands of someone as small as her.

“I’ll leave it to you, then.”

Myalo slowly raised the rifle, tensed her elbows, and placed the muzzle against the back of Luida’s head. “Farewell, dear grandmother.”

The moment Myalo put her finger on the trigger, a shiver ran through me like a thousand centipedes were crawling over my body. I grabbed her right hand, which was on the grip of the gun.

“Ah!” Myalo cried.

I tore her right hand away from the trigger, pressed my palm against her chest, pushed her back, and took the firearm. Then, I spun around and quickly took aim. Before Luida could turn to see what was happening, I pulled the trigger with the gun pointed at the base of her skull.

*Boom!*

There was the sound of gunpowder igniting, then it was as if a heavy object had struck Luida’s head. The old woman’s body collapsed onto the table, and fresh blood spurted from the gaping hole left by the bullet.

“Yuri?! What’ve you done?!”

“It wasn’t right. I couldn’t let you do it.”

There was no way I could’ve let it happen. I didn’t know why I’d even

entertained the idea at all. Luida was Myalo's own flesh and blood. We'd gotten so caught up in the atmosphere Luida had created that we'd ceased to think straight.

"But why...?"

"If you want to be the sort of witch who calmly kills her own family members, then I have no use for you."

Luida's aim might've been to put her curse on Myalo. I was glad I'd put a stop to it. It felt like I'd just saved her from being burdened by bitterness, or from some sort of bad karma for the rest of her life.

I didn't want her to spend any more time in this room. The longer she was here, the more it would influence her.

"Tillet, take Myalo outside."

"All right," Tillet replied.

"W-Wait! Hold on! We're not done talking!" Myalo cried as Tillet dragged her away. "Yuri!"

The door closed with a slam.

Now I was left with six witches and one corpse. The only other person remaining was Henrique.

*Haaah... What a tiring day.*

"Well, this is it. I'm sorry that a family quarrel had to be the last thing you'll ever see," I said to the six witches. Even now that I was thinking more clearly, I knew I didn't owe these women a drop of sympathy. "Burning this house down will be a sign to all witches that their time has come to an end. Some may refuse to accept it, but I doubt there'll be many."

I wasn't about to burn the house down just for the sake of the execution—I wanted to send a message. With this building gone, the witches would know that their world had been utterly destroyed along with it.

"Once we're done hunting down the remnants of the second order, we'll let the city's people come see it for themselves. They'll know that the history of witches came to an end right here."

“What’s your point?” Vivila said.

She made me realize that I had nothing to accomplish with this speech. These women were about to die anyway. *Let’s just end it.*

“Despite what Myalo said, you made the final chapter in witch history something grand. Go to your graves assured that whatever happens, your history will never be forgotten.”

I took my lighter and used it to ignite an oil-soaked cloth, which I stuffed between pieces of firewood at my feet. The flames spread to the dry leaves first, and in no time at all, it grew into a blazing fire.

“If I’d have drunk the wine, I would’ve met my end instead. You were tough opponents.”

Those were my final words before I left the building.



“This puts an end to it,” Dimitri Daz said. He’d been overseeing this entire operation, and now he stood beside me and watched the small house burn.

As the fire grew, we heard anguished screams from the women who were still alive inside. The flames then spread to the outer walls, becoming an intense blaze as the coating of the cedar bark ignited.

“Yeah. Everything’s going to change.”

“It seems it hasn’t improved your mood, Your Excellency.”

He’d read my feelings. Around me, the soldiers were openly celebrating their joy. We’d captured the enemy’s leaders, and now they were burning in retribution for killing our former ruler and his wife. This was our victory. In one fell swoop, we’d scattered their army and put their commanders to the flame. I could hear the pride in their roars of celebration. But I didn’t share their feelings.

“I thought I’d feel better than I do...”

“Vengeance didn’t satisfy you?”

“No matter how much they suffer, it’ll never bring back my mother or father.

Making them feel pain and watching the anguish on their faces was never going to offer any consolation.”

The place in my heart that had once been filled by Rook and Suzuya was now an empty void—it had been since the moment I’d found their bodies in the underground morgue. There was nothing in the pain or the screaming that could fill that hole. I’d thought they might help, but any satisfaction I felt would immediately fall straight through that void, leaving it as empty as before.

“Do you regret taking revenge?”

“I wouldn’t say that. If I’d let them live, I don’t think I could have ever moved on. It had to be done.”

It was hard to find the right words, but the act of vengeance had nothing to do with making myself feel happy or satisfied. I knew it did nothing to fill the emptiness inside me. But despite its fruitlessness, it somehow felt important to throw the lives of my enemies into the void they’d created. For as long as that emptiness existed, the urge to do so would be irresistible.

Vengeance was a thankless endeavor, and yet it was necessary if I were to move on.

At any rate, there was still work to do. The plan had been proposed to the witches by a man from the Papal State. If my suspicions proved correct, that man was Epitaph.

“It’s good for the kingdom too,” Dimitri said. “We’ve purged those who led us into stagnation, clearing the way for a new era. Now we have to make it a good one.”

Whatever Dimitri had in mind, it probably wouldn’t come. Knights were mired in a stagnation all of their own.

### III

As our efforts to capture the royal capital began winding down, I was able to visit a once-familiar house for the first time in seven years.

“Just follow the road,” I said. “It leads straight there. I’ll leave it to you.”

“Yes, sir,” a young employee from Ho Company said with a bow of his head.

I watched as he climbed onto a horse with a shovel attached to its saddle and rode off uphill in the direction I’d pointed. He was wearing a longsword at his waist because he’d been my escort on the way here.

When I turned back to the house, I found the head maid waiting by the entrance. She bowed deeply to me as I approached. There was a young girl, who appeared to be about ten, by her side.

“Welcome home, my lord.”

“Oh. W-Welcome home, my lord.”

“Who’s the girl?” I asked, looking at her.

She nervously looked up at me.

“Riccie, go on and introduce yourself.”

“Ah... My name is Riccie. I’m a maid-in-training. I, um, nice to meet you.”

Somehow, just looking at her put me at ease. I was immediately fond of her, like I’d gotten a sense of her good-natured personality already.

The head maid took a step closer and whispered in my ear. “She’s a well-behaved child. Princess Carol is always too tense in my presence... I brought her from the manor hoping that she might help the princess relax.”

That explained everything. As always, the head maid was attentive down to the finest of details.

“Good to have you with us. Do your best,” I said, placing my hand on the girl’s shoulder.

“Yes, sir.” She spoke quietly, presumably because Carol was resting upstairs.

I opened the door and entered the house.

The layout was familiar. The stove and furniture were right where I expected, even though I hadn’t been here in so long. The old memories were guiding my mental state back to what it had once been, and a powerful sense of nostalgia filled me.

I knew that if I opened the door ahead of me, I’d find Rook’s study, long

unused. Behind another door, I'd find a room with a large bed where a married couple had once slept. I could remember its crude structure and leather-covered legs. Rook had made it himself one weekend. Maybe Riccie and the head maid were sleeping in it these days.

As I stepped inside, I saw the kitchen and the stove Suzuya had always used. It was designed such that the smoke could escape via a chimney, but a little always escaped through a few lacquered joints regardless. It had given the room a smoky smell whenever Suzuya had cooked.

On the way up the stairs, I noticed places where woodwork had been renewed, along with other evidence of recent repairs here and there. I remembered how the staircase had creaked whenever anyone climbed it. It must've been seen as a problem, because now the stairs were silent under my feet.

I opened the door to my old room and found Carol peering at me from the bed.

"Hey..." I greeted her. "Feels like we haven't seen each other in a while."

"Yeah. It's nice to see you."

Carol's voice was vanishingly soft, and her cheeks were a little sunken compared to ten days ago. Nevertheless, she smiled with pure happiness when she saw my face.

Carol had a brand-new bedsheet, stuffed with plentiful cotton, pulled up to below her chest. She was resting her back against linens that had been sloped a little to help her sit up. In her position, she had a clear view out of the window. She'd probably seen me coming.

There wasn't much of a garden outside—or any colorful flowers, for that matter—but the scenery was idyllic nonetheless.

"How are you feeling?" I asked.

I sat down on a round stool. It didn't have a backrest, so I assumed the head maid and the girl used it often—it was ideal for someone who needed to face various directions in the course of their work.



“Not bad. The air’s nice here.”

“Glad to hear it.”

Sibiak experienced a slight sea breeze that carried the odors of the city streets as far as the academy grounds. The air here had to be much cleaner.

“And it’s really quiet. Is this where you grew up?” Carol asked.

“Yeah. This was my room until I was six, though it’s had some work done since then.”

The room didn’t feel nostalgic. The flooring had been replaced, the walls were resurfaced with fresh white plaster, and the window—with its large pane of glass—was completely new. The bed too had gone from being child-sized to something bigger. Only the pillars and ceiling looked familiar at all.

“I like it here,” Carol said. “It’s the perfect place to rest.”

“That’s what I thought. I always preferred it over Kalakumo. It’s so...hectic over there.”

Kalakumo was home to the Ho family’s head household. No wonder, then, that tensions were high there during times of war.

“Oh, thanks for thinking about me.” Carol looked pleased for a moment, but her smile soon vanished. With some trepidation, she asked, “So...what happened to the royal capital?”

Carol was in a remote place where news wouldn’t reach her, and her whereabouts were being kept secret. A few members of a trusted family were positioned around the house to defend it, and the head of the family was under strict orders to keep the location secret. Anyone seeking Carol would have to search hard to find her.

I’d made it clear to the people of Ho Province that they’d be digging their own grave if they went looking for anyone or anything that I’d advised them not to be concerned about. If any of my own subordinates disobeyed this instruction, they’d be interrogated, then charged with treason.

In this state of isolation, Carol’s only source of information was the head maid, who lacked Myalo’s skill for intelligence gathering. Since the maid was

devoted to nursing Carol, she was essentially in the dark about the situation at the royal capital besides a few things she might've overheard. Even if she did overhear something, though, she generally kept such things to herself.

"The fighting ended five days ago. There was barely any bloodshed."

"Don't lie to me."

Carol didn't believe me. To be fair, it would've been an exaggeration to say there hadn't been *any* bloodshed *at all*.

"It's the truth. I positioned a large army near Sibiak's south, which left the second order unable to move. That gave us a chance to attack the royal castle by kingeagle. The first order then came to our aid during the fight on Royal Castle Island. Once the castle fell, the second order had nowhere to run. They surrendered quickly without a full-scale battle."

"You're telling me the royal capital fell in just ten days without much bloodshed?"

"The second order was all they had."

"Ha ha... Should've known. No one has ever taken that city, but you did it in just ten days."

Everyone kept telling me I'd done something incredible, but I didn't see it that way.

"There's never been a situation like this. There'd always been a queen in the royal capital. Who'd want to give their life to defend an empty throne?"

In every rebellion up to now, both halves of the royal guard had fought hard as a unified whole. If the first order had stood against us, the losses we'd have endured during the battle would've been too great to overlook.

No one had recognized Carla as the legitimate queen once we'd finished distributing our flyers. I'd even heard reports of trouble at her coronation, resulting in numerous arrests. One man had even been publicly executed for throwing an egg at her.

"And my mother...?"

"She passed away."

“Oh...” There wasn’t even a hint of surprise in Carol’s voice. She must’ve half accepted the reality already.

“A national funeral was held at some point during those ten days. The witches oversaw the whole thing with all the proper formalities followed, as you might expect. If we’re going to hold our own service, we should wait a while.”

“Yeah... That sounds right. If we don’t like what they put on her tombstone, we can change it.”

“I already intend to remake her tombstone. It doesn’t state her true cause of death.”

Queen Shimoné’s current tombstone was merely a placeholder anyway. An impressive carving couldn’t be completed in just a few days, and the witches obviously hadn’t been able to start work on it while the assassination had been in the planning stages. Since there were constant visitors to her grave, we’d just erased the offending parts of the existing inscription as a temporary measure.

“Please do.”

Understandably, Carol was in low spirits. I wished we didn’t have to discuss any of this. But she had to know. If I’d told her to forget about it and focus on getting better, curiosity would have eaten away at her.

“And Carla? What happened to Carla?”

I knew this question had been coming—Carla was her little sister, after all—but it was still hard to say.

“She killed herself.”

“Oh...” Carol replied while looking downward.

“I went there myself and talked her into it. Despite what she did, I didn’t want her to suffer. I gave her a poison that would make it an easy death. I don’t think she was in much pain at all.”

“Thank you for handling it carefully.”

“Well...she was more than a stranger to me.”

Even now, I wondered why Carla had turned out the way she had. If I’d been

kind to her when we'd first met, would things have been different? But it might've only heightened her misunderstanding, leading to a deeper resentment when I rejected her later.

Another option would've been to marry Carla, but that would've been out of the question. I couldn't have dedicated my life to a woman I didn't have any love for. Try as I might, I couldn't think of any better options I could've taken.

"Ngh, ngh..." Carol grabbed the sheets tightly as she quietly cried.

I got up from my chair, sat down on the bed, and wrapped my arm around Carol's shoulders.

"Sorry... Ngh... Why did she...?"

"It was her simple mind that brought the royal family harm. The witches used her against you, but now they're gone too. They're all dead. It's over now."

As I spoke, I stroked her hair. Gradually, her sobs became softer until she stopped crying.

"Sorry, Yuri. I got you caught up in all this, and now your parents..."

"It's not your fault."

I was to blame for that. My happiness came from the people I held dear. I'd been protecting the new continent so that I could keep them safe. The pursuit of happiness had also led me to sleep with Carol. I'd been living for the sake of making myself happy.

But I knew the new continent could never have protected Carol. That's why I'd decided to fight. Once she'd become pregnant, I'd decided to marry her thinking it would make things more convenient during the fighting.

I hadn't seen things clearly.

"I won't lose hope," I told her. "Not as long as you're with me."

"You're right. I have to give birth to a healthy baby," Carol said firmly while putting her hand on her swollen stomach.

That wasn't what I'd meant. My hope came from her. *I just want her to live. I don't need a child.* But I didn't correct her. If the baby gave her the motivation

to live, I wasn't going to disagree.

Now that she'd calmed down, I removed my arm from her shoulders, gently stroking her back with my open palm as I pulled it away.

She'd lost weight. Carol's shoulders had once been covered with firm muscle thanks to all the training she'd done at the Knight Academy, but they were a little smaller now.

"So what's happening in the royal capital right now?"

"Myalo is handling everything carefully. No one can deal with witches better than her."

"Oh, that's good."

"I'd be lying if I said we weren't busy, but I made time today. I'm going to stay here tonight."

"Really? You don't have to..." Carol sounded reluctant to agree.

"No, listen. Almost the entire Ho family army is in the royal capital, so we held the funeral there. But the burial..."

"Oh..." Carol guessed what I was talking about—my parents.

Cremation wasn't a common practice, and a burial couldn't be put off for too long.

"Yesterday, we held a burial for them alongside former generations of Ho family members. Keep this to yourself, but I buried empty coffins. Their real resting place is going to be near this house."

"What?!" Carol cried out loudly. That was followed by a brief coughing fit.

I hadn't meant to surprise her.

"There's a hill behind the house. We often climbed it together. You can see this house, my father's ranch, and even some far-off wheat fields from there."

It was a place that Rook had made for Suzuya. He'd been able to ride an eagle and enjoy amazing views anytime, but that had meant leaving Suzuya at home.

For that reason, he'd climbed the hills surrounding his ranch, found a spot with a beautiful view of our home, and made a clearing in the trees. He'd even

created a path so that the journey there would always be easy. He'd done it all before I'd been born. We'd often gone there for family picnics during my childhood.

"Father never got his knight medal, and mom wasn't from a noble family. I just couldn't put them in Ho family graves. I'm going to bury them on that hill."

It was my decision. Without consulting anyone, I'd ordered two coffins from a coffin maker in Kalakumo, then secretly switched them for my parents' coffins to be buried in their place. I'd feigned calmness as I'd loaded the real ones into a carriage ready to meet up with trusted men from Ho Company. I'd driven the carriage myself on the way here.

The men had no idea this was my former home. I'd told them they were digging a grave for friends I'd lost in the recent battle. Right now, they were likely starting on the hole.

"Then the luggage you brought..."

"Mm. I'd rather not say it."

There were two bodies in the carriage visible from the room's window.

"I see..."

"I'll be heading out for a while. I should be back in time for dinner."

I wanted to finish this today. Burying bodies deep enough to prevent wolves or wild dogs from digging them back up required backbreaking labor from at least three people.

"All right. Well, please give my regards to my late mother-and father-in-law."

"I will."

With that, I left the room.



"Phew. This ought to do it."

"Yeah, I think so."

The two company employees and I were covered in sweat and mud after digging a hole wide enough for two coffins to rest side by side. We'd reached

the point where the grass was at eye level. Since the hole's depth almost matched my height, we decided we'd done enough.

We climbed out using the slope we'd made, then the three of us unloaded the coffins from the narrow carriage that had been designed to be drawn by a single horse.

"Take it slow," I instructed. "Don't drop it."

We slowly lowered Rook's coffin down, then placed Suzuya's coffin beside it. Finally, we climbed out of the hole.

"This is good. Let's fill it in."

I picked up a shovel and began replacing the soil. It had taken us so long to make the hole that the sun was already setting.

"We'll have a lot of soil left over," one of the employees said.

"Let's pile it up on top," I replied. "It'll sink down later."

I didn't know the general procedure for burying someone. I considered compacting the soil under our boots, but I didn't want to stomp repeatedly on my parents' grave. Instead, I decided I'd remove any extra dirt the next time I came here if it hadn't flattened out by itself.

"Are we finished now?" an employee asked.

"Yeah. You can head back. Good work."

I'd paid them well for this job—enough that they'd be able to find an inn and enjoy some fine alcohol afterward.

Before walking away, both employees stood in front of the grave and prayed to offer their respects.

"We'll take the carriage back with us," one said.

"Yeah, please do."

As we'd arranged, the two men left with the horse and carriage.

I remained, taking in the beautiful view until the sun had almost set. It was nice to enjoy the peaceful scenery like this.

It was just the three of us here. Without no one around to hear me, I began talking to Rook. “What do you think, dad? I figured you’d find it more comfortable. I know you always got a little bored here, but the view’s way better than at the burial ground. And I figured you’d find that burial ground too stuffy, mom. I remembered how you always cheered up when dad used to take time off to bring us here.”

The tears began to flow unabated. No one could see me. I was alone here.

“My first mom walked out on me, and my dad was a terrible father...but you two raised me and showed me love. It made me realize what real parents are like, but I never knew how to be your son... You were finally going to have a real child, but then I ruined everything... Mom, how can I ever make it up to you?”

The people I was apologizing to were already at rest in the ground. *How did it all turn out like this?*

“I’m sorry...”

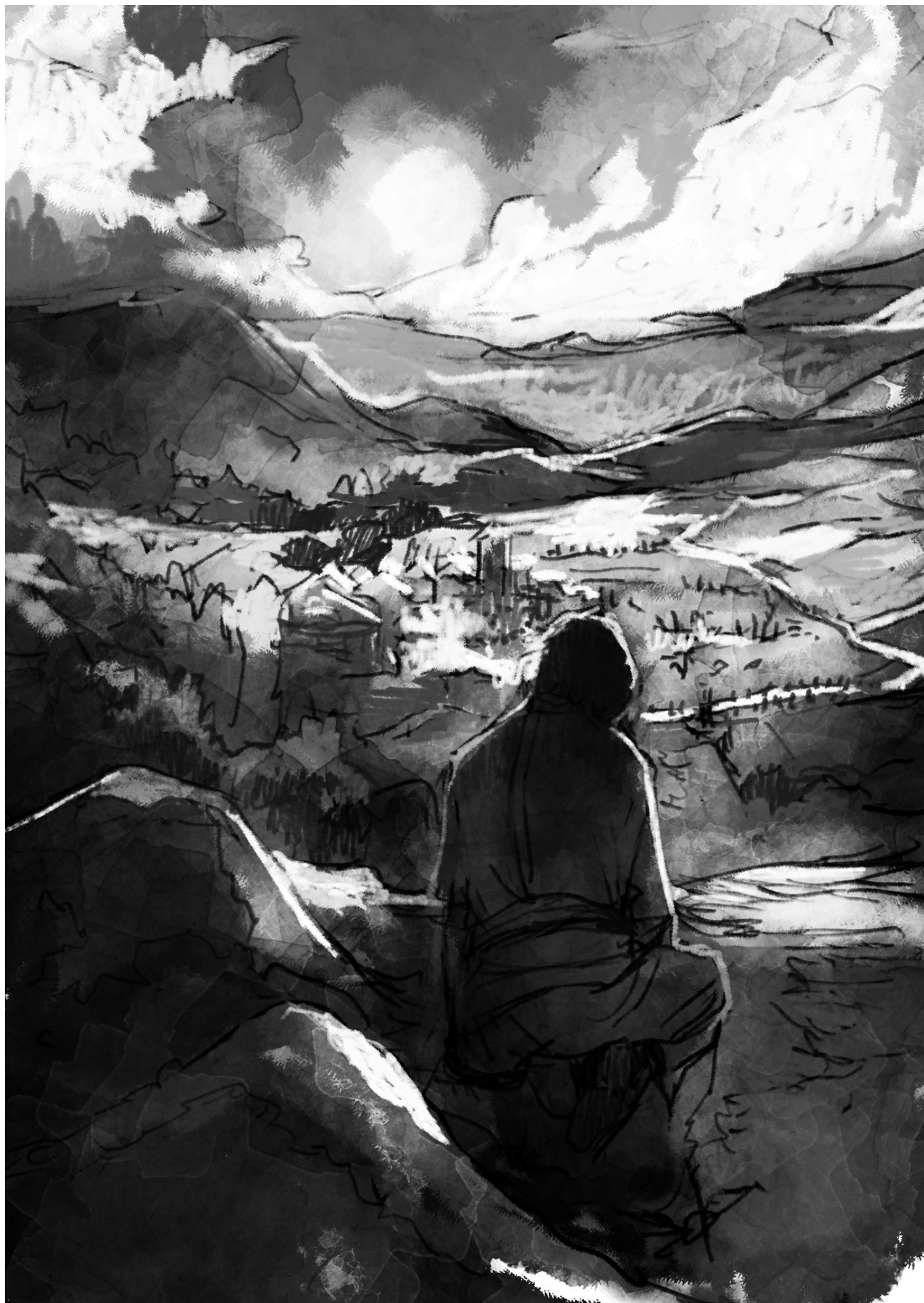
No matter how much I apologized, it wouldn’t be enough. But I had to let them know how I felt.

The tears streamed down as I continuously apologized in my head. It continued on for so long that I lost track of time. The sun was falling, and it would soon grow dark.

“I’ll be back soon to bring your tombstone.”

I left the grave and got onto my horse. Carol was waiting for me.





## Chapter 4 — The Next War

I

It was April 5, twenty days since we'd captured the royal capital. Ashen gray clouds covered the sky, creating an atmosphere that was far from cheerful.

I was drinking tea with Myalo in a conference room in the royal castle. Tillet was standing in the corner.

"Let's just read it, Yuri. There's no reason not to." Myalo was looking at an envelope resting on the table. Its wax seal was unbroken.

"No. I want to be honest and open about everything. Even if we resealed the envelope afterward, our feelings would give it away."

As we were talking, the door opened, and Kien and Liao Rube entered.

I stood up to greet them. "Long time no see, Sir Kien."

"Indeed... And a lot's happened since." It was difficult to describe Kien's expression. It was as if he didn't know how to feel toward me or whether it was appropriate to vent his frustrations.

Liao, on the other hand, looked completely uncaring. He only glanced at Myalo briefly, but it didn't escape my notice.

"Somehow, I've lived through it all." I extended my hand to Kien.

He accepted it and shook it. His hands were dry like an old man's, lacking any sweat or grease.

Next, I repeated the gesture with Liao.

"You handled things well, Yuri," he said.

"No, it's been one failure after another."

After I'd shaken hands with both of them, I sat back down.

Liao gave me a puzzled look, like he couldn't see how I could call everything

I'd done a mistake.

"Please, take your seats," I urged them. "Over here, where it's easiest to talk."

Kien and Liao sat side by side. Myalo remained in the same position to my left, which meant we couldn't properly arrange ourselves with the higher-ranking people by the top of the table.

"I already explained some of the details in my letter."

I'd recently written to Kien, warning about a likely crusade and calling him here. Liao was just along for the ride.

"This is the contract that the witches made with the Papal State. There are already copies on display throughout the city, but this is the original."

I placed the document I'd found in Vivila's house down on the table. The content was as follows.

## Contract

As the Crusade Force's leading authority, the Papal State asks that the Shiyalta Kingdom's Witch Collective meet the following Requirements.

1. Cause a shift in power through the elimination of the Shiyalta Kingdom's royal family or the installation of a puppet under the Witch Collective's control.
2. Maintain the power shift until the Crusade Force arrives and continue to thwart efforts to build defenses against the Crusade Force during that time.
3. Support the Crusade Force's invasion of the Shiyalta Kingdom by opening ports of the royal capital Sibiak and allowing our fleet access at our request.
4. Secure as many blonde Shanti as possible, including Tellur Toni Shaltl. Requirement (1) may be prioritized over this Requirement when the two are in direct conflict.
5. Capture the heretic Ether Catholica Wichita, and hold

her ready to be handed over to the Papal State.

If Requirements (1) to (5) above are met, the Papal State will abide by the following Promises in return.

1. Up to five thousand members of the Witch Collective will be given rights equivalent to those of Kulati people.

2. The title of Duke will be awarded to seven members of the Witch Collective.

3. The Witch Collective will maintain rights over its assets.

4. The Witch Collective will maintain ownership of its land in perpetuity.

The above Requirements and Promises constitute a contract between the Crusade Force and the Shiyalta Kingdom's Witch Collective.

Signed

Epitaph Palazzo, representative of the Crusade Force

Six representatives of the Witch Collective

"So that's how it was," Kien said.

"They really were scum," Liao added.

The pair looked utterly disgusted, as if the document was a gruesome sight.

"Sir Kien, I'd like us to discuss this as equals."

"Hm? Well, you are the Ho family's leader now... I'm fine with that."

Up to this point, I'd been showing him respect, but I needed to be frank throughout the conversation we were about to have.

"Do you think a crusade's coming, Sir Kien?"

"I don't know. Perhaps not, since their plan failed, or maybe they'll want to

take advantage of all the disruption. The reality is the royal capital has been in disarray since the queen's death."

That wasn't *quite* the reality. The queen had set me up as a national hero, and I'd distributed my flyers before anyone could damage my reputation among the city's people. Even though Carol's absence had given the population some cause for suspicion, they'd mostly welcomed the Ho family as their new rulers regardless. I worried whenever I thought about all the taxes we'd lose this year while our bureaucratic systems were in tatters, but at least the restoration of public order had been swift.

"This letter should hold the answer." I placed my palm on the envelope that lay on the desk, its seal unbroken.

"What's this...?"

"The day after the assassination, I asked employees heading for the Albio Republic to learn what they could about the crusaders."

The response had finally reached me.

"It normally takes twenty days for a ship to make the trip there and back, but this time it took just fourteen days owing to favorable winds. I called you here after the letter arrived yesterday."

Weather patterns at this time of year meant that only one in five ships would be fortunate enough to make it to Albio and back so quickly. We'd been lucky.

"That doesn't add up," Kien replied. "You took the capital just a little over ten days ago."

"Even before then, I'd guessed that the witches were in contact with the crusaders based on our overall situation."

"Yuri, while everything may have been clear to you, it was far from obvious to the rest of us. Please allow me to explain, lest we create any misunderstandings here," Myalo said before summarizing the evidence and reasoning that had led me to my initial conclusion. "So, you see, that was enough for Yuri to guess that the witches had a deal with the crusaders."

"Mhm," Kien replied.

“And now we have the response,” I said. “As you can see, it’s sealed. We haven’t tried to read it.”

“Why call us here without opening it?” Liao asked. “If the letter’s addressed to you, there’s no reason to wait.”

“Whatever the case, I’ll need the Rube family’s help in dealing with the crusaders, or there’s no hope for us,” I explained. “I didn’t want to draw any conclusions before our discussion. We’ll open the letter together because we’re going to consider the implications together.”

“I see,” Kien said.

With the unbroken wax seal as our only evidence that the letter hadn’t been tampered with, there was no proof we were being honest. We could’ve faked this setup easily by opening the envelope, putting a new letter inside, and resealing it. The seal had been made using a stamp that belonged to the Kuklillison family, but there was no way to prove we hadn’t duplicated it. Trust in whoever delivered it was far more important.

“I would’ve opened it without you if you hadn’t gotten here today. Anyway, let’s take a look.”

“All right,” Kien agreed.

I broke the seal and opened the envelope.

“Please let me be the first to read it. It’s also a means of communication from company employees, so I need to check it doesn’t include any company secrets.”

“That’s fine.”

I’m struggling to accept the news of the assassination. It’s difficult being outside of the kingdom where many details don’t reach me. If such a murder really did take place, then may Her Majesty the Queen and the parents of our chairman rest in peace.

I: General Matters

Regarding the printed holy books, the new format has proved popular. Demand has increased significantly and the same applies to the unbound version. (See the attached document.)

Demand for the old version of the holy book has fallen by ninety percent.

Protests from archbishops of the Carulgi sect are growing increasingly loud. I have enclosed the rebuttal we received in response to Ms. Ether's written arguments.

## II: Information

An order to assemble a crusade force has been issued for the third time.

This information came to the Albio Republic from across the channel via an urgent messenger pigeon. We consider it highly reliable.

The Albio Republic has spies who gather this sort of intelligence in the Euphos Federation—a likely enemy of Albio. We are still unaware of the response from other nations, but Euphos has agreed to participate following a discussion held by the nation's rulers.

According to analysts in Albio, this confirms that the order to assemble a crusade force was recognized by the Papal State. When an unofficial order was issued previously, Euphos's rulers did not even meet to discuss it.

In short, we can conclude that a crusade force will gather for the sake of an invasion.

Upon receipt of this news, a grand council was convened in the Albio Republic to discuss the matter. As with every crusade, the government here worries that they might be the target of the next attack, rather than a Shanti nation. As

per your instruction, I shared details of the assassination with them without concealing anything.

### III: Products

As instructed, we've acquired a large sum of money from a lender to purchase guns and large quantities of gunpowder. The interest rate is eight percent per annum.

The lender touched my behind. I was infuriated.

### IV: Ships

We have received the *Holland XV* and the *Mamiya XVI* (small exploration vessels). They will be sent over once loaded with goods.

Regarding ship construction, we're forced to put discussions with shipbuilders on hold because the remaining earmarked funds will instead be spent on guns.

"That figures," I mumbled to myself.

Above all else, I'd been hoping the crusade had been called off. Unfortunately, enemy forces had been ordered to assemble, which made an invasion inevitable.

Once a state gave orders to take aim, it was sure to give orders to fire. Taking aim meant spending vast sums of money and moving people and resources. It was too late for them to declare the whole thing a mistake and back down.

I passed the letter to Kien while I read the documents that had been enclosed with it.

I was glad that I'd left it to others to handle the holy book's redesign. The increase in orders was enough to increase our profits by tens of percent—though money was a secondary concern for someone in my situation.

"Sounds like they'll reach us this year," Kien noted, then passed the letter to Liao.

"Yes, it looks that way."



“The Rube family will, of course, fight. We can mobilize twelve thousand soldiers.”

“The Ho family army has sixteen thousand. The second order has eleven thousand, and the first order’s another seven thousand. That’s forty-six thousand in total. Then again, the second order’s pathetic—we should think of them as one-third their current size.”

“What’s the state of the second order right now?”

“The regular soldiers were charged with insubordination and told they’d be pardoned after a year of military service. They’re under the command of high-ranking Ho family officers, and they’re going through a harsh training regime in Ho Province barracks and the royal territory. Any female officer who was merely a figurehead has been removed in both orders of the royal guard.”

“The crusaders could be here in a matter of months. Is there even time for training?”

That was a problem.

“The second order was never assembled to fight wars. They served the witches in exchange for authority and money without hard work. We’ll use them in the war, but even after training, they’ll only be half as useful as other soldiers. Let’s imagine the second order is five thousand and five hundred strong—that gives us an army of about forty thousand and five hundred overall.”

“Last time, the enemy had roughly eighty thousand soldiers. We can’t face them without help from Bof and Noza.”

“Fortunately, we’ll have at least a few months to prepare. Common sense says that the enemy can’t raise an army any quicker than that, no matter how much they hurry. First, the individual nations have to discuss matters and coordinate their logistics. That’s where their planning will start.”

“Yes, that’s likely.” Kien was in agreement.

“In the meantime, we have to crush the Bof and Noza families,” I said while handing Kien a sheet of paper.

## Contract

The seven witches will enter into a contract with the Bof family's representative, Orone Bof, upon fulfillment of the following Requirements.

1. The Bof family will not position its army in the royal territory in the event of a disturbance in the royal capital.

2. The Bof family will hinder the advance of the Rube family's army by denying the army permission to enter Bof Province.

3. If the Rube family attempts to move south by sea, this advance must be stopped.

If the above conditions are met, the seven witches will do as follows for the Bof family.

1. A maximum of two thousand people affiliated with the Bof family will be given rights equivalent to those of Kulati people.

2. The head of the Bof family will be given the title of Duke.

3. The Bof family will maintain ownership of its territory after it has been conquered by the crusade force.

4. The Bof family will retain the right to bear arms and defend itself.

The items above constitute a contract between the seven witches and the Bof family.

Signed

Orone Bof, representative of the Bof family

Six representatives of the Witch Collective

“How could they...” Kien’s eyes burned with rage. This offended him far more than the news of the witches’ betrayal because the two families were neighbors.

“They’re scum, as you can see,” I said. “I’ll summon the head of the family to the royal castle and kill him myself.”

“But then what’ll happen to his army?”

“We’ve got a few months to rebuild it somehow, though we’ll have to move fast.”

“Ugh, but...” Kien showed no enthusiasm toward a fight between chieftain families.

“We can’t rely on an army commanded by someone who’d rather sign this contract than fight. Do you want to face eighty thousand crusaders with a man like Orone Bof in a position of strategic importance? We’ll have no way to know whether he’ll stand his ground or just step aside.”

The Bof family had been so pessimistic in the past war that their army had barely fought at all. Right now, their soldiers were useless to us. If we spared Orone Bof, there was also the issue of what might come after our victory in the war. We wouldn’t be able to put him on trial because we’d be offering him awards for his service. If he was no use to us, then the sooner we killed him, the better.

“They won’t go down without a fight,” Kien warned.

“We’ll distribute flyers. After Orone Bof comes to the royal capital, that is. The Bof family will be under threat from the Ho family to the south and the Rube family to the north. I doubt they’ll show much resistance.”

“Hmm...”

“The bigger problem is the Noza family. Bolafra Noza’s a smart man. He made a similar deal, except in his case, there’s only a written pledge full of one-sided assurances from the witches. He didn’t put his seal or signature on anything.”

Bolafra Noza must’ve understood the danger of signing a bilateral agreement with a group like the witches. The document could easily have been used to

blackmail him later, and he'd lose everything once it came to light. Accepting a written pledge that he didn't have to sign meant that everything could be blamed on the witches. If the document ever came to light, he could claim it was a forgery that the witches had prepared without his knowledge. Once he'd burned his own copy of the pledge, there'd be no way to prove that he wasn't another victim of the witches' conspiracies.

"Yes, I know that all too well," Kien agreed. "He's a nervous man. He was never worthy of leading an army."

"If I summon Orone Bof, he'll come right to me, but I doubt Bolafra would answer the summons."

"Indeed. A clever little coward like him won't leave his home." Kien's opinion matched my own.

"Well, we have options. We'll discuss them after I've killed Orone Bof. Bolafra should be easier to convince once he sees that he has no friends left."

It would be simpler to deal with Bolafra after we'd taken down his partner in crime, Orone. In any case, we had overwhelming military superiority. If we wanted both men removed, we'd find a way.

The real problem was the crusade force we'd have to fight afterward. For that, I was going to need Kien's cooperation.

"The crusaders will arrive soon after, and I'd like to ensure we'll win, even if they invade with an army of a hundred thousand. If we lose this war, it'll be the end of us."

It wouldn't just be the end of the kingdom—it would be the end of the Shanti people entirely. A few members of our kind would still exist on the new continent, but that meant little. Even without considering the resources and technology they'd need while building a nation, their population of just over two thousand would take over a hundred and fifty years to grow to a hundred thousand—and that was an optimistic estimate that assumed a constant baby boom. Even a population of a hundred thousand would be a lot smaller than Sibiak alone. The Kulati would probably discover the new continent and slaughter what was left of the Shanti people before they could build a strong nation.

“That’s what any commander wishes for, but there’s rarely a sure way to win. Do you have a plan, Sir Yuri?”

Kien’s experience taking command in actual wars gave him enough reason to doubt me. I knew that the armies I’d witnessed in Kilhina had been just as desperate for a means to save their kingdom, but no amount of thinking or strategizing had been enough to prevent its fall.

“I want the decisive battle to occur north of the royal capital. I’d like you to allow the crusaders to pass through Rube Province without a fight.”

“What?” As expected, Kien was offended by the idea.

“Your people can take refuge in the south. We have at least two months to prepare. It shouldn’t be too difficult.”

“But...the villages they pass through will be torched and the cities plundered. I can’t sit back while they lay waste to Mital.”

Losing a city wouldn’t be too bad if no one lived there. The city’s fall would be little more than a mass looting.

“I’m not asking your citizens to flee with nothing but what they can carry. There’s enough time to move valuable items south. Besides, it would take considerable effort for the crusaders to reduce a city like Mital to rubble. Whatever damage they do can be repaired when people return. I intend to fund the process.”

“This is ridiculous!” Liao interrupted. “The city of Mital has been protected by the Rube family for generations. You’re telling us to let the enemy burn it down?”

“You can remain there if you please,” I replied. “As long as you allow the Ho family to stand back, you can fight where you will.”

“What?”

“You can’t be...”

Father and son were both shocked. It was a natural reaction. I knew there’d be a psychological barrier for them to overcome. Even my own retainers were going to have a hard time accepting my plan, but it was the only way.

“It would be difficult to win a war on the kingdom’s northern border with our current military capabilities. I don’t want to take the chance.”

Kien replied with an empty argument. “This is childish nonsense. We have to fight as a unified whole.”

“Sir Kien, please consider the number of soldiers we can actually rely upon. The Ho and Rube family armies will fight. The royal guard’s first order needs to rebuild its command structure, but they’ll be there to assist us too. That gives us a total of thirty-five thousand soldiers. The Kulati, however, will come with at least sixty thousand soldiers. They had eighty thousand in the previous war.

“Every one of our thirty-five thousand soldiers would have to be a powerful warrior fighting with far more ferocity than our Kulati opponents, but that’s not going to happen. During the previous war, our soldiers generally proved inferior to their Kulati counterparts. From what I’ve heard, the Rube family army was pushed back by enemy foot soldiers just like everyone else. The enemy had a large supply of guns, while our side fought with swords and spears. It was a given that we’d lose.

“The second order can give us another eleven thousand soldiers. The Bof family has about nine thousand and the Noza family around eight thousand. These low numbers are a natural consequence of the poor quality of their land. That gives us an additional twenty-eight thousand soldiers in total, but they won’t be a match for Kulati soldiers. Even if we’re optimistic and assume these additional soldiers are as strong as the rest, we’d still likely be outnumbered.

“So let me ask you, Sir Kien—now that our kingdom and the survival of our people is at stake, will you go into battle without a solid plan? Is a good meal for every soldier accompanied by a speech to raise morale the best means of preparing you can think of? Perhaps you think we have an advantage because the enemy lacks eagles and plainrunners?

“No, we’ve lost in this same way too many times now. We’ve made ourselves easy targets by refusing to learn anything from defeat after defeat. Well, if you wish to repeat the cycle, then do as you will. Just leave me to do things my own way.”

My research told me that fighting on the northern border was too foolish to

even consider. If that was our best hope, we'd be better to attempt a strategic withdrawal while relocating as many people to the new continent as possible.

"And you think we can win by retreating to the royal capital?" Kien asked.

"Yes, we can. I've already put together our strategy."

I didn't like promising victory when so much was uncertain, but it was necessary. In times of war, accepting someone's promises was about more than loss or profit—it was life or death. But no one could calmly assess the deal before them with their life at stake. I had to promise victory even when it was far from foolproof, because otherwise he'd be paralyzed by doubt.

"Give me some specifics."

"I've been preparing for some time. The first step was to spare the second order while capturing the royal capital. And don't you think it's odd that I found all of these documents so quickly? I planned ahead to make sure I'd find what I needed before killing the witches."

Things would've been very different if I'd crushed the second order without any thought. We would've triumphantly encircled and killed thousands of soldiers, leaving us with nothing to show for it other than a mountain of corpses.

And if I hadn't spoken to the witches before killing them, I wouldn't have found proof of the Bof and Noza family's betrayal. It might've taken me a month to discover the Charlevilles' hidden room, and by then, it would've been too late.

"And if we abandon Mital as you say?"

"Father! You're actually considering it?!" Liao grabbed Kien's leg and shook him. His strong attachment to Mital was obvious.

But what was destroyed could be rebuilt. Unlike human lives, the city wouldn't be lost forever.

"Liao, be quiet. Sir Yuri, I can't turn my back on Mital without a good reason. Why must we fight at the royal capital? I can't agree until you've explained it to me."

That was a reasonable question.

“Then hear me out. I’m sure you’ll agree by the time I’m finished.” I began to explain the plan I held in my head in fine detail.

“I see,” Kien said once I’d finished. “Very well, we’ll abandon Mital.”

“But father! Early generations of our family raised it like it was their own child! How can we hand it over to the Kulati without a fight?”

“It doesn’t matter. Cities can be rebuilt. Defeat would mean the end of the Shanti. One city’s a small price to pay.”

It was just as Kien said. I was thankful that this old man was so understanding.

“Family heirlooms and the like can be moved to the royal capital,” I said. “The Temper storehouses near the port just became available, but you should wait until we’ve finished with the Bof family—you’ll need routes across land. The risk of your ships being sunk is too great.”

Bof Province lay between the royal capital and Rube Province. With no passageway to link the two places, any route across land would go through the Bof family’s territory. Obviously, those roads weren’t safe in our current situation.

I knew Kien wouldn’t put his trust in ships as a mode of transport because there was always a risk they might sink. And since seafaring required a very particular set of skills, moving items by ship would require help from people other than trusted members of chieftain families.

“Alternatively, I could loan you my company’s ships, but I assume you’d rather not trust your family’s treasures in the hands of sailors you’ve never met—especially not when they have to navigate along the coast of Bof Province.”

“When are you going to summon Orone Bof?”

“I can send a messenger today. I already have ten thousand Ho soldiers with me in the royal capital. I’d like you to remain vigilant, but not move your army until I contact you. If we raise Orone’s suspicions, there’s a chance he won’t come.”



“Understood. I’ll be ready to move the moment news reaches us.”

To my relief, we’d settled everything quickly.

“I think that’s all for today,” I concluded.

## II

With our discussion over, Kien and Liao had returned home. Myalo and I were left alone in the small conference room.

“Summon Dolla,” I said.

“Are you sure?” Myalo asked.

“Yeah. I have to talk to him eventually.”

Myalo nodded, then sent someone off to fetch him.

Dolla had been detained the day before. I wasn’t just summoning him, but ordering his release.

I’d been informed that Dolla had charged into the royal castle soon after the assassination and attempted coup.

Since the second order had been posted in front of the castle and they’d been trying to act like everything was under control, they’d been aggressive toward anyone who’d forced their way into the castle. Needless to say, Dolla had been beaten up and arrested after finding himself severely outnumbered.

He could’ve easily gotten himself killed by throwing himself into a dangerous situation like that, but thankfully, his dad was an officer in the first order. He’d been imprisoned while his fate was decided. After the first few days of turmoil, Galla had been informed that his son was in the detention barracks. Galla had made sure his son was released, but after telling him that I’d fled to Ho Province with Carol, Dolla had pursued us.

As a son of an officer of the first order, Dolla would be taking an obvious risk by entering Ho Province. Galla had had the foresight to strictly forbid his son from going—meaning Dolla had been unable to use his family’s horses or plainrunners—but nothing could have stopped him from running over.

Rossi—the village where Carol had rested for a while—was on the road to Kalakumo. Carol was still staying at the village inn when Dolla had arrived because my old home had been under renovation.

Ho family soldiers had been surrounding the village as a security measure at that point, making it impossible for anyone to get close unnoticed. The area had been in a state of high alert, similar to martial law, where any suspicious passersby were arrested and questioned. Even those who weren't suspicious were told to take another route. That was the situation Dolla had walked into.

When the soldiers had taken him in for questioning, Dolla had told them honestly that his dad was an officer in the royal guard. At that point, the royal guard had still been considered the enemy, so my soldiers had carried out their duties as instructed and arrested Dolla. He'd been sent to a dungeon in Kalakumo.

At that point, I'd been heading north to capture the royal capital, but word had been sent to me after Dolla had informed the jailer that he was an old friend of mine from the academy. I'd responded by ordering his release, because I knew he meant no harm. That was how he'd managed to walk free.

But then, Dolla had started asking about Princess Carol's whereabouts. Carol had already been moved to my childhood home, which only a handful of people knew about. Everyone had told Dolla honestly that they had no idea. After realizing that he'd reached a dead end, he'd decided to go looking for me again. Apparently, he'd been so worked up by this point that no one had wanted to tell him I was at the royal capital. Instead, they'd said I was in Suomi.

Dolla had headed to Suomi, but of course, he hadn't found me there. I'd heard he'd visited the Ho Company office, but the employees there obviously hadn't known where I was.

Dolla had then decided to return to Kalakumo and wait for me. However, he'd learned of the royal capital's capture while he'd been waiting and decided to return there himself. Another series of misunderstandings had then led to him being mistaken for a remnant of the second order, which had resulted in him being thrown into a cell once again.

When I'd learned all this a few days later, the first thing I'd done was send

someone to apologize to Galla and inform him that his son had been imprisoned over a misunderstanding.

Surprisingly, Galla had requested that Dolla be left in his cell. Maybe he'd thought that his son had lost his mind, given he'd been arrested and imprisoned three times within a single month. I'd also been told that Galla wanted me to release his son whenever it would be most convenient for me to talk to him. After all, Dolla's aim had been to find me.

That brought us to today. He was about to be freed once again.

Myalo and I drank tea together as we waited, and after a short while, we heard a woman yelling outside.

"Please wait a moment! No! Stop right there!"

The door burst open.

"Yuri! You asshole!" Dolla's anger was directed at me.

"What's wrong, Dolla? Sit down."

He was furious with me, but I wasn't sure why exactly.

"You know exactly what's wrong! Where's Princess Carol?!"

"She's under my protection."

"But I heard she was poisoned. Was that a lie?"

"No. She was poisoned, but she survived."

Dolla's anger turned into concern. "And she's all right? She just needs to rest?"

"No, she's not all right. Half a glass of the poisoned wine was deadly enough to kill the queen. Carol drank a mouthful of that same wine. It damaged her digestive tract to the point that she can only handle watery foods like gruel. Fortunately, her kidneys are unharmed."

If her kidneys had been damaged, her body wouldn't be able to filter the impurities from her blood. Needless to say, dialysis was beyond us, so there wouldn't have been a way to prevent the buildup of toxins.

A pregnant woman's body could protect a fetus from toxins thanks to a

barrier within the placenta, but there were certain substances with teratogenic effects that could pass through that barrier—particularly chemically synthesized ones. Our unborn child must've survived, because Carol hadn't miscarried, but the poison's effects on the fetus were still a concern. Although the whole thing wasn't my field of expertise, it was as though the placenta had learned how to block naturally occurring poisons as a result of humans coming into contact with them during our evolution. If that were the case, then it was possible the red canolia had had a minimal effect on our child due to its natural origins.

"Give it to me in simple words. Just tell me if she's okay or not."

Dolla probably didn't understand what it meant for someone's digestive tract to be damaged.

"She'd bedridden. She can't take a single step by herself."

"What...?"

"I don't know whether she'll survive. She can't even eat much of the gruel."

Dolla's rage seemed to take control of him. He stormed toward me, swung his fist, and punched my cheek. The intense shock to my head sent me tumbling out of my chair.

"You were with her! Why didn't you protect her?!"

I got to my feet and approached him. When I was within striking distance, I gave him a hard kick to the groin. He could've dodged it, but he didn't.

"Ngh!"

I quickly followed up with a kick to the abdomen, and he went tumbling to the floor, knocking over the chairs that the Rube family members had been sitting on.



“Don’t give me that crap,” I told him. “Who’d *you* protect when the fighting was going on?”

“What did you say?!”

“I asked who *you* protected. I did what I could. I know Carol was harmed, but I did protect her. What about you? Did you do anything besides running around?”

“I wasn’t there! I tried to get into the royal castle!”

*Does he think he would’ve made a difference? He thinks he would’ve sensed the poison and stopped Carol from drinking it? Bullshit.*

“What about Tellur?” I asked him.

“What...?”

Judging by his reaction to the question, the thought of her hadn’t even crossed his mind until now. His face said, *Good question. Where is she?*

“Haven’t seen it, have you? Read this.”

I passed him one of the documents I’d shown the Rubes—the contract formed between the witches and the crusaders. Article 4 mentioned Tellur by name. They knew her as the blonde Shanti that had escaped capture during the previous war.

I waited a long time for Dolla to finish reading.

“What happened to Lady Tellur?” His concern for her was evident on his face.

“Oh, so *now* you care about her? Are you serious?”

“Just tell me.”

I knew he’d want to know.

“They handed her over already. A Kulati spy carried her away overseas. I can’t imagine what they’re doing to her right now.”

“Wha—?! Shit.” Dolla, being an idiot, had already turned heel and was about to run off. I had no idea where he planned to go.

“I lied,” I said, sitting back down. “She’s in this castle.”

My cheek hurt, and it felt like a tooth was loose. I hoped I wouldn't lose it.

Dolla's face went blank. "Huh...?"

"Tellur's home was raided on the night of the assassination. She was captured and confined to the royal castle. Meanwhile, you were lounging in a cell."

"Why'd you lie?"

"Where were you going to run off to? Did you think you could charge through Kilhina and the Kulati territories until you found her? You don't even speak Terolish."

"Tell me why you lied to me!"

*Don't yell at me.* "You think you've got the right to criticize me?"

Rather than answer the question, Dolla seemed to shrink.

"If she means so much to you that you'd run to her now, then why didn't you protect her?" I pressed. "I was the one who saved her. Not that I ever attacked the capital for her sake."

If I hadn't taken back the capital, Tellur would definitely have been sold by now. After the spy we'd learned about from Julia had been questioned under torture, we'd learned that Tellur was meant to be handed over before the crusade force even arrived. No one could predict what might happen while crusaders were invading the royal capital, so it made sense to move her to a safe place beforehand.

If I'd simply abandoned Tellur to her fate, or if I'd delayed the attack on Sibiak by a few weeks, she might've been on a ship sailing across the sea right now.

"I should've protected Carol? That's easy for you to say. All you did was stand back and let everyone else do the work."

"I stood back..." he mumbled.

"I know what you're thinking—no one could've guessed that Tellur was in danger or arrived on time to save her, and that there was no way for you to reach Carol."

Dolla stayed silent and let me continue.

“And yet you’re telling me, ‘Yuri, you should’ve been capable enough to guess what was going on before Carol drank the poison so you could stop her. You should’ve found a way. I’m not smart enough to predict things like that.’”

I must not have been too far off, because Dolla didn’t disagree.

“You’re lucky, Dolla. Tellur survived without a scratch, and you didn’t have to lift a finger. Meanwhile, my wife’s bedridden and can barely eat enough gruel to sustain herself.”

My anger grew as I spoke. It made me want to slam my fist on the table, but I just barely managed to stop myself. I wasn’t going to deal with my rage like an infant.

I didn’t care about Tellur at all. I’d put zero effort into saving her. She’d just happened to be in the room next door when I’d gone looking for Ms. Ether.

“Sorry. It’s true—I’ve got no right to criticize you.”

An earnest apology from Dolla felt so unnatural that it sent a chill down my spine. But it wasn’t the time for apologies, and it wasn’t what I wanted to hear.

I waited, but Dolla didn’t speak again. It seemed he was done criticizing me.

*I’ve had enough of him.*

“Just go see Tellur. I’ll tell you where Carol is, and you can pay her a visit too. Just make sure any gift you give her isn’t food.”

“All right. I’ll do that.”

“Show him the way,” I told the woman who’d led him to us.

“P-Please follow me.” She looked afraid as she offered to guide Dolla.

The two of them left the room.

Myalo wasn’t pleased with me. “Yuri, you shouldn’t have spoken to Dolla like that. I feel sorry for him.”

“You feel sorry for *him*? That bastard hit me full force.” I rubbed my cheek. It was still hurting.

“Yes, but you kicked him in a sensitive area.”



“I was careful not to crush anything.”

He'd be in some pain for a while, but I knew his balls would be fine. A cracked tooth, on the other hand, would never heal. False teeth did exist, but they were made using real ones extracted from corpses. The thought alone creeped me out.

“You were? It didn't look that way.”

That figured. *It's hard to tell when you don't have any of your own.*

I decided to change the subject. “More importantly, we need to provide Ho Company with money for all those guns we're importing. If we don't do something, Lyrica's going to have that lender touching her again.”

Naturally, I didn't intend to make Ho Company foot the bill for the guns. The kingdom would be paying for them along with the cost of shipping. The accounting involved was tedious, but delaying it wouldn't be fair to Lyrica.

“As always, you're a soft touch when women are involved, Yuri.” Myalo spoke like she'd read my mind.

“You're talking to the man who burned those witches alive.”

I'd gained a reputation among the common people for showing no mercy toward women.

“I mean when it involves a woman who's on your side,” Myalo corrected herself.

I felt like I was being criticized. “I don't think I'm soft. I just don't get angry with women because I know they won't get violent with me.” *Carol did slap me that one time, but that was too long ago to count.*

“If you truly consider Carol your wife, then perhaps you should save your kindness for her.”

“That's what this is about? It's because I said she's my wife?”

“N-No... I'm just saying you shouldn't be too soft. If Lyrica was a man, you wouldn't feel the same, would you?”

*If Lyrica was a man...? Wait, what? Am I supposed to imagine how I'd feel if a*

*male Lyrica got touched up by the moneylender?* It was a frightening thought—all the more so when I imagined the fight it could've caused. *I'd help him out however I could. No one should have to deal with that.*

"I'd still want to help, because I know how threatened men feel when another man gets too close. The girls at the Cultural Academy have no idea," I answered.

"That's not what I meant. Imagine the lender was a woman."

"Oh, like an unwanted approach from an old woman? Yeah, I'd just let him handle it on his own."

"Old woman? No, I didn't mean... Anyway, the point is you'd handle it differently."

"Yeah, that's true." *I'd tell him it was his problem, not mine.*

"Which means you're soft when it comes to women."

"Maybe. But that's because there are different attitudes toward men and women's bodies."

"No, that's not what I meant either. Let's forget it. Lyrica's case was a bad example."

*What am I missing?* "I don't get what you're trying to say."

"I'm saying you don't always have to go out of your way to be kind to women. Forget it."

With that, Myalo left the room, seemingly angry at me.

*She's been touchy with me ever since that incident with Luida. I wonder why.*

4

# The Great Continent's West Area

Imperial Year 2320  
Reverent Year 2020



## Intermission — A Meeting in Andahl

Angelica Sacramento was in the Tyrelme Holy Empire's capital city of Andahl. She'd been summoned there by her brother, Alfred Sacramento.

All of the nobles who directly served the imperial Sacramento family were gathered in a meeting room in Andahl's castle with Angelica Sacramento among them.

*My brother looks so old,* Angelica thought while looking at him.

Although he was no older than thirty, his brown hair had gained flecks of gray. The heavy responsibility of running the empire may have taken its toll on him, or perhaps it was a symptom of the intense pressure he'd faced during his fight for the imperial crown. It was baldness, rather than graying, that ran in the family. If this was the state of his hair already, then the future of his head looked bleak.

"I've gathered you all here to discuss our participation in the next crusade," Alfred said.

There was some alarm among some of the less-informed members of the gathering.

Ange, naturally, was unsurprised. She'd learned of the upcoming crusade some time ago. As Alfred shared further details, she half listened to ensure they were consistent with what she already knew, but much of her attention was given to the view outside the window.

Andahl. Outside the window, she could see several ports—which had been dug into the side of the major river—branching out of the water. The ships moored there were just as big as those found in port towns by the sea. When the wind was strong, ships could raise their sails and move against the river, and even on windless days, it was relatively easy to go against the flow thanks to horses and oxen that could tow vessels from a road that ran alongside the river. Since the city was far enough inland to avoid the risk of piracy, this section of

the river was a key component of the nation's transport network.

Andahl wasn't the historical capital of the Tyrelme Holy Empire. In the empire's early days, a city known as Altima within Ange's territory had been the nation's capital. The history of the imperial capital was linked to that of the imperial family.

The Sacramenta family were outsiders, in a sense, because their ancestors were from a region with no connection to Tyrelme at all. Long ago, back when most adherents of Yeesusism had belonged to the Carulgi sect, a nation considered the home of the sect known as the Carulginion Empire had attacked the Tyrelme region, which had just been a gathering of small independent nations at that point. The region's rulers had been in a panic as defeat seemed inevitable. It was then that they had considered uniting as a single nation by appointing someone from the Papal State as their emperor.

The Papal State had sent them a member of the imperial family of the Xurxes Holy Empire, which had long since passed the peak of its prosperity. The Holy Empire had fallen after a war that had centered around the sacred body of Yeesus. Fortunately, the imperial family hadn't been wiped out completely. One of their descendants had survived, and at the time, he had been working as a fisherman in a small seaside village in the Papal State. That fisherman was Angelica Sacramenta's ancestor, Leon Sacramenta.

Leon had been brought to the Tyrelme region, given the title of emperor—he hadn't dared resume the title of holy emperor—and made the head of state. But he'd been a ruler in name only. That was to say, the Sacramenta family had been a figurehead with no real authority. Despite establishing an imperial family, the existing nobles had wanted to retain as much power as possible. To that end, a system had been established in which emperors were chosen by hereditary prince-electors, giving the nobles considerable power over the imperial family.

Leon's first act had been to negotiate with the ruling nobles for control over a small, remote town, to which he gave a new, grandiose name. That name was "Altima," meaning "supremacy." Ange now considered that town her home. Industry there was poor and transport links limited, but the peculiar geography meant the mornings were frequently misty, which had led to noble rot wine

becoming a local delicacy with high profit margins.

Leon had later found success fighting against the Shanti people and expanded his territory. His successors had then expanded the nation's borders even farther. The capital then had to be relocated when it was decided that the imperial territory also needed to grow in accordance with the nation. Andahl, therefore, had been made the empire's new capital.

Ange's elder brother, Alfred Sacramenta, had been speaking at length about things she already knew, but eventually, he began to wrap up. "...And so I've decided that we too will participate in the sixteenth crusade."

One of the nobles in attendance spoke up. "I hope I'm not being premature, but should we prepare to move settlers?"

It was a sensible suggestion. Land had no meaning unless people were living there. The land they claimed would be vacant and useless until people were relocated.

If a call for settlers was put out, the typical volunteers would be third and fourth sons from farming families. In general, they'd either be unemployed or from a family that struggled to feed them. These initial volunteers would inevitably form all-male households. As the settlers grew self-sufficient, people would come from the cities to arrange marriages, and then single women, who were otherwise thought too old to marry, would be sent to the settlement. That was the general process for establishing a new population.

Willing settlers became increasingly numerous during the peace between crusades, giving the populace the potential to expand its reach. Since a mere two years had passed since the last crusade, gathering volunteers was likely to prove difficult. It was one of the reasons for the time left between each crusade.

To make matters worse, these new settlements were being built in progressively poorer environments. After capturing territory in the relatively warm regions in the south, all that was left were cold, frigid lands where even wine was liable to freeze.

The people of the Peninsula Kingdom to the south didn't need tools to survive, because they could dive into the sea to catch fish. Unfortunately, this

wasn't possible in the harsher northern regions. Survival depended on tools and ingenuity. For example, settlers would need axes in order to gather enough firewood to survive the winter. They didn't have the privilege of fertile lands where wheat would simply grow wherever the seed was sown. A stable livelihood required a deep understanding of the land, knowledge of the beasts living in the forests, and consideration of the climate.

In addition, since many settlers were penniless and uneducated, they relied upon the state to provide their initial funding. This could be offered in the form of a loan to be recovered later, but it created a significant expense in the short term.

"We won't be ready to settle people for some time," Alfred replied. "But there's no getting out of it. The Papal State is eager to begin. If we remain as spectators, we'll be left behind. There won't be a chance to join in later."

"Yes, quite so. No good can come of letting the opportunity pass us by."

The noble who'd replied was one of Alfred's yes-men, but he wasn't wrong. Even bare land was worth grabbing when the chance arose—it wasn't as though it would rot while it was left unused. If they failed to do so now, they wouldn't be able to put settlers there later.

"We'll have to dispatch our troops quickly this time, so I want to form a supply plan as a matter of urgency. You will all report the content of your granaries, army food stores, and so on. We may need everything we have."

"Yes, Your Majesty!" everyone replied in unison, with the exception of Ange, who merely moved her mouth along with the others.

"This will likely be the last crusade. We may struggle to keep up because it's all happening so fast, but other nations will have the same problem. Our nation's location does at least give us an advantage. We mustn't squander it."

"Once this is over, we'll be entering an era of peace," one of the nobles added. "This may be our final chance to secure more land."

Ange wasn't so sure. Human nations were always looking for new enemies, both at home and abroad.

An end to crusades would leave the nations of Yeesusdom without a common

enemy. The closest heretical state would be the Korlan Dragon Empire, but that was a large nation with a powerful army. Unlike the Shanti states, Korlan was strong enough to defend its land from invaders. Their soldiers wouldn't fall like grass reaped from a meadow, and any conquest would likely cost far too much to be considered profitable.

Until a common enemy was found, the nations of Yeesusdom would likely fight one another. In particular, the scattered patchwork of small territories known as the Yeesusism City-states Region had long been united by a common enemy, ensuring that the region was free from internal conflict. It wouldn't take much to destabilize a region like that, however. They'd only managed to maintain the peace so long because there hadn't been any external threats.

In the past, a little pressure on such a region had resulted in the rapid formation of a new state known as the Galilee Union, which had since grown into a large nation with enough power to threaten the Tyrelme Holy Empire.

The end of the crusades would pave the way for a new era in which the nations of Yeesusdom fought each other. Ange could see it coming.

"Angelica, I sense you have something to say." Alfred's voice reached Ange at her faraway location at the very bottom of the table.

"If I were to comment, it would be on the witch rebellion that the Papal State claims to have incited. I feel it may be worth investigating further. In several communications from the Papal State, we were asked to form a crusade force that would land in the royal capital. Recent communications, however, speak of a straightforward invasion. It would appear something hasn't gone according to plan." Ange raised this concern despite knowing she was wasting her breath.

"Hah... I don't know how you can be so fearful. Last time, two enemy nations stood together and lost. We're certain to win against one nation alone."

As always, Alfred chose to ridicule Ange rather than listen to what she said. Though it was her competence, not her words, that he truly wanted to cast doubt on. The idea was to leave Ange no chance of gaining support from others. The whole reason he'd summoned her was for the sake of embarrassing her.

Rather than try to defend herself, Ange simply conceded. "My apologies, dear brother. I defer to your superior insight."



Alfred's annoyance was clear on his face. Ange had never gotten along with him, even as a young child.

"We'll conclude for today," Alfred said, bringing the meeting to an end. "Angelica, you'll come to my office."



"Hello, dear brother."

Ange was visiting Alfred's office upon his request. Her outfit was a masculine ensemble that commanded respect. Although she didn't hide the presence of her breasts, she wore slacks instead of a skirt.

"What were you talking about earlier?" Alfred asked irritably.

His ire was nothing new—Ange's very existence offended him.

He longed to assassinate her, but Ange refused to touch any food or drink inside this castle, and he couldn't openly draw a weapon on her. Alfred's reputation would be irreparably damaged if word got out that he'd killed his little sister ten years his junior. Not only was it contemptible to kill one's own flesh and blood, he'd be deemed a pathetic coward for considering her a threat.

Therefore, as much as he wanted her dead, he couldn't risk being blamed for it. The previous crusade should've been the perfect chance. The people of the region spoke a different tongue, and anything could have happened on the battlefield. And yet he hadn't found an opportunity.

"I spoke the truth," Ange replied. "We know that their plan was to incite a rebellion, but I doubt that the rebellion succeeded."

"Does that matter? No, it clearly doesn't."

Alfred must have been confident that the enemy would succumb to superior numbers regardless, but the history of the Tyrelme region suggested there was reason for caution. Before the empire's formation, the combined forces of the Tyrelme region had been seventy percent higher in number than those of the invading Carulginion army, and yet they had been defeated in an instant. And it hadn't been just once or twice either—it was only after five successive defeats, with the region on the verge of total subjugation, that the Papal State had

finally stepped in. With a stronger enemy at their backs, the Carulginion Empire had been forced to withdraw, unable to focus on the weaklings of Tyrelme.

“Superior numbers” was an incantation with the power to inspire confidence and complacency in any fool who lacked a proper understanding of war. The reality should’ve been obvious to anyone who paid attention. A strong worker with a hearty breakfast could swing his axe hard enough to fell a tree, while a starving worker would feel dizzy the moment he lifted the axe. But both men were equal in terms of numbers. Likewise, there could never be a simple proportional relationship between troop count and war potential. The former was just a number, while the latter was an intangible concept.

“I believe it matters. We know the enemy has at least one exceptional individual. Such a person could use the disruption within their nation to rise higher. We shouldn’t assume that the same fools are still in charge. The rebellion isn’t certain to have weakened them.”

A man named Yuri Ho lived in Shiyalta. Ange had learned all she could about him after facing him in battle.

Of all the Catholica states, the Euphos Federation had proved the best place to gather information about him. Yuri Ho had amassed his own fleet of ships, seemingly without the involvement of the rest of the Ho family, which he used to conduct frequent trade with the Albio Republic. Since Albio and Euphos were enemies, Euphos had numerous spies concealed there. This had created a pathway for intelligence which had reached Ange.

Since Altima didn’t generate sufficient tax revenues to fund an intelligence network made up of numerous spies, Ange had needed to learn what she could through her personal connections. She regularly visited the Euphos Federation to discuss the trade of wine, giving her opportunities to exchange intelligence at social gatherings.

“People of exceptional talent exist in any nation. But how can he help the Shanti forces now? They can’t withstand a crusade, no matter what clever tricks they try.”

“I’m not so sure. There was one Shanti who hindered the previous crusade significantly. I’m talking about the one who burned all the Papal State’s supplies

and killed the dragon.”

“What of him?!” Alfred asked angrily. He rose from his chair, as if ready to lambast Ange, but then sat down again. “That’s a woman’s way of thinking. You all fixate on one thing and fail to see the bigger picture. Even if some exceptional individual *did* use the rebellion as a chance to gain power, the crusade force wouldn’t give him time to prepare. It won’t even be half a year before the next war begins. These concerns of yours are irrelevant.”

Alfred may have been right. Ange might have been overly fixated on Yuri Ho ever since he’d defeated her in battle. Then again, Alfred had never faced him.

While Epitaph Palazzo had suffered an embarrassing defeat at Yuri Ho’s hands, followed by a grueling journey back to safety, Alfred had enjoyed the greatest success imaginable as he’d claimed the royal capital Reforme. He’d achieved this magnificent victory without having to face Yuri Ho at all. If he’d actually seen the devilish strategies that Yuri Ho could employ, he might have shared Ange’s concerns.

“I’m merely saying that we should be careful.”

Ange could’ve tried harder to make Alfred understand her reasoning, but she wasn’t obligated to do so. As Alfred said, this idea of Yuri Ho assuming power was nothing more than wild speculation. Whatever talent or genius he might have, he wasn’t all-powerful. He could die as easily as anyone. The circumstances of her father’s death had taught Ange that fact of life all too well.

Indeed, if Epitaph Palazzo had orchestrated a conspiracy within Shiyalta, his hatred for Yuri Ho would have made him a primary target for elimination. He might even be dead already.

“How old is this exceptional man you’re talking about?”

“He’s twenty at most.”

“Hah. What can a mere youngster do? Sadly for him, he was born too late.”

Ange felt that Alfred’s remark was also a jab at her. It was because of her late birth and young age that she’d been excluded from the battle for the imperial throne. Now, with just ten years between them, there was no hope of Alfred growing senile while she was still capable of seizing the throne for herself.

“You may be right. As your retainer, I felt obliged to share my concern with you, but you need pay me no mind.”

“Keep your concerns to yourself next time. No one asked for your opinion.”

Ange remembered Alfred’s exact words: “Angelica, I sense you have something to say.” It was hard to interpret that as anything *other* than an invitation for her to share her opinion, but she knew better than to argue.

“Please pardon my rudeness.” Ange lowered her head in a display of humility.

“I received a request for your hand in marriage from the Euphos Federation. Again. Get married already.”

That was the price she paid to gain intelligence. Ange was attractive, even in her own estimation. She often received proposals from young men who’d mistaken the intent of her interest in their words.

“I decline.”

“Tsk... Then get lost somewhere. You’re an eyesore.”

“As you wish.” Ange bowed her head briefly before turning around.

“Wait,” he called to her from behind.

When Ange turned to face Alfred once more, he threw an envelope at her from the opposite side of his desk. It fluttered in the air for a second, then dropped futilely to the ground.

“Write the refusal letter yourself. I’m tired of doing it.”

“As you wish.”

Ange had to crouch down to pick up the piece of parchment. Then, as she rose, she felt something touch her—the cold weight of a sword resting flat on her shoulder.

The weapon was in Alfred’s hand.

“Dear brother, you jest.” Ange continued to rise, even with the blade against her shoulder.

The two stood there silent for a time. Alfred merely had to slide the sharp blade sideways and it would slice open Ange’s neck, leaving him with one less

problem. But Ange knew he wouldn't do it.

Alfred's disgraceful conduct during the contest for the throne had gained him too much notoriety. The assassination of their eldest brother was somewhat understandable—the two had been rival contenders, after all. The murder of their other brother, however, had been less forgivable. At the tender age of twelve—he'd been five years younger than Ange—the boy had been too young to have any real ambitions. Nothing had suggested he'd coveted the throne. Alfred was, therefore, the heartless emperor who'd murdered his own little brother out of pure cowardice. It was a reputation he still couldn't erase.

As for Ange, she prided herself on being popular among the people, and she knew she'd proved herself a capable regional ruler who maintained a strong government. At the same time, she kept her claws well hidden so that no one would accept the idea that she was aiming to claim the throne for herself. At the very least, Alfred couldn't kill her in his office.

In the end, Alfred pulled his sword away. "Hmph..."

"Now, if I may be excused." Ange turned around and left the room.

She closed the door, passed the knights standing guard outside, and walked down the corridor. Once she was some distance away, she stopped and waited until her trusted subordinate, Gustave, came to her side.

"Lady Ange, you're unharmed?" he asked with some concern. To him, this place was practically an enemy's lair.

"I'm fine. He only threatened me."

Ange had just caught a glimpse of Alfred's mental distress. It was an ailment unique to those who murdered their own family members to gain the throne.

Put simply, Alfred constantly worried that Ange would someday kill him. Having assassinated his siblings himself, he found it easy to imagine that Ange was plotting the same. Ange had never sent an assassin after Alfred. Nonetheless, in his mind, he and his sister were constantly trying to kill or outmaneuver each other.

She didn't know the finer details of her brother's mental state, but she knew he had an irrational fear of his food being poisoned. For a long time, he'd

refused to eat anything but cold meals. He'd been emperor for three years, and not once had any of his food tasters died from poisoning, but that wasn't enough to stop him from worrying about the next meal.

"Would you like to return home now?" Gustave asked.

"We'll visit the city, then leave. This place gives me the creeps."

She wanted to get far away as quickly as possible, but a trip into the city wouldn't take long.

The region was known for its wines, so they began by visiting a wine seller to purchase a few highly rated bottles. They loaded those into their carriage.

It was occasionally necessary to visit tailors here, since Altima lacked anyone capable of making formal wear fit for imperial family members, but Ange wasn't in need of clothing at that moment.

The final task was to visit her favorite bookshop. She was greeted by a wrinkled old shopkeeper in spectacles the moment she entered.

"Oh, Miss Angelica. It's been a while."

Ange relaxed the moment she heard the old man's hoarse voice. It wasn't clear whether he knew of Ange's high birth, but he treated her like any other customer. That had always put her mind at ease.

"Sorry that I haven't visited in so long. Got anything good for me?"

"Yes, some Shanish books. I kept them to one side for you."

The shopkeeper disappeared into a back room for a while, then reappeared with two bundles.

"These and these," he said, placing the stacks down.

The two piles were composed of five books each and bound by string. Judging by the titles written on the spines, they were interesting collections.

"Is one gold coin enough?" she asked.

"Yes, indeed."

Ange placed the coin down on the counter.

Ten books written in Terolish would've fetched far more than a single gold coin, but it was still a high price compared to what others paid for Shanish books bought in bulk.

Shanish books were usually sold to specialist dealers who'd destroy their contents. Since parchment could be reused once the old text was scraped off, enterprising individuals would hire nimble-fingered paupers to clean the sheets. The old text would remain faintly visible, making the pages unsuitable for holy texts, but it was good enough for use in merchants' ledgers.

"Thanks. If you get any more, please keep them for me." When Ange raised her hand as a signal, a knight who'd been waiting outside the store entered to carry the books away. "Anything else interesting?"

"Hmmm. Do you have a copy of the holy book at home, Miss Angelica?"

"Of course I do."

Altima was poor, but not so poor they couldn't afford a holy book for the castle. As minor as her territory was, she was a ruler.

"Oh... Then perhaps you won't be interested, but this is new."

The shopkeeper placed a single book down on the counter. It was a rather plain thing with "Holy Book" written in large, unassuming letters on the cover. Below that was written "A Terolish translation with commentary."

"The pages are made of plant paper, but I can offer you it very cheaply."

"Hmm..."

Ange assumed that the dull cover was another reason for the low price. She didn't collect holy books, and even if she did, this drab thing wouldn't look impressive on a shelf. She had no interest in buying it. She was, however, glad to see that the book was cheaply available for commoners to buy. Having such a book at home was an important way for people to express their faith.

"How much do you charge for them?" she asked.

"Seven silvers a copy."

*Just seven?* Given that a holy book written on parchment could easily fetch a hundred silvers, that was surprisingly cheap.

“Isn’t that a little low? Is it preowned?” she asked.

“No, brand new. Take a look.”

The shopkeeper flicked through the pages of the book. Just as he’d said, there wasn’t any sort of discoloration or wear on the pages—it looked brand new.

The first letter of each page was the only one with any decoration, while the rest all looked alike. The overall assembly was dull compared to most holy books.

Upon closer inspection, Ange realized there was something odd about the letters—they were so similar that it was as if they’d all been created with stamps. It was likely that some sort of printing method had been used to reduce the labor required. Even so, the letters shouldn’t have been so uniformly spaced. They were also so cleanly printed that it was easier to read than handwritten text. The only problem was that the array of perfectly identical letters was a little unsettling to look at.

The bottom third of each page was ruled off from the rest, creating space for commentary. Ange had never seen a holy book complete with notes on its interpretation. The right to interpret scripture belonged solely to the clergy, and clergy members provided that interpretation orally within churches. It was an interesting idea.

“Do you mind if I read a little?”

“Not at all.”

Ange left the book on the counter as her eyes scanned over the pages. She quickly realized that this wasn’t the same translation she had in her own library.

Her parchment holy book back in Altima was, of course, the certified translation. The familiar translation certainly wasn’t bad, but there was something beautiful about this version. Like poetry, each passage flowed with rhyme and rhythm. The writer had also avoided any stiff prose, making the scenes and stories captivating. Despite the new composition, the sentences were clear and remained faithful to their original meaning. It was the same content that Ange knew from the certified translation, yet it flowed so well that she felt it might sound like a song if she read it aloud.



*Did a woman translate this?* Ange wondered. “This...isn’t the certified translation.”

“You’re quite right. I imagine it’s to get around the rule that says copies of the certified translation can only be produced in monasteries.”

That made sense. Almost every copy of the holy book in circulation had been at least in part produced by a monastery.

Part of a monastery worker’s job was to create copies of the holy book. The process involved writing as they read the text, which meant studying, working, and generating money for the monastery all at once. It was three birds with one stone.

Since monasteries in remote regions could generate more revenue by farming crops for use in wines and liqueurs, holy books were only produced in cities that lacked fields.

Some monasteries had members renowned for their creativity, and the holy books that bore their names would sell for a high price. Such works were bound with gorgeous covers, the first letter of each page gilded, and the margins of each page filled with beautiful illustrations.

“Hmmm. But this... It doesn’t look like the work of a fraudster. Whoever produced this translation has to be considerably well educated,” Ange mused.

“Sounds like you rate it highly. I can’t judge the quality of the translation myself because I don’t understand Totish.”

“I can’t read Totish either.”

Totish was the ancient language originally used to write the holy book. It was difficult to learn because of its excessively complicated grammar. Study of the language had actually been such a burden that even clergy members were no longer encouraged to learn it and hadn’t been since long ago. It was just that difficult.

“The commentary’s quite enlightening, so I thought you might benefit from buying it if your purse allows. It’s certainly easier to understand than the sermons the church provides.”

“I see... Well, if it’s only seven silvers, I might as well take a copy.” Ange took the coins from her purse and placed them on the counter.

“Thank you, as always.”

Ange closed the book, then opened the cover to examine the page beneath it. She hoped to learn more about the book’s origin. It began abruptly with a table of contents—there was no record of the time or place of production.

She chuckled to herself when she noticed that there was also a space left empty for a book curse. A book curse was a passage of text, usually written on the underside of the cover, intended to offend anyone who stole the book. The standard one read, “A curse upon the one who steals this book, borrows it without returning it, or buys it while knowing it to be stolen. May a thousand nails impale you that you die as blood drips from a thousand holes.” Books like fairy tales often placed it in the back, so as not to ruin the mood.

At any rate, it was no wonder that the owner was left to write a curse themselves if they felt the need—it would surely lose its effect if it was created by stamped letters, rather than written by hand. Still, it was amusing to see that there was a little box, complete with a border, as a space for a book curse.

Since the front cover lacked any information, Ange wondered whether the rear might prove more fruitful. She turned the book over, and there it was. The final page read as follows:

Year of publication: 2020

Publisher: Hellet Monastery, Ralgolanko Island

Translation provided by Catholica Patera Wichita

Once again, Ange was amused. She knew that an illegal publication like this one wouldn’t provide honest details, but she hadn’t expected something so tongue-in-cheek.

Ralgolanko was a real place that existed in the northern part of the Xur Peninsula, but it certainly wasn’t on an island. It had strong ties to Catholica Wichita. While there’d once been a school of sorts there—known as Ralgolanko

Temple—it was now associated with a saint and was the location of a famous church known as Ralgolanko Church.

She didn't know that Patera had been Catholica Wichita's baptized name, but that too was amusing. Patera the Southward Saint was known for sailing south to spread his religion during the high disciples' days of wandering. He was the patron saint of sailors and anyone who faced political persecution. The name was given to many children baptized during infancy, but it didn't suit Catholica Wichita at all. He was known for searching for the holy body of Yeesus, but he wasn't generally associated with political persecution of any kind.

"This should make for interesting reading. If you get any more Shanish books, put some copies aside for me."

Ange closed the book and put it under her arm. Now that her business was finished, it was time to return to Altima.

"I will. I hope to see you again," the shopkeeper replied lazily from his chair.

## Chapter 5 — Survivors and the Dead

I

The Bof family was comparatively new among chieftains.

Bof Province had been established about two hundred years prior, and up until that point, it had belonged to another chieftain family known as Mulan. The then head of that family had been named Aaron Mulan—a spirited man who had liked to boast of his frank and openhearted nature.

The queen of the time had been a narrow-minded woman with close ties to the witches who despised masculine culture.

The two had once gotten into an argument at a banquet held in the royal castle. The story was that Aaron Mulan had enjoyed a song by a minstrel performing at the banquet so much that he'd let himself get far too drunk. The queen had then reprimanded him for his rowdy behavior, but she'd taken it too far and greatly offended him.

What had followed was an argument between the pair that had left the banquet's attendees aghast. Since there hadn't been a member of the royal family capable of mediation between those two powerful figures in those days, Aaron Mulan had returned to his territory in the north filled with indignation.

The queen had later dispatched a royal sword to the Mulan household in an attempt to assassinate their head of family. When the attempt had failed, Aaron Mulan had raised an army, marched south, and crushed the royal guard out in the fields. His attempt to rush the royal capital had succeeded, but he hadn't been able to breach Royal Castle Island's defenses.

The Noza family had reacted promptly, crossing the mountains while Aaron Mulan was still trying to take the island.

Since the Mulan army had already been weakened from the battle with the royal guard, Aaron Mulan had decided to pin his hopes on a kingeagle strike

rather than risk another battle. He'd taken to his eagle in an attempt to breach the royal castle.

With Royal Castle Island on high alert and filled with soldiers who'd taken refuge, he'd known his chances of success were slim. Indeed, he'd failed and been killed on the island by the royal guard.

The Mulan family had then been stripped of its power, and the Noza family awarded a Sun Star Medal for their services.

Despite the bad decisions made near the end, the Mulan family had governed their territory well, and they'd been popular among their people. Moreover, the family's defeat in battle had been so swift that their territory had remained completely unaffected. Many of those who'd lived under the Mulan family's care were left with a grudge against the royal family.

After much negotiation, the younger brother of the Noza family's head was given permission to start his own branch family and take control of Mulan Province in recognition of his great achievements. To appease the people of the province, the first head of the new branch family agreed to wed the youngest daughter of the Mulan family, such that the Mulan bloodline would continue. The family that formed was given the name Bof.

A little of the northern part of the Mulan family's former territory was given to the Rube family, and a little from the south became part of the royal territory, but most of it became Bof Province.

Whether this was all to the benefit of the Noza family was difficult to say. Later generations of the Noza family continued to look down on the Bof family as a mere offshoot, and three generations later, the situation reached a climax. Their fierce rivalry led to a worsening of relations. For three generations, they'd maintained close ties through intermarriage, but this practice was abandoned entirely. After that, they became two completely unrelated families.

But that was all in the distant past.

## II

The current head of the Bof family, Orone Bof, was in the royal castle.

Several days earlier, he'd received a letter in Carol Flue Shaltl's name. It had dictated that he come at once to renew his vow of vassalage unless his loyalty now lay with Carla Flue Shaltl. He'd had no option but to agree.

As a precaution, he'd arrived in the royal capital the night before his scheduled appearance and stayed in his own residence. He'd hoped to learn more about the Ho family's attitude toward him before his visit, but his efforts had been fruitless—the messenger he'd sent out had failed to return.

He'd been permitted to keep five of his escorts with him inside the castle.

"This is the room. I'd like to ask that the knights escorting you go no further," the maid guiding him said.

Orone grew fearful. "But why—"

The maid cut him off as she opened the door. "There is no one other than His Excellency Yuri Ho and a secretary in the room."

Peering inside, he saw that she was right. Orone entered.

The door closed firmly behind him.

The small room contained a large, perfectly square table with four legs, across which sat Yuri Ho. The boy looked as young as ever—and young he was. Strictly speaking, he was still a student of the Knight Academy.

Beside him stood someone with short hair—presumably the secretary. He judged that the secretary was male, but he couldn't be quite sure.

"Sir Yuri, I hope you're in good spirits," Orone said.

He wasn't sure of Yuri Ho's current status. His title might have been prince consort or lord-supreme. All that was certain was that he'd assumed control of the Ho family while he was still a student.

"Sit down," Yuri Ho said sternly.

"Y-Yes. As you wish." Orone obeyed and took a seat.

It was an ill-mannered way for someone so young to address an elder, but Orone wasn't angry. Perhaps it was because he knew he'd wronged Yuri Ho.

"First, read this," Yuri Ho said curtly.

The secretary took a sheet of parchment from Yuri Ho and slid it along the table to Orone.

The nature of Orone's betrayal was written right there. It was the secret contract with the witches, which also bore his signature. He'd prayed that the evidence would become lost forever amid the chaos, but now he knew that the witches had allowed it to fall into the Ho family's hands.

Orone repeated the line he'd rehearsed in advance. "I have no recollection of this."

The secretary left Yuri Ho's side and slowly walked over to the door. Orone thought they were perhaps going to fetch tea, but they locked the door and returned to their previous position.

"Really...? Well, it doesn't matter."

"Indeed it doesn't. I've never seen this," Orone said. "Rest assured that Orone Bof and the chieftain family he hails from fight for the royal family now and always."

Orone hadn't been caught off guard when confronted with the contract. He'd seen this coming because he knew it bore his signature. He'd discussed the issue with the wisest of his close associates, who'd talked through the likely outcomes with him. Ultimately, they'd concluded that Yuri Ho couldn't afford to make an enemy of the Bof family, and Orone had agreed. With a crusade force soon to arrive, the contract meant little. It was obvious that the Bof family's assistance would be needed in the war. No good could come of a conflict between them.

"It doesn't matter, because the Bof family is finished," Yuri Ho said coldly.

"Wh-What do you mean?"

"Is a man who'd form such an agreement with witches worthy of commanding knights? I don't think so."

Orone slammed his fist on the table and stood up. "What are you saying?!"

He wasn't actually enraged. In situations like this, he liked to make an outward display of anger while rising to his feet. In his thirty years as head of

the Bof family, he'd found this trick could remedy almost any situation.

"Shut up and sit down," Yuri Ho said.

"You've no right." Orone placed his palm on the parchment and crushed it. He thrust out the crumpled sheet and yelled, "I've never seen this parchment! Do you know who I am?! How dare the Ho family show the Bof family such disrespect?!"

"Shut up. Listen to what I'm about to say."

"This parchment..." Orone tore it into four pieces and threw them into his mouth. Once they were wet with his saliva, he forced himself to swallow. The contract disappeared with a loud gulp. "...never existed. This discussion is over."

"Are you really that stupid?"

Yuri Ho shot a glance at his secretary, who handed him a new sheet. He placed it down on the table. It was perfectly identical to the parchment Orone had just swallowed.

Orone's mouth hung open.

"You think I'd give you the original? I wasn't born yesterday," Yuri Ho said in disbelief.

"Uhh..." Orone opened his mouth to argue, but no words came out. Try as he might, he couldn't form a sentence.

"Now listen." Yuri Ho's expression hadn't changed the whole time. He was looking at Orone as if he was a speck of dirt. "If you'll voluntarily relinquish the title of lord-supreme and hand back the province that the royal family placed in your care, your family can continue as minor landowners. I'll give you a territory large enough to keep three other families in your service."

Orone wasn't about to accept such a ridiculous proposal from a Knight Academy student several decades his junior. "This is an outrage!"

"Fine. Sit back down. It'll make this easier."

"Do you even realize who you're talking to?!" Orone Bof spoke in the same tone he used when scolding his retainers. He always reacted like this when faced with someone who wouldn't agree with him. They all cowered before him



and accepted what he had to say. For him, this was the most natural way of dealing with people. “I’m the Bof family’s—”

“Enough.”

One of Yuri Ho’s hands disappeared from view. His right shoulder dropped a little as his right hand went under the table. Then came a *click*, followed by a *whooshing* sound. A moment later, there was an explosion that threatened to rupture Orone’s eardrums, accompanied by a shock like a kick to his lower abdomen.

“Guh!”

His legs suddenly lost their strength, sending him falling to the floor. He’d been hit in the hanging region of his flabby stomach. He felt a strange burning sensation as blood spilled from him. He touched the area and found a hole.

Yuri Ho got up and approached Orone with a dagger in his hand. “I did tell you to sit.”

“W-Wait! Listen to me!” Orone pleaded as he put pressure against the hole in his abdomen.

But Yuri Ho didn’t stop. His expression remained the same. With the calmness of an experienced cook preparing a chicken, he grabbed Orone by his hair, lifted his jaw, and slid the dagger across his windpipe.

“Guhh!” Orone clutched at his throat as fresh blood gushed out. He felt the warmth of his own lifeblood spray forth in his hands as his consciousness faded.

### III

When the sounds of fighting ceased, I unlocked the door and opened it. Two dead knights lay on the floor.

“Two of them?” I asked.

“Yes, Your Excellency,” a Ho family knight replied. “The other three surrendered.”

“He must’ve been well-liked for someone so flawed.”

Ho family soldiers had been ready to surround the five escorts and demand their surrender when they heard the gunshot. I'd heard them yelling at the knights from inside the room, but only now had I learned that two had chosen to die instead. At the very least, they'd shown devotion to their master until death.

"It was inevitable that some of them would fight," Myalo told me. "They were a chieftain's trusted servants, after all."

"When you put it that way..."

He wouldn't have brought them this far if they weren't the best five men he had. Still, I thought it incredible that some people were willing to fight to the last breath. Unlike the battlefield, where some significant fraction of the soldiers would make it out alive, their deaths had been all but certain. Few people were willing to sacrifice themselves to protect someone.

"Tell Dimitri to ready our forces," I told the knight.

"Yes, Your Excellency!"

"And you," I said to another. "There's an eagle ready to depart. Instruct the rider to head for Rube Province."

"As you command, Your Excellency!"

The knights gave me stiff salutes before running off to perform their errands.

"But will they all surrender as planned?" Myalo wondered aloud.

"Probably."

Sky knights carrying flyers were already in the air. Even if Orone had accepted my offer, I would've still needed to strip the Bof family of all authority. That meant distributing flyers across all of their cities to expose the family's deal with the witches and their betrayal of our kingdom. The eagles had set off just as Orone had entered the castle, so flyers might've already fallen on the nearest towns.

"I think the change to the content was wise," Myalo said.

The flyers explaining the Bof family's betrayal weren't entirely honest. The agreement that the Bof family had with the witches said that up to two

thousand of their retainers would be promised rights equivalent to those of a Kulati. Since the witches were never going to honor that promise, the number could just as well have been twenty thousand or two million. For our purposes, two thousand sounded a little high. If the flyers suggested that the Bof family was also trying to save those closest to them, it might convince some of their retainers to remain loyal. To prevent that, we'd changed the number to two hundred. Even if their retainers realized our deception after they'd surrendered, it would be too late for them.

"The lower their morale, the sooner they'll surrender once surrounded by a large army," I remarked. "Bof Province's cities aren't fortified. The only challenge is going to be Koturah."

Koturah was the provincial capital. From above, it looked like a city built in the middle of a large plain, free from any hills, but the whole thing was surrounded by high walls.

Although there weren't any rivers running through the city, it was apparently so rich in underground water sources that wells provided it with a limitless supply.

One weakness that the city had was the lack of a moat outside the walls. Therefore, it didn't have drawbridges like Royal Castle Island. Instead, the walls protruded outward to form semicylindrical towers on either side of each of the city's two gates. Anyone approaching a gate would be attacked from both towers.

While the gates weren't a pair of doors, they functioned as a barrier that could be raised and lowered. I'd never seen them lowered firsthand, but we'd found annotated drawings of the gates in the royal castle, intended as a reference for anyone attempting to capture Koturah.

Since the Bof family's ancestors—the Mulan family—had rebelled with little warning in the past, there had been a time when the royal family had been distrustful enough of the Bof family to demand that Koturah's gates be removed entirely. They'd been restored a decade later after tensions had cooled, but brand-new structures had been installed rather than the originals. Based on the pictures, they were made from thick pieces of hardwood and

reinforced by an iron lattice for good measure. I couldn't tell how sturdy they were, but I suspected we'd have our work cut out for us trying to destroy them.

"Yes, indeed. Their gates are formidable. I fear we may incur significant losses," Myalo said.

The gates had looked so impressive from above that I had to agree with her.

We needed a plan. A straightforward attack would result in a thousand or so casualties. The best outcome was the Bof family's surrender, but ultimately it would be their decision.

No matter how low morale fell, soldiers defending the city walls would continue to fight. We could surround them on the plain, but they'd feel safe beyond the reach of our spears.

"We've only got two or three months until crusaders get here... Oh, that's right." A good idea had just hit me. "We won't even need to attack."

After some thought, I realized that I had no interest in saving the Bof family or their close associates anyway. If capturing the city posed a dilemma for me, then it would be equally tough for the crusaders. When they showed up with another giant cannon to destroy the fortifications, they'd save me the trouble. It would also delay them big time since they'd have to assemble the cannon on-site.

"Okay, problem solved," I said.

"Huh?"

"We don't have to waste time fighting them. We make them seal their gates, then leave the rest to the crusaders. That's all we have to do."

"You mean by starving them out? Except it won't be starvation that gets them."

"If they won't surrender, we'll wait until the crusaders arrive, abandon them, and withdraw to the royal capital."

That settled it. The Bof family hadn't assembled their army yet, so most of their soldiers would be somewhere outside of Koturah. At most, they'd have two thousand soldiers stationed in the capital. To lay siege to the city, we only

needed to keep watch on their two gates, so it wouldn't require a large army. Making sure the Bof family stayed put for a couple of months would be easy.

"You don't need to come north with me, Myalo. It'll be just me and Dimitri. I'd like you to continue your work cleaning up after the witches in the royal capital."

Myalo nodded. "As you wish."

Calm as she seemed, Myalo was overworked.

Since we didn't have a full-blown three-tier court system, trials concluded after a single swift session. Witches were being handed sentences one after another. With each witch that stood trial, Myalo would investigate—paying informants and sharp-eared street dwellers—to find victims who'd be willing to testify against them. Such witnesses could state their case. A lawyer would then argue against them, and finally, a verdict would be decided.

If Myalo saw any signs of talent in witches who'd committed only minor crimes, she pardoned them and allowed them to return to working in the royal castle. The royal capital still wouldn't be able to charge taxes or manage budgets correctly this year because our bureaucratic systems were in tatters, but there was no avoiding that.

"I'll head north as soon as I've finished one last task here in the royal capital. See you."

Dimitri was a reasonable man, but many soldiers serving the Ho family valued killing above all else. To them, each enemy they disposed of was considered an achievement. I'd have to keep them under control, or else they'd likely indiscriminately kill anyone loyal to the Bof family outside of Koturah.

"What task is that?" Myalo asked.

"I have to visit Ms. Ether."

I hadn't talked to her at all lately. It would be rude of me if I didn't at least say hello.

"Oh. Well, take care. I hear that she's rather popular these days."

*Popular?* "What do you mean?"

“Well...rather than explain, I think you should go see for yourself.”

“Hm? All right. I will.”

I didn’t get it, but I was planning to visit her anyhow.

## IV

I stopped by my family residence to change into my academy uniform. After making sure to hide my face with a hat and an oversized scarf, I walked to the academy.

The streets weren’t dangerous. Ho family soldiers were positioned at regular intervals along the main roads, and patrols regularly passed down the smaller paths. They were all highly trained soldiers with integrity—they wouldn’t try to throw their weight around or extort money from citizens.

There were also commoners outside, who were walking around as normal. An acceptable level of peace and stability had been established, though there was still a sense of unease and distrust in the air as people tried to adjust to their new rulers.

I passed through the academy gate and headed to the school building. Although the Knight Academy was running as normal, I knew all classes would be suspended at the Cultural Academy. The director—Isabeau Marmoset—had been Vivila Marmoset’s elder sister, and she’d been killed during the recent disruption.

It was still unclear what would become of the Knight Academy. It would be home to many of the Bof and Noza family’s followers, and the curriculum was in sore need of an overhaul. A turbulent period of rapid change awaited that might bring a complete end to the Knight Academy, along with its classes on spear combat and outdated battle tactics.

I entered the building where lectures were held and headed for Ms. Ether’s office. When I arrived, however, I found six Cultural Academy students waiting in the corridor.

*What’s going on?* I wondered.

It would've made sense if they were waiting in line, but the students were scattered about. They watched me warily as I approached in my suspicious-looking outfit.

"Excuse me, what are you all doing?" I asked one of the students. "Are you waiting to ask questions?"

"We're waiting for Ms. Ether Vino."

*Waiting for her?*

"You mean she's not here? Then where is she?"

"Where indeed. Maybe try asking politely if you want answers."

*She's touchy.*

I chalked up the student's reaction to tension brewing between the two sides of the academy. There'd always been some hostility, but it must've reached a boiling point because of my tireless efforts to strip the witches of all authority. No doubt a major power shift had occurred within the school, as well.

Since this student looked at least my age, if not a little older, I decided I'd try being more polite. "I'd be grateful if you could tell me where to find Ms. Ether."

"I don't know where she is. That's why I'm waiting here, of course."

*I should've figured that out.* "So I see. Might I ask what business you have with her?"

My best guess was that everyone had questions about Terolish. That was the usual reason people visited her.

"Ms. Ether Vino was one of Yuri Ho's teachers. I'm going to ask her for a letter of recommendation."

"What?" I blurted out before I could stop myself.

*What do I have to do with anything? Ms. Ether certainly was my teacher, but still...*

"What sort of recommendation? I'm one of Yuri Ho's friends, by the way," I quickly added. *I'm the man himself, in fact.*

"A recommendation to spare the life of my grandmother. And the others..."

The girl looked at another student. “Well, we all have our reasons.”

The other student began talking. “My mother sent me here. Our family business is...”

I could see that the situation was complicated—enough that it had made Ms. Ether run and hide. Six people were waiting for her, and they were just the ones outside her office.

“Have any of you taken the Terolish language course?” I asked in Terolish.

“Yes, I have,” one of the girls farthest away replied.

The rest were blank-faced, clearly oblivious to what we were saying.

*Just one...?*

Ms. Ether worked here as a teacher. Anyone who wasn’t taking her lectures shouldn’t have had any business with her. She must’ve been the focus of attention since I hadn’t formed close ties with many others at the Cultural Academy. I could imagine how awkward it must’ve been for her, having unfamiliar students crowding around and asking for her help.

There were tons of people at the Knight Academy with some connection to me because of the expedition, but the Cultural Academy students probably didn’t like going there.

Lilly and Sham would’ve been alternative options, but they’d both fled to the south. That only left the two girls who’d helped me with the printing work. Students were probably going to them for help too, but I couldn’t imagine Pina talking to people about their problems. That just left Komimi. It was as though she was fated to a life of hard work.

“Do you have a question about Terolish?” I asked.

“Yes, but it seems I’ll have to wait in line.”

We continued to talk in Terolish. She was close to being fluent. She’d gone beyond broken speech and reached the point where she could hold everyday conversations.

“What sort of question?”



“This passage of text.”

The girl had a Terolish book with her that she must’ve borrowed from Ms. Ether. I’d already read it myself, so I’d probably be able to help.

I read the passage aloud. “Such violates the precept, but he who forgets compassion cannot follow the will of his master.”

“What precept is it talking about?”

“It’s referring to one of the ten precept hymns. Do you know them?”

“Oh, is it the one about the mendicant priest?”

“That’s right. The hymn of the mendicant order. I get why you’d be confused since it comes up out of nowhere.” *This isn’t exactly easy stuff, is it?*

The book was a collection of comical tales based on Yeesusism’s parables, written with the assumption that the reader was already familiar with the originals. Anyone reading this book first would just find it confusing.

“I get it. Oh, but what about this?” she asked, pointing to a word on the page.

“Nightcap? Oh... You’d better ask Ms. Ether about that one.”

“You don’t understand it?”

“I do, but...it’s hard to explain.”

“That’s all right. Please try me.”

Ms. Ether had looked very uncomfortable when I’d asked her about this same word in the past. Now the same burden had fallen on me. I wished the ink would disappear from the page.

“‘Little nightcap’ is a euphemism,” I began. “You know how prostitutes stuff cotton down there to prevent infections? Well, that’s what it refers to.”

“What?!” The girl shrieked in surprise and slammed the book closed. Her face turned red as if I’d offended her.

*I hope this doesn’t count as sexual harassment.*

“I’m sorry. I really should have left the explanation to Ms. Ether.”

“N-No. It was my fault for asking.” Her face was still red, and her shoulders

were trembling.

It felt like I'd done something immoral. Worrying that I might be mistaken for some kind of pervert if I hung around, I decided to make a quick exit.

"I'm going to go look for Ms. Ether. Good luck with your Terolish studies."



Ms. Ether was sitting and praying on a small mat that she'd spread out on the wooden floor of a humble, unused classroom. It was next to the lecture theater she used for her Terolish course.

These days, there was a dedicated room for Kulatish lectures, but it hadn't always been that way. In the past, there'd be an initial lecture session, followed by a short break, and then we'd come to this room where we could ask questions.

When Ms. Ether heard the door open, she stopped praying and turned to look at me. She rose from the mat and started backing away.

"Um..."

"It's me." I removed the hat and scarf.

"Oh, Yuri?"

"Yes, I came to say hello."

"Oh, I see." Ms. Ether remained in stunned silence, as if she'd never expected me to visit.

I bowed my head. "It seems I've caused you a lot of trouble."

"No, not at all. I've been perfectly fine."

Ms. Ether had been arrested by the second order on the night of the assassination and confined along with Tellur. After I'd made contact with Tillet, I'd asked her to determine Ms. Ether's whereabouts. Having guessed that the witches were in league with the crusaders, I'd known they'd target her.

After gathering intelligence in the royal capital, Tillet had learned that Ms. Ether had been arrested, just as I'd expected. The heavy security placed around her had made it difficult to rescue her immediately. Since the witches were

treating her well, we'd decided not to attempt a risky extraction. Instead, we'd waited for her to be moved out of the royal capital where her escorts would be more vulnerable to attack. However, the royal capital had fallen before the witches had had time to transfer Ms. Ether anywhere.

"Did you come here alone?" Ms. Ether asked. "It's dangerous for someone as important as yourself."

That felt a little rich coming from her.

"That goes for both of us. I needed to come back to see how things were at the Cultural Academy too. I would've had to step in if the girls were being mistreated."

I took a seat near Ms. Ether as I spoke. Like everything else in this unused classroom, it was a little dusty.

Ms. Ether, likewise, picked up her mat from the floor and put it down on a bench before sitting on it.

"Were you unharmed when they captured you? You weren't injured or..."

"I'm fine. Even while I was imprisoned, the room they kept me in was very comfortable."

Ms. Ether had been taken to the royal castle, and the guest rooms they had there were probably a lot finer than her own home—though she had the money to live somewhere just as nice if she wanted from the royalties we paid her for the holy book.

"I see. Well, that's good to hear."

"I know things have been difficult for you too, Yuri. Your parents were... I-I don't know what to say..." Ms. Ether looked as though she was genuinely grieving with me.

"Yes, well..." I didn't want to bring the mood down, so I quickly changed the subject. "I went to your office looking for you. There were six students waiting outside."

"Yes, I've been rather busy lately."

"I think all of this trouble is because of me. I'm sorry."

“Not at all. Though I don’t know why people keep appearing even when I refuse them. I feel bad, because some people still come to me with questions about Terolish. The problem is, when I try to help them, dozens of other students start lining up.”

Ms. Ether put her hand to her head, looking understandably stressed. Her glasses probably stopped her from putting her hand over her face.

“Have you considered employing a skilled Terolish speaker and having them act as your standin?”

A substitute wouldn’t have any connection to me, so eventually, only people with relevant questions would show up.

“I couldn’t cause someone so much trouble,” Ms. Ether said.

“I’m sure they won’t mind if they’re being paid for it. Most members of witch families lost their jobs, so you’d be helping them out.”

“That does make sense. Yes, you might be right.”

I was relieved that she’d accepted the suggestion.

“The school can pay for it,” I said. “Why not ask all of your promising students to work as teachers? That way, any Cultural Academy student with enough time on their hands can start learning Terolish.”

If the school was closed, then teaching the students skills needed for a new career wasn’t a bad idea. At the very least, Terolish lessons would be a better use of time than loitering around outside Ms. Ether’s office.

“Oh? B-But...”

“It won’t cause trouble. It’s what people need.”

We could never have too many Terolish speakers. The more we had, the smoother our relations with the Kulati might become.

“Then it’s decided. The course text can be your holy book.”

It would teach them foreign culture while providing the necessary understanding of Yeesusism—two birds with one stone.

“Hm... Are you sure?”

“Yes. It’s not like Ancient Shanish is going to be of any use now.”

“Oh. You’re right, I’m sorry.” For some reason, Ms. Ether lowered her head. It was as if she’d thought I was making a jab at her. “The coming crusade and your parents...when it comes down to it, it’s all because of my people.”

“Please don’t say things like that. You had nothing to do with it.”

“But...”

That was when it hit me that the people around her must’ve been putting weird notions into her head. Since she was a Kulati, it was only natural that Shanti would blame her for the situation we’d found ourselves in.

Unfortunately, I couldn’t do anything to fight those attitudes, and I hated myself for considering such hatred toward her natural. If I were to declare that the Kulati were just like us during a time when war was on the horizon, there would be a significant decrease in morale.

“I’m sure you’ll hear people say that sort of thing given your background, but you should just ignore them. When the war starts, you’ll be no better off than the rest of us,” I told her.

“But one of my people betrayed you. I heard about Luke Moretto.”

“Oh, him.”

He’d been useful to us.

“Sorry,” Ms. Ether said. “He accepted the kingdom’s offer of shelter, yet...”

I’d recently learned that he’d signed a contract that said he’d be given refuge in our kingdom. In exchange, he was to never act against the interests of Shanti nations. He’d violated that contract. He would’ve been sentenced to death for abetting foreign enemies even if he hadn’t signed anything, but Ms. Ether probably saw the violation as a betrayal of trust.

“You’re not Luke Moretto. You don’t have to feel bad for what he did.”

“He was from the Papal State too. Unlike me, he struggled to fit in here. He said he wanted to return to his hometown of Aholnakat. He wasn’t a bad person at heart.”

“Is that right? Well, it’s too late for him now.”

“What happened to him?”

“To put it simply, you’re better off not knowing.”

“Please tell me. I’ve seen enough terrible, horrific things to last a lifetime. I can handle it.”

“Let’s just say that his body’s in such a state that it’ll be impossible for him to find any more enjoyment in life.”

Even I was surprised by the horrible nature of the royal swords’ torture methods. A good understanding of the human body was required to make someone suffer in the way he had. Though his life had been spared so far, killing him would’ve actually been an act of mercy.

Ms. Ether sighed at the misfortune that filled our world. “Oh...”

“He didn’t know much. He was just a go-between, though he knew a lot about the state of the royal capital as well as the names of many important figures.”

Naturally, he would’ve known that Ms. Ether was an exile here, working as a teacher.

“I know his crimes can’t be excused, but it makes me so sad. He had no hate for anyone. He was just an ordinary man,” Ms. Ether said.

“I’ve killed many people, but I think an incredibly small number of them were truly evil to their core. Luke Moretto may be a good man, but I’ll be killing him all the same. In exchange, I’m giving up my own right to complain when I’m killed. I’m no different from him.”

When one person took something from another, they didn’t do so through persuasion. It was incredibly rare that someone could be talked into giving up everything they owned. Killing proved easier than persuasion, so what a thief needed was the power to steal by force. And as a general rule, it was easier to rob than create. It meant those with the power to fight and kill were far better off murdering someone and taking their home than working for a decade to build a home of their own.

Within lawful nations, perpetrators of such behavior were arrested and

imprisoned—perhaps even executed—to maintain a state of peace. However, while people could gather into separate nations to punish theft by individuals, they wouldn't gather into one big supnation. There weren't any laws to govern the interaction between one country and another. International affairs were anarchy. When one nation stole land from another and settled their people there, they did so with impunity. There was no way to punish such acts. The very nature of the world made the principle of "kill or be killed" unavoidable.

"I see... But you look so sad, Yuri. It's proof of the toll it all takes on your human heart."

"Maybe."

"Even in the recent battle, you tried to keep the casualties down to a minimum, didn't you?"

I had, but only because a crusade force was on the way. I'd been ready to slaughter everyone from a witch family, even students of the Cultural Academy. Although I'd found an alternative, I'd been entirely serious about my intentions. If the grand witches hadn't taken my offer, I would've gone through with it.

"Well...war itself is barbaric. In fact, I'm sure your opinion of me would fall if I told you how I'm going to defeat the coming crusade," I said.

I was planning on doing something so horrible that it wouldn't even occur to someone like Ms. Ether. The enemy called me a demon, and perhaps they were right. I was willing to do things only a demon would do if that's what it took to stop their brutal conquest.

"My opinion won't change. There's nothing you could do to make me think ill of you, Yuri."

That was an unexpected thing to hear from Ms. Ether.

"Oh, I think there is."

"Please tell me. I won't tell another soul. I swear to God."

"Why do you want to know? It can't bring you anything other than pain."

She wouldn't be a sacrifice in the upcoming war. When all was said and done,

Ms. Ether would be able to live peacefully in the safe environment I'd created, and she'd have no reason to feel guilty.

"I just want to know what you're trying to do," she said. "I might even be able to advise you."

"Well, okay. You'll find out eventually anyway." Since she'd sworn to her god, I knew there was no way she'd go back on her word. "Let me explain."



"You can't be serious." As expected, Ms. Ether put her hand to her mouth, at a loss for words.

"Now you can stop worrying about your connection to the aggressors. Our side is going to be just as cruel."

It would be tit for tat. The enemy had already given up their right to complain.

"Yuri...forget about me. My biggest worry is for your heart. It might not be able to bear such a burden."

"Why? It won't bother me at all."

Just a short while ago, I'd cut open a man's throat to end his life before calmly heading off to take care of other business. In another era, I might've been labeled a psychopath.

"You're capable of imagining the pain that others feel, and you don't turn to look away. That's why I worry."

"I'll be fine. I'm not as sensitive as you think."

"If you ever join my faith, even the heaviest of sins can be forgiven—though I doubt that will give you any solace."

It was an unexpected suggestion. All I had to do was atone for my sins and accept God's forgiveness, and it'd be like I'd done nothing wrong. It was an awfully convenient system—to be honest, it just sounded like a farce to me.

"Sorry to disappoint, but I'd rather not."

"I thought so. Then can I at least...?"

Ms. Ether stood up, walked over, knelt before me, and took one of my hands



in hers.

I felt the warmth of her body through her hands. It felt a little uncomfortable to look down on her like this.

Ms. Ether stared at her clasped hands while reciting some sort of chant. Before long, she stopped.

“Yuri,” she said while looking up at me. “Please don’t bear it all by yourself. There are many people around you.”

“My sins are mine to bear.”

“I’ll forgive you. My opinion of you won’t fall. To acknowledge our sins as we commit them and to endure suffering is only human. *You* are only human, Yuri. There is no one alive who hasn’t sinned.”

Ms. Ether was talking more like a clergy member today than ever before.

“That’s not going to bring much solace to the people I’ve killed.”

The witches I’d burned alive, scum though they might’ve been, had probably been good mothers despite running strict households. It had to be true of some of them, at least.

Ms. Ether continued to grip my hand as she spoke. “I forgive you. Not in the name of Lord Yeesus, but personally. Please, always remember that.”

It was as though her words had lifted a weight off me, but that feeling only made me hate myself. It wasn’t right.

“Okay... I understand. I’ll remember.”

With mixed feelings, I softly pulled my hand away, causing Ms. Ether to release her grip.

I stood up and said, “I’m afraid I’ll have to go now. I have other business to attend to.”

I had to head north to fight another battle.

Ms. Ether stood and bowed her head. “I pray that victory awaits you.”



## V

The Bof family manor rested on an elevated patch of land, which had been made by creating a sizable mound of dirt.

Five hundred years ago, the Mulan family had rebuilt their household so that it could look down on the city with as much majesty as Sibiak's royal castle. It was also intended to provide a vantage point from which far-off enemies could be seen.

First, they'd dug a well. Then, they'd piled up earth—five meters high—while they extended the well's hole upward. Once they'd amassed a large dirt platform, they'd built a four-story building on top of it.

Construction techniques had been poor in those days. They'd regressed considerably, in fact. Much of the technology that had existed during the days of the Shantila Empire had been lost in war. The carpenters who built the manor had been grossly ignorant—so much so, in fact, that they hadn't realized that the mound of earth would gradually subside.

Four years after the manor's completion, the subsidence had caused cracks to form throughout the whole structure. The corridors had grown so warped that many doors would no longer close. Leaks had appeared in the roof because it was impossible to keep its surfaces even. Eventually, the whole thing had needed to be rebuilt.

The current Bof family manor stood on that same mound of earth, but it had gradually compacted and stabilized over the course of several years. It was the roots of trees, not stone foundations, that supported it in the end.

Although technically four stories high, the building's top floor consisted of just one room with a staircase at one side. It was basically a glorified watchtower. Still, it was higher than the city walls, providing a clear view of the land beyond in all directions, just as the designers had intended.

At that moment, three people were gathered there, including Orone Bof's wife, Clarine. Her maiden name was Atsuto. She came from a branch family of no real significance, but Orone had made her his wife after being taken by her

exceptional beauty.

“Lady Clarine, what do you intend to do?” Tigris Harmon asked.

The Harmon family was a branch of the Bof family, and for generations, the title of lord-of-estates has been given to its head. As one of the most influential families in Bof Province, they governed a city named Mestina, which was situated between mountains. As the kingdom’s second largest producer of gold, Mestina was a wealthy mining city.

Following a recent declaration of war, invaders had been sweeping through the Bof Province’s castles and cities like a storm, triggering one surrender after another. When this news had reached Clarine, she’d sent word to the towns and cities, ordering the immediate assembly of an army in Koturah. Tigris Harmon was one of those who had heeded the call.

“I’m still thinking,” Clarine replied.

“Lord Einora, what is your opinion?”

Einora Bof was Orone Bof’s only legitimate son. Orone had fathered many children, but Einora was the only one born of his first wife, Clarine. His bastard sons had all been forced upon other families or left to live as commoners. Given that no one knew whether Orone Bof was still alive, Einora was being treated as the head of family until his father’s fate had been determined.

“I don’t know. I’m thinking about it,” Einora said lazily as he folded his arms over his large body.

“We need more than thought!” Tigris replied. “Your citizens are on the verge of an uprising! Why won’t you open the city gates and let them leave?!”

The enemy was positioned so as to prevent any escape from the city. The Rube family had three thousand soldiers at the north gate, and the Ho family had three thousand soldiers at the south gate.

The Bof family still had four thousand soldiers left in Koturah, but the moment they would gather to attack the enemy at one side, the opposite gate might be breached. It seemed the enemy’s strategy was to force the Bof family into making the first move.

There was no hope of reinforcements because Koturah was now completely isolated. To make matters worse, the Ho family's current head, Yuri Ho, had publicly announced his intention to hold his position until the moment a crusade force arrived. There wouldn't be an assault on the city. If Koturah's rulers chose death, Yuri Ho would have them die fighting crusaders.

Yuri Ho had added, however, that he wouldn't place blame on the city's commoners, so they were allowed to leave via the south gate. The enemy had promised that if the gate was opened for this purpose, it wouldn't be used as an opportunity to strike the Bof family army.

To complicate things further, this message—along with a story about the Bof family betraying the kingdom with the witches—had been written on small pieces of paper and spread through the city streets. Needless to say, the people had become enraged and demanded that the gate be opened.

"We will await an opportunity," Clarine Bof said.

It made no sense whatsoever for Clarine to have a say in military affairs. At thirty-two years old, Einora was still young, but he was ten years older than Yuri Ho. He certainly shouldn't have needed his mother to speak for him.

"What opportunity?" Tigris scoffed. "Do you suppose the crusaders will come to our aid?"

"How dare you mock me?!" Clarine's voice seemed impossibly loud for someone with such a thin frame.

For a moment, Tigris struggled not to recoil from her. "Then what? I beg you, help me understand what you're planning."

"We still have ample provisions for our soldiers. We can afford to wait for the Ho family to approach us with an offer."

"You think you can fix this with diplomacy?"

Tigris looked out of the window. Beyond the reach of the city's archers, the Ho family army was erecting fences and stakes that would prevent a cavalry charge. A third of the soldiers were positioned along the fences, while the remainder were conducting military drills.

Also visible, a southward procession of commoners were fleeing Rube Province while giving Koturah's city walls a wide berth.

The tents set up outside were too numerous to be all for soldiers. It appeared some were being used by the commoners. From this high vantage point, it looked as though food was also being given out.

"That's right. We don't need to act rashly. It hasn't even been a week since they began encircling the city. I say we wait a month to see how things turn out," Clarine said.

They would only need to wait two days before Yuri Ho invited the Bof family to negotiate.



They entered the tent and found that, as previously agreed, there were eight men inside—guards included.

Yuri Ho and Kien Rube sat on the opposite side of a long table, ready to negotiate.

Tigris, having never seen Yuri Ho before, was shocked to see how young he was. He looked like a new recruit, fresh out of the Knight Academy. Out of either arrogance or sheer disrespect, he was calmly sitting at the head of the table, while Kien Rube—the recipient of a Sun Star Medal—sat below him.

"You're late. You made us wait," Yuri Ho said when he saw the Bof family's representatives enter the tent.

He was right. Clarine had spent so long getting dressed that the Bof family's representatives had arrived thirty minutes late.

"My apologies," Clarine said.

Her motion was elegant and ladylike as she took a seat, with Einora sitting above her. Since there were only two chairs, Tigris was forced to stand.

The enemy's delegation also appeared to include two important figures who'd been left standing. There were four guards, positioned two at each end of the table. Likewise, four of the Bof family's guards had positioned themselves so as to face the guards from the other delegation across the table.

With the agreement of both parties, a tent had been set up a short distance away from the south gate. Any assassination attempt here would prove difficult since the guards couldn't be killed quickly. Even if one delegation did succeed in killing the other, both sides had archers stationed close by who would prevent the survivors from making an easy escape.

"I'll be frank and tell you our demands," Yuri Ho began. "Release your citizens. We've already prepared a surrender agreement that your family may wish to accept."

"Very well. Let me tell you what we'd like in exchange. The Bof family's standing will remain the same," Clarine replied.

Yuri Ho sighed with disappointment. "Listen here..." He trailed off and sighed once more. "Why does this have to be so drawn out? Sir Kien, maybe you know the reason."

"I can't say I do."

"Is this what the Cultural Academy teaches people? There is a course on negotiations, isn't there? Something definitely went wrong somewhere." Yuri Ho rubbed his forehead with his fingertips. "Let's not mince words—I told you to release the civilians. That's simple enough. It works in your favor, since it means fewer mouths to feed. I'm obviously not going to let your family persist in its current state in exchange for something so simple."

"But you want our people, don't you? You can't expect us to give them away."

"There's a limit to my generosity. I already told your husband that if he'd voluntarily relinquish the title of lord-supreme and hand back his territory, I'd let his family continue as landowners. How does that sound to you?"

"I cannot accept," Clarine replied with a smirk. "Guarantee us sovereignty over the city of Bisreft and the surrounding land for the next hundred years, in addition to independent authority over our own army. Then you'll have a deal."

"Okay, we're done here. Leave." Yuri Ho shooed them away with his hand.

"Leave...?" Clarine furrowed her brow in confusion.

"There won't be a negotiation. You've left me no choice but to capture

Koturah. Needless to say, you can't expect any mercy now. You've got about a week to prepare." Yuri Ho fixed Clarine in his gaze. "One week. Enjoy your final days. I will kill you, mark my words."

"Such insolence." Clarine scowled at Yuri Ho's bold claim.

"What about you?" Yuri Ho asked Einora, making no attempt to hide his foul mood. "Einora, was it? You haven't said anything. Haven't you got a brain of your own? Hiding behind mommy isn't going to save you. I'll kill you too. I'll find you no matter where you run."

As Einora's face contorted with anxiety, Tigris saw it clearly.

Without warning, there was a *bang!* and, for a moment, the whole table rose up. Yuri Ho had kicked it from underneath without leaving his seat. His guards reached for the hilts of their swords, but Yuri Ho showed no concern.

"I gave you an offer to live out your last days in peace. I can't understand it. You want more, even after you sold out your own kingdom? Let me ask you one more thing. This is my final question." Yuri Ho spoke softly as the rest of the tent fell silent. "You have a choice between retiring to a peaceful life with a sizable fortune to live off of, or putting up a futile fight that ends in your brutal death next week. Which do you prefer? Pick one."

Tigris shivered. Yuri Ho clearly meant what he'd said. Something about his attitude suggested it was more than just a childish threat. The man who'd captured Sibiak in just ten days couldn't be taken lightly.

"We choose neither," Clarine said. "Do you really think you can take our people unharmed by attacking our city? I'll order our army to kill them first."

Tigris couldn't believe it. *She's an idiot.*

"This is absurd!" Kien Rube roared as he slammed his fist on the table. "Knights exist to protect their people! You say you'd not only use them as shields, but also turn your blades on them?! The name Bof will forever—"

"Sir Kien," Yuri Ho interrupted his speech. "You're wasting your breath on this fool of a woman. Let her try her stupid idea."

"But—!" Kien Rube could barely contain his emotions as he stared at Yuri Ho.



“Think about it—suppose this buffoon actually *does* give the order she just proposed. Do you think her soldiers would actually obey?”

Kien Rube was, of course, intelligent enough to realize how unlikely it was.

“They might carry out such orders if a popular commander like you demanded it, but it’s out of the question for her,” Yuri Ho continued. “Your name was Clarine, wasn’t it? Essentially, you’re going to ask family members to share meals together one day and then kill each other the next.”

Soldiers would willingly kill criminals among the populace, but not their own families. A band of immoral mercenaries might obey such an order, but not the soldiers gathered in Koturah. They’d sooner rebel.

“If you want to attempt it anyway, then you’d better be quick. I’ll drop flyers from the sky just like I did before. The next ones will say that I plan to seek out and execute every last soldier who killed a civilian. If you think they’ll still obey you after reading that, then just try it. Your soldiers will rebel, and you’ll be the one they hang.”

Tigris knew that Yuri Ho was correct. The Bof family was out of options. Surrender was the only choice remaining. What alternative could Clarine possibly be considering?

“Then I’ll order my most trusted servants to poison the wells,” Clarine shot back. It was another ridiculous idea.

“Hah... You think that’ll work?”

“I’ll order my soldiers to only drink the water from the Bof family manor. That way—”

Tigris interrupted her, speaking for the first time. “Lady Clarine.”

“You stay out of this.”

“No, I must have my say. What could such an act possibly achieve? Especially when the Ho family has already made an entirely reasonable offer. You’ll have your own land and live with considerable wealth.”

“Silence.”

“Stubbornly holding out for more won’t get you a better offer. Your best

option is to swallow your pride and surrender.”

“Have you lost your nerve, Tigris Harmon? You’re a disgrace to your ancestors. They considered your brilliance so great that they broke all the rules to make you, a woman, the head of their family. But now look at you.”

*It’s hopeless, Tigris thought to herself. There’s no getting through to her.*

The idea of poisoning the wells was perhaps no more than a bluff to scare the enemy, but Clarine could only worsen her negotiating position by claiming that she was desperate enough to resort to such self-destruction. If there was any room for negotiation, it would be minor. Clarine was demanding a major city; the enemy would never agree.

“Lord Einora, do you have nothing to say?” Tigris asked him. “Your mother just said she intends to massacre your people by poisoning the wells.”

“Ngh? Mmh...” Einora only made these strange sounds before falling silent.

*There’s no hope...*

“Then how about we make this more interesting?” Yuri Ho said. “Why not have the fight here? Let’s see how many of the Ho and Rube family’s most elite you can take down.”

“That won’t be necessary.” Tigris drew the weapon at her waist—a sword that was just a little too long to be called a dagger. In the same motion, she cut so deep into Einora’s broad neck that she felt her blade hit the tough bone within.

Clarine was wide-eyed as she watched. “Y-You’ve gone mad!”

Tigris pulled her blade free and swung it toward Clarine, cutting through her much narrower neck as she attempted to stand. Clarine’s head rolled to the ground as Tigris severed it effortlessly, like cutting a branch from a tree.

Having taken two lives with two swings of her sword, Tigris returned it to its sheath. The five Bof family guards had surrounded her, their spears ready. With her final act of service toward the Bof family completed, she calmly waited to be impaled.

“Stop!” a voice called out, just as the guards were about to skewer Tigris. “If you kill her now, I’ll have no choice but to retaliate against you. It’s too late to

help your master, but you can still return to Koturah and arrange the surrender. We'll take this woman into custody."

There was no reason that Yuri Ho should kill the guards. It would mean nothing to him if they executed Tigris for her act of betrayal. But despite the obvious flaw in his reasoning, it was enough to make the guards lose their will to fight.

Tigris removed her sword from its sheath and laid it flat on the table.

## VI

I'd entered Koturah the day after Orone's wife and son had been killed, and now I was sitting in one of the Bof family manor's meeting rooms with Kien and a few other important figures.

At the very bottom of the table, a spirited young woman named Tigris Harmon sat. She wore perfectly fitting clothing with a standing collar, and her long hair was tied back in a ponytail. I estimated she was about thirty.

The question was why a young woman was head of her family and held a title like lord-of-estates. From what I could gather, the previous head of the Harmon family had been unable to produce a male heir. Ordinarily, a successor would enter the family by marrying the head's daughter, but Tigris had stubbornly insisted that she'd go to the Knight Academy and assume the role herself. Thus, a woman had become head of the family.

As a lord-of-estates, she was a powerful figure, with many knight families serving under her. Her territory was so far from the provincial capital that her role was like that of a margrave.

Distance was an important consideration for effective government, with regions farther from a nation's center being harder to control. A central government would struggle to keep watch over numerous, scattered small territories, which could lead to those remote territories doing whatever they pleased. An intricate system of bureaucratic processes might ensure order, but that brand of politics was of little interest to knights. Their preferred solution was to entrust a dependable figure to oversee the more remote territories. This

was the common way for a regional ruler to become a margrave.

There wasn't a specific rule against a woman becoming a knight, but it was exceedingly rare that they became a lord-of-estates. In ordinary circumstances, there'd be countless complaints, and the woman about to assume the position would suddenly have a plethora of suitors offering to marry her and assume the title themselves.

Women who served as knights were respected as long as they earned their knighthood first, but since the kingdom was governed by women, there was a powerful desire to keep knights under the control of men. For a woman to obtain a military leadership role and maintain it regardless was no small feat.

Based on what I'd heard, Tigris had silenced the naysayers with displays of competence. Although Mestina—a city famous for its gold mines—was suffering a reduction in its gold exports, she'd compensated by encouraging new industries, ensuring that her territory continued operating smoothly. Her own people had therefore developed strong trust in her.

"It took us two full weeks to capture Bof Province," I said. "We still have to deal with the Noza family."

Two weeks. All the while, we'd been impatiently awaiting a ship that would bring news from the Albio Republic. A successful voyage hadn't proved possible within fourteen days this time.

"Do you have a plan, Sir Yuri?" Kien Rube asked.

Liao wasn't with us. He'd already taken command of forces heading out to hold back the Noza family.

"It'll be harder this time. We attacked the Bof family immediately after killing Orone Bof, leaving the province's rulers without any time to react. That won't work on the Noza family. We've already given them enough time to assemble forces to defend against us. Sir Kien, I imagine their soldiers have already assembled at the border with your territory."

"Indeed. After dispatching an eagle, I learned that the enemy has around three thousand soldiers in position. Though there aren't any large settlements close to the border."

The border between Rube Province and Noza Province lay in the far north where villages were sparsely distributed throughout icy fjords. Although the villages were connected by roads, the land there wasn't productive enough to allow them to develop into towns or cities. Though forts could've been built there for the sake of defending the region, they'd have been expensive to maintain and useless except in times of war. For that reason, none had been built.

"It appears that the people have evacuated from the villages closest to the border, and felled trees have been used to create abatis and fortify the fields," Kien added.

"Dimitri, tell me about their border with us."

A fief belonging to the Daz family, which Dimitri was head of, lay at the border between Ho Province and Noza Province.

"The enemy has constructed makeshift defenses at Noza Province's southern border too, but there are few soldiers deployed there—no more than five hundred men, it seems. It's likely that they intend to withdraw to Oregano the moment any fighting begins."

Oregano—the capital of Noza Province—was a considerable distance from the border with Ho Province. There weren't any sizable towns in between. Heartless as it sounded, the enemy would be wise to abandon whatever settlements lay in that region.

It occurred to me that Lilly's family home was located just a little north of Oregano. Her father couldn't provide an army since he was merely a custodian, but he'd still have to defend his land.

"We could also enter through the mountains via Yutan Pass," I suggested. "That's the broadest road, though it could prove difficult because it's easily defended."

Yutan Pass was an important trade route linking Sibiak to Oregano. It detoured some way north so as to stick to the low ground between mountains, but it was better maintained than any other mountain pass. The problem was that the narrowness of the route was highly advantageous to the defending side. After the initial battle for control of the pass, we'd also struggle to

establish supply lines. A supply line's length wasn't its only limiting factor—any danger encountered along the route also had an obvious impact.

Steep, narrow mountain paths were challenging environments when moving supplies. Even if our army successfully fought its way through the pass, food and other supplies would need to be transported through it continuously to the soldiers on the other side. As the army fought a strenuous battle beyond the mountains, they'd come to rely upon the constant back-and-forth movement of supply wagons. However, those wagons would each have to traverse a difficult road—one which might not even be wide enough to allow them to pass each other in opposite directions. This restriction on the supply train would limit the size of the army it could support.

There was a tale of a famous mountain range crossing by a certain “lightning” general who was able to pillage the settlements on the opposite side to feed his army, but that wouldn't be an option for us. Even if we were willing to go to such lengths, it was doubtful there'd be much to pillage—the Noza family ruled over barren land.

I would've used the pass if it proved to be strategically advantageous, but there were other routes into Noza Province that weren't blocked by the mountains. Since the land to the north and south was wide open, it made little sense for us to enter via the more treacherous route. At the very least, I wasn't fond of the idea.

“If they're ready for us, then I'd advise against an approach through the mountain pass,” Dimitri said. “A pincer attack from both north and south will be enough to bring Noza Province to its knees. The question is how we bring the war to its conclusion.”

“We lost about three hundred soldiers when we captured the royal capital,” I said.

“Indeed,” Dimitri agreed. “Battles broke out in two districts of the city.”

“The Noza family has eight thousand soldiers, all of which are fully geared up for a war. This won't be easy.”

Just as Dimitri had said, there were many different strategies we could use to suppress our enemy. The problem was that we could easily lose one or two

thousand of our soldiers in the process.

“We could start by advising them to surrender,” Dimitri suggested, taking the words out of my mouth.

“I was thinking the same,” Kien agreed. “I’ve known Bolafra Noza long enough to know he’s a coward. He’ll surrender more readily than you’d expect. He thinks himself all high and mighty as the head of a chieftain family, but he never did enjoy a fight.”

Kien’s assessment was so unflattering that I had to wonder what had happened between them in the past.

“Quite so,” Dimitri agreed. “I heard that he spent the entirety of the previous crusade looking for an opportunity to flee.”

“I was right to trade places with him on that battlefield,” Kien said. “He was positioned to face the Tyrelme army head-on, so I took that risk in his place. If I hadn’t, I’ve no doubt he would’ve let them through.”

Apparently, a lot had happened during the crusade.

“Okay,” I agreed. “We’ll start by inviting him to a discussion. It costs nothing to send a letter, and we’ll need to wait while our soldiers move into position anyway.”

“We can hold our discussion on Yutan Pass...though we should let him set the conditions, or he’ll be wary of us,” Kien said. “He’s a true coward. If fear gets the better of him, he’ll refuse to meet with us at all. Let him make the arrangements. I’ve no doubt he’ll choose Yutan Pass anyway.”

I wasn’t so sure. Kien could ride an eagle despite his large size, but I doubted Bolafra Noza could do the same. The eastern boundary between Noza Province and the rest of the kingdom ran along the peaks of a mountain range, making it an inconvenient meeting spot for anyone who couldn’t fly.

Even if Bolafra Noza was a qualified sky knight, that didn’t mean he could actually ride an eagle. Flying always entailed some risk, and there were countless sky knights who’d grown rusty and decided never to take that risk again, despite having been skilled in the past.

“Then that’s that. Maybe we should write the letter now while everyone’s here.”

“Fine by me,” Kien agreed.

“In that case, Tillet, could you summon a maid to assist us?”

Tillet left her spot in the corner of the room. As she walked out, she grumbled, “I’m not your servant.”

I *hoped* she’d gone to fetch that maid. She obviously wasn’t happy, but I didn’t think she’d disobey an order.

“Was that a royal sword?” Dimitri asked.

“Yes. I brought her just in case. She could prove useful if the situation calls for infiltration and sabotage.”

“I see.”

The door opened with a *click*, and an aged maid appeared.

*That was quick.* She must’ve been waiting outside.

“Here’s your maid,” Tillet said.

The maid looked down at her feet as she avoided making eye contact with anyone. “How may I be of service?”

“Sorry. I know it’s a bother, but could you please bring us parchment and an envelope? We’ll also need writing equipment and wax to seal it.”

“Um, I’m afraid the envelopes here all bear the family’s seal...”

“That’s quite all right.” I smiled in an attempt to make the maid feel less nervous.

“I’ll f-fetch them at once,” she said before leaving the room.

“You asked her awfully politely,” Tillet pointed out. “Nothing like the arrogant tone you use with me.”

“Sorry. I’m never trying to be rude, even if it sounds that way sometimes. I respect you in my heart, so don’t let it bother you.”

“Listen here...” Tillet began, but then she stopped herself.



Someone began to laugh, but then added, "Oh, forgive me." It was Kien. Our little exchange must've appealed to his sense of humor.

With another *click*, the door opened again.

"Sorry to keep you waiting." The maid placed a tray on the table containing everything we'd need.

"Thank you."

"It's n-nothing." She bowed her head, then left the room again.

"I'll write it," I said.



## Request for Discussions

We propose a meeting to discuss the future of the Noza family in addition to other matters.

### 1. Meeting Location

To be stipulated by the Noza family. However, the location must be on the provincial border, rather than within Noza Province.

We will not agree to meet at any location that requires us to enter Noza Province accompanied by only a small force, or anywhere that presents a danger to us.

In the interests of common sense, we would also like to avoid any precipitous mountain peaks.

### 2. Response Deadline

Since we are making urgent preparations to defend against the next crusade, we can only allow you until the end of April to dispatch a response to the Ho family via eagle.

We will allow time for the letter to reach us, but if we receive nothing by May 3, then you may treat this letter as a declaration of war and anticipate our invasion.

Upon receipt of a response, the war will be postponed

until the date of our discussion.

### 3. Meeting Date

To be stipulated by the Noza family. Please choose a time between April 25 and May 7.

Since we are making urgent preparations to defend against the next crusade, we cannot accept any request to delay this discussion.

Given the pressing nature of the situation, we hope you will understand why we are forced to make these demands.

### 4. The Witches' Written Pledge and Treatment of the Noza Family

After coming into possession of a written pledge hidden by witch families, we learned of their secret pact with the Noza family. We have concluded that the Noza family can no longer hold the title of lord-supreme and must be stripped of power.

However, we have no intention of taking Bolaфра Noza's head or punishing other family members for this betrayal in the event of a surrender. We will merely strip the family of the title lord-supreme and its territory.

We wish to avoid a war and the expenditure of lives, supplies, and, most importantly, the time it would entail. The reason for this is simple—your surrender will allow us to take resources that would otherwise be squandered and use them against the coming crusade force.

If the matter reaches a swift resolution, and if you disarm and relinquish your territory, then we will not only pardon you, but also ensure that your family is treated well.

Signed by the following,

I added my own signature at the bottom.

I handed the letter to Kien. “How’s this look?”

Kien skimmed through it, then signed it before handing it back. “As I expected. This is why they said excellence of your sort was seldom seen at the Knight Academy.”

“Tigris, what about you?”

Tigris looked back at me. “But I...”

“I’m not asking you to represent the Bof family. It’ll just give the letter some extra weight if you’ve signed it. At least read it. You don’t have to sign if you don’t like what it says.”

“Very well.” Tigris walked over to me from the very bottom of the long table—she’d left chairs empty in order to sit there.

Tillet must not have trusted her, because she left her spot by the wall to stand closer to me. She looked ready to kill Tigris the moment she made any sudden movements.

I didn’t trust Tigris either, but I knew I could draw my dagger quick enough to block an attack, even if she tried to draw her sword and attack me in one swift movement like when she’d killed Einora. However, Tigris merely took the letter and returned to the bottom of the table.

“Where’d you hear that?” I asked Kien in response to what he’d said a moment ago.

“My cousin is the Knight Academy’s director.”

“Ah... Revelo Rube? We’ve barely spoken.” *So they’re cousins.*

“Apparently, you gained more credits through exemptions than any other student in history.”

“I did? I had no idea.” *Wow. I didn’t know I set the record.*

“Not long after you’d entered the academy, you had nothing left to do.”

“I had so much free time that I started Ho Company. I wonder what would’ve

happened if they didn't have the exemption system."

If I'd been as busy as everyone else, the idea of starting a business wouldn't have crossed my mind. I wouldn't have acquired ships, developed celestial navigation, found the new continent, invented fire bottles, or developed printing technology.

"So you truly did it all independently from the Ho family?"

"Not quite. The witches got in the way as the business grew bigger. In the end, we had to operate under my family's protection. It was unfortunate, because I'd avoided relying on my father until then."

It was a shame. I'd always told myself it was fair because we paid our taxes and covered our own security costs, but I'd still hated to rely on my parents.

"Hmmm... Nonetheless, it's impressive that you did so much with just your own money."

"The company made it possible to distribute flyers and make fire bottles. And all the profit I made is going to be used to fund the war effort. It's hard to predict what you might find useful in the future."

Tigris stood up and walked over. She must've finished reading while I was chatting with Kien. She placed the letter on the table, picked up a quill, signed her name below Kien's, and slid the letter toward me.

"You have my signature."

"Thanks."

I folded the letter into thirds and placed it in an envelope embossed with the Bof family's emblem.

There was a burning candle in a weighty candlestick—heavy enough to ensure it wouldn't fall over—on the tray. Candle wax and sealing wax were two different substances. I tilted the candlestick to empty the pool of wax on the candle into a pot for disposal, then I held a stick of sealing wax near the candle's flame so that it would melt and fall onto the envelope. Before it could harden, I pressed a stamp down on it firmly. The letter now bore the Bof family's seal.

"Your Excellency, I'll see that it's delivered at once," Dimitri said.

“If you don’t mind.” I waved the envelope in the air a little to let the wax seal harden before handing it over.

“Should I head north along with my soldiers?” Kien asked.

“Can the Rube family afford to leave a well-trained unit here?” I replied. “You’ll find it easier to offer shelter to migrating civilians if you control Koturah.”

Koturah was like a roadblock on the main route connecting Rube Province to the royal capital, set up for the sake of collecting taxes. Refugees would have to pass through the city. If the Ho family was in control, it would necessitate some coordination between us, so the Rube family would probably want to handle it by themselves.

“That would make things easier. You wouldn’t mind?” It seemed as though Kien was asking whether I really trusted him.

“It’s fine. It’s not like I have Ho soldiers to spare. They have to keep the peace in the royal capital while also training the second order of the royal guard. This actually benefits me.”

“In that case, I’ll accept your offer.”

“But this doesn’t mean that the Rube family can keep the city when the war is over.”

“Ha ha. I know.” Kien laughed as he left the room.



Tigris spoke to me once everyone had left the meeting. “Sir Yuri.”

Dimitri had hurried off to dispatch a messenger, and everyone else had gone about their business. Tillet, Tigris, and I were the only ones still in the room.

“What is it?”

“There was something I wanted to ask. Yesterday, you said that Koturah would fall within a week. What was your plan?”

*Oh, she’s curious about that. What should I tell her?* “Hmmm...”

“Was it a bluff to deceive us?”

“No, I’m confident I could’ve taken it within a week. I’m just not sure whether I should tell you how.”

“I see. I haven’t offered my spear to you. I understand your concerns.”

“Actually, I don’t mind telling you. It doesn’t matter who finds out at this point.”

It wasn’t worth thinking about what came after the crusade. A few years from now, there’d be many more options for capturing a city.

“Then please tell me.”

“The city certainly had impressive gates, but its wall was too thin.”

Tigris knitted her brow. “You intended to destroy the wall?”

Koturah wasn’t like a castle on a hill. It rested on a flat plain, surrounded by a simple wall. It was a fragile structure that wasn’t much better than a reinforced fence.

Similarly designed walls often had rocks and earth piled up behind them to offer reinforcement. Destroying such walls was incredibly difficult. A cannonball would merely damage the surface, and it would be incredibly time-consuming to create a hole all the way through. Striking the wall dozens of times in the same place would cause the structure to collapse and form a slope, but we lacked the technology needed to concentrate cannon fire so precisely. Even if we did have that option, the top of the resulting slope would still be an easy position to defend.

Koturah’s wall, however, wasn’t that tough. It was little more than a fence and not particularly thick. The weak construction was understandable, given that it had to surround an entire city rather than just one structure. It was more than enough to prevent a raid by bandits, but not very good for much else.

“It seems you didn’t notice that a section of the wall on the north side was in need of repair. There are stones missing near the bottom.”

“What of it?”

“We could’ve dug there to make a hole leading into the interior of the wall. After filling the hole with gunpowder, we would’ve put an explosive device on

top and detonated it. I can't be sure it would've worked—I've never tried it before—but I think the wall would've collapsed. Then it would've been a simple matter of rushing into the city via the gap."

"But even if your device could destroy the wall, how would you get it in place?"

"I was studying the wall from above for the past few days. Your defenses were all focused on the gates, so there were barely any guards elsewhere. Would the lookouts at the top have even noticed if we were doing something at the foot of the wall during the night?"

"I see." She sounded convinced.

"But don't think about repairing it now. That wall's a relic of the past. It'll be no use to you in the near future, so don't waste your money."

"Okay..."

"I'll decide what to do with you after I'm done with the Noza family. Return to your territory and train your soldiers until then."

"As you wish."

Despite her popularity, she'd always be the knight who'd killed her own master. If I was going to give her command of the Bof family army, I'd have to wait until tensions died down.

## VII

"I fear we may have to move away," Bolaфра Noza told his wife and children.

As he spoke, he was looking at Oregano, the home he'd have to leave. It lay at the tip of a fjord, and it was the most prosperous port city in all of Noza Province. The city was at the southern end of the province, which was warm and hospitable compared to regions farther north.

The busy port made Oregano a trade center for Noza Province. Exports, such as the dried cod prepared in the cities to the north, were brought in on small boats traveling along the coast, then transported to other regions.

This all made the city so prosperous that many called it the jewel of Noza Province.

Oregano would also prove a difficult city to invade owing to its excellent defenses. A thin wall ran along a mountain ridge that surrounded it, with stone keeps positioned here and there along its length.

Bolafra Noza was about to throw all this away.

“You’re surrendering?” his wife, Aures Noza, asked.

“That’s what I’ve decided. We’ve been promised better treatment if we do—though I doubt we can continue as a knight family.”

“Then what’ll become of us?”

“I expect we’ll be offered land on Aisa Island, and I’ll ask to take our wealth with us. Even *he* should be willing to accept that compromise.”

“But...” His wife didn’t appear ready to leave behind the life they’d been living.

“It’s not a bad deal. Crusaders are already on their way, and I think we have a less than fifty percent chance of victory. If the Ho family is going to arrange our escape to Aisa Island, it’s an opportunity too good to turn down.”

“Father, I don’t like this.” Bolafra’s son, Thoma Noza, was a youngster of thirty-two with grand notions about being a knight.

“You wanted to lead the soldiers into battle yourself, didn’t you? Well, now you don’t have to. Truth is, Yuri Ho will probably find better uses for our soldiers.”

“Father, if only you hadn’t made that secret pact.”

“None of that, Thoma. What’s done is done.”

The previous crusade was still fresh in Bolafra’s memory. If two kingdoms standing united had failed, then a single kingdom alone had no chance. Any other conclusion was illogical.

That said, in under a month, Yuri Ho had conquered the royal capital and overthrown the Bof family. Though Bolafra still expected the kingdom to fall to



the next crusade, he held on to some hope that Yuri Ho hadn't yet shown the extent of his talents. That is, Bolafra believed that if there was any chance of victory, it lay within the mysteries surrounding Yuri Ho.

"Regardless, I've decided to surrender."

"But father, how can we expect the Ho family to honor any promises they make?"

"Kien Rube will be there. He's a man of honor. Besides, it'll be an easy promise for them to keep. Better to go through with it than risk the damage to their reputations."

This was the twisted logic within Bolafra's mind. It was common for him to ignore the downsides of every situation because it helped him keep his sanity. It was the same thought process he'd used when deciding that the witches had brought him a realistic offer that was worth accepting.

"I think I'll remain here, father," his daughter, Minuet Noza, said.

Bolafra had one son and one daughter. The daughter was a young girl of twenty-five who'd graduated from the Cultural Academy the previous year.

"Why?" Bolafra replied. "Well, whatever your reason, I won't allow it."

"I have a fiancé—Lord Vilan Tomin."

"That doesn't matter now. We're leaving this kingdom."

Even if they stayed, they'd cease to be a chieftain family, which would overturn the original reasoning behind their betrothal. The time for strategic marriages was over.

"I love Lord Vilan from the very bottom of my heart. I beg you, please leave me here."

"I won't."

"I see... Well, okay then. If I have no choice in the matter, I'll give up." Minuet had given in surprisingly easily.

"I shouldn't have to say it, but you mustn't mention any of this to anyone. No matter how much love you still hold for our kingdom, there's a chance that our

people won't look kindly upon the special treatment we're about to receive."

"Very well. I'll do as you wish, father."



"Minuet isn't here yet?" Bolafra said.

He was eating a meal at a candlelit table with his wife and son, but Minuet was strangely absent.

"Perhaps she went to say her goodbyes," Aures suggested.

The family lived a simple lifestyle, and only a few dishes were laid out on the table. Their meal that evening was roast venison. The table was made of simple wood with large knots, and the varnish coating had largely worn away. No chandelier hung from the ceiling. Displays of wealth would only invite envy here because the region's people, including the nobles, were poor.

"I often worry about that girl's judgment," Thoma Noza said.

"Don't talk about her that way," Bolafra replied. "It's not fair to expect much self-restraint from a young girl."

"You don't think she was spoiled by her time spent at the royal capital? You're sure she'll adjust to life on Aisa Island?"

"I've heard that Aisa Island's a lot more active than it used to be," Bolafra said as he lifted a small piece of venison thigh to his mouth. "And it's full of beautiful hot springs. I'm sure our time there won't be so dull."

Bolafra had concerns of his own because he knew nothing about the Etto family that ruled the island. But he knew that almost all problems in life could be fixed with money. He'd need something more if he wanted authority over his own land in perpetuity, but a comfortable life as a rich commoner, rather than as a ruler, could at least be bought at a reasonable price.

"Hot springs? I've never cared for them. I'd rather stay here and make a name for myself fighting alongside our soldiers."

"No. You're this family's heir. I can't let my bloodline end so easily. The Nozas have endured since the days of the empire."

Despite their disagreement, Bolafra was happy to know that his son had a knight's heart. He'd shared those feelings once, but that time had long passed. Being head of a military family no longer appealed to him. Rather than gathering up strong fighters and heading out to battle, he dreamed of a life as a statesman who could win the respect of his people through wise governance.

Bolafra couldn't stand war. During the fight against the previous crusade, he'd been living in tents and constantly on the move. The ordeal had ruined his health.

"We'll be giving up our spears and starting a new life. I know it won't be easy for you, but you'll have to adjust."

Just as Bolafra finished speaking, the dining room door burst open.

"What's this? Enjoying some family time, are we?"

The man who entered was Vilan Tomin—a good-for-nothing son of a lord-of-estates. He had one arm wrapped around Minuet, who stood beside him, dead drunk.

"Vilan Tomin. What business have you here?"

"What indeed!" Vilan responded loudly as he slammed the door behind him.

"Eek!" Bolafra's wife, Aures, shrieked as the door closed with a crash.

"Lord Bolafra, you can't surrender," Vilan spat.

Bolafra realized his mistake—he'd shared his plans too early. Instead of being compassionate, he should've confined his wife and children to the household.

"This is the Noza family's household," Thoma Noza said. "Your insolence won't be tolerated here!"

"What? If you've quit being a knight, then it's not your home anymore, is it?" Vilan shot back.

"I'm a kn-knight until I officially give up my title."

"Stop blabbering, kid."

"It's your blabbering that needs to stop!"

With a sigh, Vilan let go of Minuet and walked over to Thoma.

“Wh-What are you...” Thoma stammered.

“I...said...silence!”

“Ugh!” Thoma went tumbling from his chair as Vilan’s fist hit his face.

“Ahhhhh!” Aures’s shrill cry filled the room.

“How dare you?!” Bolafra yelled as he rose from his chair. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Bolafra looked down at his son sprawled on the floor. It looked as though he’d hit his head when he fell.

“Lord Bolafra... I’ll be the one asking the questions. You think you can flee like a coward, carrying a purse full of coins? I don’t think so. What’ll happen to the rest of us?”

“Th-That’s...”

“Why not talk Yuri Ho into a deal? Tell him you wanna keep things the way they’ve always been. Did you even try?”

“Guards! Where are you all?!” Bolafra called loudly, hoping a guard would appear.

“They’re not coming. The biggest, strongest man in my service is holding them back. Your weaklings won’t get past him.”

“Grr...”

“Pass the title of lord-supreme on to me, Bolafra, and I’ll spare your life.”

“Outrageous! That title was given to me by the queen and can’t be handed to another!”

The recipient of the title was actually decided by a council overseen by the chieftain family, rather than the queen. The queen would officially confer the title during a ceremony afterward, but her approval was only sought after the matter was already decided. It was Bolafra’s reluctance to give the title away that made him claim otherwise.

“No one cares about that. Just step down and let me take over for you. Then you can make an announcement to let everyone know.”

“Even if I agreed, who would follow your orders?! Everyone’s going to surrender to the Ho family either way!”

“Ah, you’re right.” Vilan scratched his head, then grabbed the hatchet he was wearing on his back and casually swung it.

“Uhgah!” Thoma, who’d been unconscious on the floor a moment ago, let out a strange cry. The hatchet had split open his skull.

“I’ll have to win them over with a show of force. This is the quickest way.”

A moment later, the screams of Thoma’s mother rang out through the dining room. “Aaaaahhh! Thoma! Thoma!”

Aures ran to her son’s body, knelt down beside him, and after hesitating briefly, pulled at the hatchet that was buried deep within his skull.

“Shut up!” Vilan stomped down with all his might on Aures’s neck as she knelt down near his feet.

“Ugh.” Vilan’s foot broke Aures’s neck, leaving her head at an unnatural angle. She slumped on top of Thoma and became perfectly still.

Vilan put his hand against the bodies of mother and son as he yanked the hatchet free from Thoma’s skull and returned it to its place at his waist.

“Hah! It serves you right, brother! A fitting punishment for the way you’ve always looked down on me!” Minuet cried.

Minuet was wearing an expression Bolafra had never seen before as she regarded the bodies of her own family members. Bolafra couldn’t keep up with everything that was happening. As his precious daughter looked at Vilan with longing eyes, it was like she’d become a different person entirely.

“And you too, father. Why couldn’t you just make Lord Vilan head of our family? Then he would’ve let him live.”

With that declaration, she pressed her body against her fiancé.

Vilan pushed her away. “Get off me, pig.”

“What...?”

“You’re so fat. All that soft flab makes me sick. You think I would’ve slept with

you if you weren't the Noza family's daughter? Now that your family's finished, you're no better than any other pig."

"What a cruel joke! Tell me you don't mean it, Lord Vilan."

"Oh, I mean it." Vilan put his foot to Minuet's stomach and pushed her away. "I'm done putting up with you! I'm sick of hearing those disgusting noises you make when you're pressing that bloated stomach against me!"

"How can you say that?! I thought you liked larger women! If you don't, I can lose weight for you!"

"Everything about you disgusts me. Just die already." Vilan picked up a cleaver that was resting on the table and threw it toward Minuet. It bounced along the wooden floor and stopped by her feet. "All you have to do is cut your throat with that. Now go on. If you love me like you say, then you'll die for me, pig."

"You can't be—"

"I'm serious. If you'd die for me, then hurry up and do it!"

As Vilan stared down at Minuet, his eyes were no longer those of a man with his wife-to-be. He looked at her like someone might look at a rotten hunk of meat swarming with maggots.

"No, no, no, no! This can't be! Tell me you don't mean it!"

"Haaaah," Vilan sighed. "You're so irritating." Brutality filled his eyes as he approached Minuet.

"Stop!" Bolafra had finally regained his senses and managed to raise his voice.

Vilan turned to look at him for a moment.

"Uraaaaaah!" Minuet cried out as she grabbed a knife from the table and lunged forward, thrusting it at Vilan.

Rather than dodge, Vilan let the blade sink into his stomach. "You idiot. You're trying to stab me with a blunt table knife." Vilan grabbed Minuet's arm and forced her elbow to bend the wrong way.

"Nngh!" She braced herself for intense pain as the joint was stretched to its limit, but then she felt the tendon tear followed by pain worse than she could

have imagined. “Aaaaargh! It hurts!”

After breaking Minuet’s elbow with brute force, Vilan grabbed her by the collar of her thick clothing. “I’m not done hurting you yet.”

He swung his arm, punching her with all his might.

“Ahguh!”

Rather than stop after the first punch, he began showering her with blows.

“Ah, ngh! St— Sto— Stop!”

“This is how much pain I felt mentally, letting a pig touch me. Now die!”

Vilan beat her for what seemed like five minutes. Eventually, his arm grew too tired for him to continue, by which point it was hard to find any remaining traces of skin tone on Minuet’s face. The left side—where Vilan’s right arm had been able to reach most easily—had received the worst of it, and it had swollen up due to a fracture that extended from her cheekbone to her nose.

“Ugh... Ah...”

Vilan turned to Bolaфра and stared at him in disbelief. “Just look at you. You just stood there while I killed your son and wife, and now I’ve beat your daughter to a pulp. Have you even got a cock?”

He looked down on his former fiancée with disgust, then grabbed her by the hair while still gripping her collar. With a burst of force, he brought his clenched fists together.

“Kngh.” Minuet’s head turned to face behind her as her neck twisted to an impossible degree.

After Minuet had gone limp, Vilan cast her aside and released her collar so that her body slumped down to the floor near his feet.

Bolaфра had been unable to move as he’d watched it all. In the face of Vilan’s brutality, his body had refused to obey him. Now that Vilan had finished his work, Bolaфра had lost everything. All he could do in his despondency was sit back down in his chair. *This is how it ends?*

“I still can’t believe it. *You’re* the head of a chieftain family?” Vilan scoffed. “I

won't stand for it."

Bolafra lacked the willpower to respond. He couldn't even summon up the strength to reach for the dagger in his pocket.

"Time to die, old man."

Vilan swung his hatchet, and Bolafra lost consciousness.



# Final Chapter — A Girl's Days

I

I, Riccie Rouen, recently turned ten years old.

I'd been an apprentice maid at the Ho family manor in Kalakumo for as long as I could remember. It was a nice place to work. Lord Rook and Lady Suzuya were so kind that they even let their young servants learn reading and writing from a retired scholar if they wished.

Lord Rook was well loved by the people, while Lady Suzuya was kindhearted and gentle. Some military men still had their doubts about Lord Rook, but the wise leadership he'd shown in Kalakumo was undeniable. People here generally agreed that life had gotten easier under his reign, and the population had grown richer.

For a long time, that peaceful city was where I lived and worked. Then, one day in March—not long since the start of the new year, and just as winter was giving way to spring—I learned that my peaceful life would change completely.

The matron of the household—Lady Satsuki—had been woken up at dawn by a messenger who'd arrived with urgent news. Lady Satsuki then had everyone in the manor out of bed, and she gathered the most important people for a meeting.

Then came a rush of activity, followed by rumors spreading through the household. Everyone who heard the news was enraged. They reacted like our world was coming to an end.

On the evening of that same day, Lady Satsuki summoned everyone together so we could hear the true story from her, rather than all the wild rumors. The truth turned out to be no different from the rumors I'd already heard—Lord Rook and Lady Suzuya had both been killed with poison.

I'd refused to believe it was true, but now I could no longer deny it. I dropped

to my knees and wailed in despair. How could someone murder a gentle husband and wife who'd treated everyone with such kindness?

Lady Satsuki spoke at length about the circumstances behind the incident, but it was all too complicated for me to follow. All I could do was wipe away the constant stream of tears as I continued to sob.

A kind couple, beloved by everyone, had died a painful death, coughing up blood from the poison. Such things weren't compatible with the peaceful world I inhabited. I felt it had to be some mistake, but I couldn't understand why such misfortune would befall them, of all people. It all suggested that the world was horribly unfair, but trying to come to terms with that left me so unbearably sad that I couldn't accept it.

As I remained there on my knees in tears, no one patted my shoulder or scolded me. Through my bleary eyes, I saw that adults and children alike were all crying with me. Some of those tearful faces were twisted into expressions of intense hatred, while others were simply mourning the loss.

Another morning came after everyone was allowed to spend a day mourning.

A young man had flown to the manor by eagle and landed near the birdcages. When loud cries heralded his arrival, the adults abandoned their work and ran to the windows. I followed them to see what everyone was looking at.

The young man had left his eagle in a birdcage and walked toward the manor.

Another maid who I got along well with happened to be standing next to me. "Riccie, take a good look," she said. "He's going to be our master from now on."

"Is he? I wonder what he's like."

I'd never seen this man—named Yuri Ho—before. I knew that the couple had a son, but he'd moved away to the royal capital before I'd begun working here. I'd been told many times that he'd been here to visit, but I'd never managed to see him—he'd always left by the time I heard the news.

"He's going to be a hero. You can count on that."

That wasn't the reply I'd expected. I looked at the maid and saw an

expression I'd never seen her make before. It was a little frightening how intently she was staring at the young man.



Several days later, I was summoned to Lady Satsuki's room. She told me to enter when I knocked, so I opened the door and stepped inside. There, I found not just Lady Satsuki, but also a woman dressed in an unusually fine maid outfit.

"I am at your service," I greeted them. "My name is Riccie Rouen."

"Good to see you," Lady Satsuki said. "Now sit down."

It was the first time I'd ever had permission to sit on a couch in the parlor—though I *had* secretly sat on it once before while cleaning it by myself. I'd been caught by another maid who'd scolded me for my disgraceful behavior.

I'd been ordered to sit on it this time, so I had no reason to refuse. As I nervously took my place on the black leather upholstery of the couch, my behind sank into the springy cushion.

The woman in the fancy maid outfit sat on the couch opposite.

"My name is Cafetti Lotti," she said. "I would normally work alongside you, but I've been employed at the family residence in the royal capital as of late."

*Oh, now I see,* I thought. *That's why she looks all refined, like a city person.*

Maids working here at the head household tended to look up to the maids of the royal capital residence and considered them a rank above us. They got prettier outfits, for one thing, but more importantly, they got to live in the royal capital. Many maids wished they could work in the royal capital, but only those who performed their duties flawlessly ever got the chance. Unlike the head household, where we were almost always serving the residents, maids at the royal capital residence also had to serve other chieftains, people known as witches, and perhaps even royalty. The slightest show of rudeness before guests like those would make the Ho family look like country bumpkins. That's why their manners had to be perfect and their uniforms incredibly smart.

The woman in front of me looked perfectly smart too. Her hair and uniform were both immaculate. There wasn't a single flaw to point out.

“Nice to meet you. I look forward to working with you.” I bowed my head.

Cafetti must have escaped from the royal capital residence. I assumed that she’d be staying in the head household for some time. *But why did she call for me?* I wondered.

“She gets passing marks for etiquette,” Cafetti said.

“Oh, good,” Satsuki replied. “Do you think she’ll be useful?”

“Yes, though I’ll conduct a more thorough assessment—if I may borrow her for a while.”

“Take good care of her.”

Cafetti stood up straight and turned toward the door. “This way, Riccie.”

“Oh. Yes, ma’am.” I got up from the couch, bowed to Lady Satsuki, and followed after Cafetti.

I wasn’t sure what she meant by an assessment, but I imagined she’d be testing me on my manners and checking I did all my chores properly.

“We’re going to keep each other company today,” Cafetti said once we were in the corridor.

At first, I thought I’d misheard her. “Keep each other company...ma’am?”

I doubted that Cafetti had summoned me just because she wanted someone to spend her day off with. But then again, I was friends with some maids who often took me places, so it wouldn’t be unheard of.

“Yes. That’s going to be a very important aspect of your new job.”

“Keeping people company?”

“Yes, Riccie. Now change into your own clothes and wait for me by the entrance. I’ll be changing too.”

“V-Very well. I’ll see you shortly.”

I left Cafetti and returned to my room.

Soon after, I had lunch with Cafetti, met her parents at her home nearby, and

went with her to a tailor to be measured for a new maid's outfit. Finally, we parted ways.

It was a different maid who took me back to the tailor the next day so I could try on the clothes while temporary stitches were in place.

I was told to make sure I had all my luggage together by tomorrow.

After another day passed, I collected two new suits of maid clothing, and a lone knight armed with a spear took me away from the manor I'd known for so long.

## II

I boarded a small carriage and switched to another one along the way. Finally, I arrived at a house deep in the mountains where Cafetti was waiting for me at the front entrance.

"You've had a long journey, Riccie Rouen. Welcome to your new place of work," Cafetti told me after I'd climbed out of the carriage.

"Yes, Miss Cafetti."

The house was a cozy little place. It was well looked after, with walls so white they looked like they'd been repainted just yesterday. A storage space next to a chopping block was piled high with logs ready for use as firewood. It was like something from a fairy tale. I'd spent my whole life in the city of Kalakumo, so remote places like this were completely new to me.

After Cafetti had said a few words to the knight, he left with the carriage.

"First, I'll introduce you to the person you'll be serving," Cafetti said. "Follow me."

She entered the house through a small door and left her shoes side by side at the entrance. To avoid being rude, I did my best to copy her as I followed behind.

Cafetti headed straight upstairs without so much as looking at the kitchen or anything else. Once she reached the top of the newly constructed staircase, she opened the door to a room.

It looked like everything in there had been recently replaced, and there was a faint smell of fresh wood. A woman lay in the bed. Her hair was the color of straw, and she was looking at me with beautiful blue eyes.

“Lady Carol, this is Riccie Rouen. She’ll be working here from today. Riccie, introduce yourself.”

I was so nervous that my voice came out sounding unusually high-pitched. “Um... I’m Riccie, a maid-in-training. I’m at your service.” I bowed my head.

When I looked up again, the blue-eyed woman was looking at me and smiling. “I’m Carol Flue Shaltl. Nice to meet you, Riccie.”

When she said my name, I felt my heart flutter. *I’m going to be serving her? This feels like something out of a wonderful fairy tale.*

“I would like to give Riccie a tour of the house,” Cafetti said.

“Sure,” Lady Carol agreed.

“Riccie? Come on.”

“Oh...? Ah. Yes, Miss Cafetti!” I replied, flustered.

After bowing to Lady Carol, I followed Cafetti out of the room.

We went back down to the first floor and to the rear of the house. By the back door, there were two pairs of wooden sandals—one large, one small.

“The small ones are yours. Put them on and follow me.”

Cafetti put on the other pair of sandals, opened the back door, and stepped outside. I saw a pole for drying laundry. It held sheets and clothing that were swaying in the chilly spring wind.

The room where I’d met Lady Carol a few moments ago was at the front of the house. That meant she wouldn’t be able to hear us while we talked here. I guessed that Cafetti had brought me here to say something in private. And sure enough, she had.

“Riccie, do you know anything about the person you just met?”

“Yes. Um...I believe she’s a princess.” Blonde hair and blue eyes were both signs of royal blood. Even I knew that much.

“Not quite. Our former queen was poisoned and is no longer with us. She passed away. You just met Her Majesty—the new queen of this kingdom.”

“Oh... R-Really?” This was too much to take in at once. *That was Her Majesty the Queen? I never thought I’d meet anyone so important my whole life.*

I had a feeling there was a special name for this sort of meeting—an “audience,” maybe. Though I’d always thought such events only involved important people like Lord Rook, and that they happened in magnificent castles with Her Majesty the Queen sitting on a throne. The meeting we’d just had didn’t fit with any of that, but it counted as an audience with the queen nonetheless.

“Lady Carol was present when our former queen, Lord Rook, and Lady Suzuya were poisoned. She only consumed a small amount of poison, but it was enough to leave her ill. What’s more, she’s with child. There’s a baby growing in her stomach. Do you know what that means?”

I responded with my honest thoughts. “It means she’s in a terrible way.”

Although I’d never cared for women who were pregnant or giving birth, I’d heard how difficult it could be. Lady Carol was unwell because of poison at the same time, so I knew that had to be really bad. It was a terrible combination.

“Well...essentially, yes. I think your impression is accurate. Her life will be at risk during the birth.”

“I see.”

“I’d like you to do whatever you can to help care for her.”

I felt a chill run down my spine. What an important task. Assisting Lady Satsuki had been enough to make me nervous, and now I’d be taking care of Her Majesty the Queen. I didn’t think I was cut out for it.

When Cafetti saw how scared I was, she knelt down and put her hand on my shoulder. “Don’t worry. She won’t demand perfect etiquette. Just carry out the same tasks you did in the manor, and you’ll have no problems.”

“A-All right...”

Although I’d only spent one day with Cafetti in Kalakumo, I felt I could trust

her. For all I knew, she might have been the sort of person who'd simply say kind things to make me relax, but yell at me later if I did anything even slightly impolite. But I didn't think that would be the case.

*I'll just do things the way I always have,* I reassured myself as I took a deep breath.

"But there is one thing that you absolutely must not do," Cafetti warned.

"I mustn't make any loud noises? I'm sorry. I'll do my best from now on."

Back when I'd gotten lost in thought in Lady Carol's room, I'd replied to Cafetti's beckoning a little too loudly. Giving loud and clear responses was a habit I'd developed while working in the manor. I knew I'd surprised Lady Carol from the way her face had twitched.

"Yes, do try to remember that. But that wasn't what I was going to say."

"Oh. If there's something else, I'm not sure what it is."

Cafetti looked me right in the eye. "Whatever happens, never act as though you pity her. You'll smile as you talk to her. I'm sure you'll feel sad when she tells you about what happened, and that's fine, but don't pity her. She's the most important person in this entire kingdom. It's fitting that she should face the most important struggle in this world."

"All right..."

"Even if she loses the ability to walk, even if someday she needs help from others after emptying her bowels, it's not your place to pity her. Always remember that."

"I will, Miss Cafetti."

Cafetti nodded and smiled. "Good. Now let me show you around the house. We'll need to prepare a bed for you too."



About a week after my arrival, the young man I'd once seen from the manor's window came to visit in a carriage.

When Cafetti greeted him with "Welcome home," I wondered why. She later



explained to me that he used to live here. That meant Lord Rook and Lady Suzuya had once lived here too.

*So that's what this place is*, I realized. I'd only ever seen the couple in the manor, but I'd had a strange sense that this house would have suited them perfectly. When I imagined them living here as a married couple, it felt as though it was the most natural place for them to be.

Lord Yuri talked with Lady Carol, then—after staying the night—he left in the morning. I didn't know what he'd told her, but I sensed that Lady Carol was more relaxed afterward.

For the past week, she'd been wearing a troubled frown and struggling to enjoy lighthearted conversation. She'd been so anxious to know what had become of the royal capital that I think she would have hurried there herself if it hadn't been for her illness and her pregnancy. Now, however, Lord Yuri had swept all of her worries away.

In the days after he left, commonplace boredom appeared to replace Lady Carol's concerns. I tried searching the drawers in the other bedroom and found a ball of yarn along with some knitting needles. With Cafetti's permission, I took them to Lady Carol.

"Lady Carol, I found these. Perhaps they'll help you pass the time."

She looked at the yarn I'd brought. "What's that? Some unraveled thread?"

It was as if she'd never seen yarn in her life. That surprised me, because I thought everyone knew about knitting. But then I reminded myself that she'd been raised in the royal castle. Maybe no one knitted there.

"W-Well, if you use these to weave the yarn, you can create all kinds of things. Sweaters, scarves..."

Lady Carol seemed to come to some sort of realization. "Oh, I get it. I've heard about people using needles to weave things by hand. So this is what it looks like. You could make things that a loom can't."

"That's right. It's so easy that many people do it for fun and a little extra income. Lady Suzuya often knitted in the manor. I suppose these were her knitting needles long ago."

“Oh, really? They’re my mother’s...”

I was confused for a moment when she mentioned her mother. It took me a while to realize that she meant her mother-in-law.

“I’m not sure I should use them without asking,” Lady Carol said.

“I think it would be all right. Lord Yuri did say that you can use everything in this house as if it’s your own.”

“Then I’ll give it a shot. Will you teach me?”

“Of course.”

I took a pair of needles in my hands and began to show Lady Carol what to do. She soon grasped the basics and began producing a knitted strip as wide as her palm.

“This might not be a bad hobby. It’s like embroidery, except I don’t have to worry about pricking my finger.”

She used her fingertips to manipulate the needles. Her work was uneven at first, but it gradually got better as she got the hang of the process. It made me happy. The most respected and beautiful person in the kingdom was knitting in front of me. It was nice to have such an important woman all to myself for a while.

“It might be an ideal hobby for someone who’s expecting,” I said.

“Yeah. It takes my mind off things. I’ll try it for a while. Maybe I’ll even make something the little one can wear.”

“I think that would be wonderful.”

Some people found knitting tedious because it was delicate and time-consuming work, but that didn’t seem to put her off. She kept making precise little movements with her fingertips as she consumed the yarn—though her movements weren’t smooth enough to produce even stitches just yet.

After a while, I broke the cozy silence with a question that had been on my mind. “Um, Lady Carol, may I ask what sort of person he is?”

I had to wonder what sort of man a woman like her would choose to bear a

child with.

“You mean Yuri? Hmm...” Lady Carol’s fingers came to a halt as she gave it some thought. “You might think he’s kind of scary if you’ve heard about the things he’s done. He’s accomplished unbelievable things, but he never makes a big deal out of them. Most people must think that he doesn’t care about anyone besides himself.”

“I see...” *That does sound scary.*

“Heh. Don’t look so frightened. I wouldn’t have fallen for him if that’s all there was to him, now would I?” Lady Carol said with a beautiful smile.

I had to accept that. Lord Yuri was the man Lady Carol had chosen.

“There are some really good things about him. He treasures the people close to him from the bottom of his heart. He wouldn’t think twice before giving his life for any of them. That’s why I’m bursting with happiness whenever I remember how much he cares about me.”

As she spoke, Lady Carol’s gaze grew distant, and happiness filled her eyes. I could tell just how much she loved him.

“The only reason he’s barbaric toward his enemies is because it’s necessary to protect those he loves. His friends rely on him, while his enemies fear him. Whatever scary stories you hear, you should remember one thing, Riccie—you have no reason to be afraid of him.” Lady Carol patted my head as she spoke. “He already considers you family. He’ll do whatever it takes to protect you, even if it’s terrible. So whatever happens, don’t fear him.”

I didn’t really get it, but I knew Lady Carol understood Lord Yuri well. I accepted what she said as the truth. These were Lady Carol’s opinions, after all.

“I see. That’s a relief.”

“Yep,” Lady Carol replied before going back to her knitting.





About a week later, Lady Carol's scarf was complete.

"All right. All done. Would you throw it away for me, Riccie?" Lady Carol snatched up her scarf and held it out to me.

"What?!" I was so shocked I couldn't help but cry out.

Lady Carol was surprised in turn. "What's wrong? It's not like you to shout."

"But weren't you knitting this for your baby?"

"No, this was just practice. I doubt anyone would want this thing."

It was true that the scarf she held used a lot of different types of stitching. The final fifth was plump with thick cable stitches—a difficult technique to get right. But that didn't make it useless. It was a lovely scarf. I wondered whether her royal upbringing had made her picky when it came to clothing.

"But you put in all that effort..."

The real problem was that I'd have to be the one to take what Lady Carol had made and either throw it away or reduce it back to yarn. I couldn't bring myself to do it.

"There's no point keeping it if no one's going to use it," Lady Carol said.

"Could I have it, in that case?"

"You don't have to use this. You've already made something much better."

I'd been knitting along with Lady Carol. I'd actually made something like a cape, complete with button holes for attaching to the shoulders of an outfit.

"I was planning to give what I'd made to you, Lady Carol. Can't I have yours?"

"Well, I was gonna throw it anyway, so you might as well. Honestly, though, you don't have to use this thing."

When Lady Carol held the scarf out to me, I respectfully accepted it with both hands.

"This is too precious to wear. I'll treasure it my entire life."

Lady Carol laughed. "Now you're being silly."

“It’s not silly at all. This is an irreplaceable treasure.”

Lady Carol smiled back at me. But then her expression suddenly turned grim. She curled her back and put her hand to her mouth. “Ngh...”

I quickly grabbed a cup, added a large spoonful of honey from a jar, and half filled it with hot water from a pot wrapped in thick cloth that was resting over the stove. According to Lord Yuri, honey could somehow kill diseases, protect the throat, and also provide extra nutrition. He’d recommended we give it to Lady Carol.

Lady Carol started drinking as soon as I gave her the cup. After she’d swallowed a few times, she calmed down and rested her back against the bedding piled up behind her. For a while, she breathed heavily. Apparently, she had problems with irritation in her gullet.

“Thank you, Riccie.” Her voice sounded slightly hoarse.

“Please don’t speak. I need no thanks.”

I held back the tears as Lady Carol slowly stroked my hair.

### III

Sometime later, in the middle of April, a carriage drawn by a single horse arrived at the house. Unlike our usual visitors, the passengers were warriors armed with spears.

Cafetti went out to greet them, then soon called for me.

“Inform Lady Carol that Dolla Godwin wishes to see her.”

I rushed up to Lady Carol’s bedroom.

I entered the room to find Lady Carol looking out of the window. “Pardon me. Lady Carol, someone named Dolla Godwin is here.”

“Well, that explains the grim atmosphere,” she said while looking outside. “Oh, that’s right, his family serves in the royal guard.”

I didn’t understand what she was saying.

Lady Carol appeared sad and deep in thought as she looked away from the

window.

“Um... Should I say that you wouldn’t like to see him?”

“No, I just needed to prepare myself first. Send him right up. If he’s tied up in any way, tell them it’s not necessary.”

“Yes, Lady Carol.” I bowed, then softly closed the door behind me.

I headed down the familiar stairs with quiet footsteps, stepped out through the front door, and relayed the message to Cafetti.

After some discussion between Cafetti and the warriors, another man stepped out of the carriage. He was bound by a rope, just like Lady Carol had predicted. I assumed he was some sort of criminal. Once the rope was removed, he calmly rubbed his wrists, as if he was used to this sort of treatment.

The man was huge, and his expression stern with closely knit eyebrows. Just looking at him made me feel nervous. Letting him near Lady Carol seemed like a bad idea to me.

“Riccie, guide him to Lady Carol’s room,” Cafetti instructed.

“This way, please,” I said before heading toward the house. The whole time, I kept thinking it was a mistake, but there was no way I could send away a guest welcomed by both Lady Carol and Cafetti.

I removed my boots, changed into slippers, and climbed the stairs. As the man named Dolla followed behind me, I sensed that he was deeply troubled.

I didn’t usually knock on the door, but this time I made an exception. “Lord Dolla is here to see you,” I announced.

“Come on in,” a melodious voice from inside replied.

I opened the door and led Dolla into the room.

“Dolla, it’s nice to see you.” Lady Carol, who was sitting on the bed, said with a warm smile. It was a little different from the tone and expression she usually used around me. She was revealing a new side of herself.

I looked up at Dolla’s face beside me. I could tell that he was filled with many different emotions as he looked at Lady Carol. It was the first time I’d ever seen

a man openly show such a mix of strong feelings.

Dolla rushed to Lady Carol's side and dropped to his knees at her bedside. As he spoke, he began choking back sobs. "Your Highness! I'm so sorry! You were in danger, and I did nothing to help!"

Now I knew what it meant for someone to be overwhelmed with emotion.

A man kneeling by a woman's bed, tears streaming down his face, made for such a dramatic scene that I felt their story had to be heading toward some kind of wonderful conclusion. I wondered what they'd talk about. I braced myself, waiting for them to exchange words of passion. I knew that a good play could feel like real life, but I'd never known that real life could be so much like a play. I was sure that their conversation was about to be etched into my memory forever; I was so lucky to witness this moment.

"Riccie, would you step outside?"

*I have to leave?* "Oh. Might I remain here?"

"No. Step outside." Lady Carol was still smiling, but her tone was unyielding.

I had no choice but to leave the room. By this point, I'd forgotten all my worries about Dolla hurting Lady Carol.

Their voices were faint on the opposite side of the door. I could've pressed my ear to the wall to listen, but I knew it would be a terribly rude thing to do. So rude, in fact, that I had to move myself to the opposite end of the corridor in case I gave in to the temptation.

It wasn't just curiosity that made me remain on the second floor. They might call on me for something, so staying nearby was reasonable—or so I convinced myself. It wasn't as though I could hear the conversation, in any case.

After a long time spent leaning against the handrail at the top of the stairs and waiting, the door opened. Dolla's eyes were puffy, and he still didn't have full control over his emotions. I knew it wasn't a face that any man would want others to see.

"This way, please," I said.

I guided Dolla down to the first floor. It was the rear garden, rather than the



front door, that I took him to. I exchanged my slippers for sandals before stepping out, but Dolla simply walked out in his slippers, seemingly oblivious to what he was wearing.

There was an old bench outside.

“Sometimes when I’m assisting Lady Carol, I get upset just thinking how unfair it is for someone so gentle to suffer so much.”

Dolla simply stood there, showing no sign that he’d heard me.

“When I feel like that, I sit on this bench and cry. If you’d like, you can sit here until you’ve calmed down.”

I gave him a bow before heading back into the house and closing the door.

Maybe it was none of my business, but I sensed he needed a place to be alone. I was sure I’d done the right thing. For a long while after, I could hear low-pitched sobs as I set about my work in the kitchen.



Dolla left later that same day and set off walking down the hill by himself.

The next day, I asked Lady Carol, “What sort of relationship did the two of you have?”

Lady Carol smiled. “He used to be in love with me. These days, he simply cares deeply for me. I think he developed feelings for another woman.”

“Oh. I see...” This was grown-up stuff.

“It’s wonderful to have the love of men like him. It’s like an ache in my chest. You’ll find out what I mean someday, Riccie.”

“Will I?”

“Yes. Give it a few years, and men won’t be able to leave a good-looking girl like you alone. Believe me.”

“Oh...” The thought of advances from brawny men like the one I’d just seen sent a chill down my spine.

“Heh. I know it’s too soon for you yet.”

“Perhaps, if you’d like, you could tell me some stories about the man who was here yesterday?”

“Hm? Oh, sure... Here’s a story you might like.”

With a smile on her face, Lady Carol began to recall the days she’d spent at the academy in the royal capital. I couldn’t even imagine Lady Carol training in her younger days, surrounded by a bunch of boys her own age. For some reason, it made me happy just to listen as she told me all about it.

## IV

Much like a tree gradually withers and sheds its leaves in fall, Lady Carol had begun to lose her strength.

She would regularly take breaks from her knitting to write letters to some unknown recipient. These letters weren’t delivered to anyone—they were simply stored in the small drawer of the desk near her bed. Cafetti made it clear I was never to ask any questions about it.

A change came just as we were entering mid-May.

“Ugh.”

Lady Carol had been drinking soup from a bowl on a table by her bedside. It contained oats that had been boiled until they’d been reduced to an unidentifiable mush.

“Lady Carol, are you all right?” I placed my hand against her curled back.

“Yeah...”

Lady Carol would gag whenever she consumed her soup—it was clear she didn’t enjoy the meal and had no appetite at all. Regardless, she always forced herself to eat.

“Should I take it away?” I asked.

Seeing her struggle with the soup like it was some sort of trial made me want to snatch it away from her.

“No, I’ll keep going. The little one doesn’t eat unless I do.”

The little one was the baby growing in her stomach.

The way she said it made the emotions in my heart spill out, only to get caught in my eyes as tears. She was such an incredible woman. Fate had cursed her, but she fought bravely against it so that her baby could be born healthy. She didn't deserve to suffer for another moment.

Lady Carol carried another spoonful of soup to her mouth, finally emptying the bowl she'd been given. Meanwhile, I was hiding my face while I wiped away the tears collecting in my eyes.

"I'll take it away and come back with something to wash it down." I picked up the bowl and carried it down the stairs.

Cafetti was peeling a yellow fruit in the kitchen. Despite being incredibly sour, it was one of Lady Carol's favorites. It must have helped reduce the nausea she felt after eating.

Once she'd finished removing all the bitter peel, Cafetti cut the fruit into six slices and served them on a small plate. "She finished her meal again today? Lady Carol really is a fighter."

"Yes, she is. I'll take the lemon up to her."

Cafetti also added the spiral of lemon peel on the plate along with a mint leaf. "Here you go."

I took the plate and carried it upstairs. The moment I put it in front of Lady Carol, she threw a piece into her mouth. As she chewed the pulp and swallowed its juice, the anguish on her face faded.

After she'd eaten three of the pieces, she sighed. "Phew. That was lovely. Thanks."

"It's my pleasure."

I hadn't been the one to prepare it, but I was glad she was done struggling with her food.

"It smells very nice," I added.

The lemon peel Cafetti had put on the plate gave off a refreshing scent that tickled my chest. Combined with the mint, it felt like the very opposite of

unappetizing—it was hard to imagine anyone coughing or gagging because of it.

“Do you want the rest, Riccie?”

“Oh, no thank you.”

I’d tried it once before, so I knew that its harsh sourness wasn’t for me. It was a strange thing for someone to eat by itself.

Lady Carol laughed. “I was kidding.”

Her teasing cheered me up. I knew she was enjoying herself despite the suffering she’d just gone through. That was enough to make me happy.

As I smiled to myself, Lady Carol said, “Riccie, I’d like you to do a favor for me.”

“Oh... I’ll eat it if that’s your wish.”

“No, not the lemon.”

*Then what?* Lady Carol had never had a reason to hesitate before asking me to do something. It was hard to imagine refusing any request she made.

“If you’d prefer to go back to serving the Ho family, then that’s fine, but... If my baby is born healthy, would you serve them instead?”

*Serve?* I assumed she meant it in the sense of working for.

“Um, would that mean I’d be working in the royal castle in Sibiak?”

“Maybe. It depends how things go for Yuri, but it’s definitely possible.”

That at least confirmed that I’d be living and working with her yet-to-be-named child.

“I-I’d rather continue to serve you, Lady Carol, if I may.”

Lady Carol looked troubled by my blunt request. “You’re still young, Riccie. I’d love it if my child looked up to you like a sister.”

“Like a sister? But I’m just a commoner. Won’t your baby be a...a princess?” People like me weren’t even supposed to speak around princesses.

“That doesn’t matter. However the crusade turns out, Yuri’s going to rule this kingdom. He’ll create a society where competent commoners can rise to great

heights. That's how he does things at Ho Company. If my child turns into a princess who looks down on commoners the way people used to, then she won't have a good relationship with the kingdom's people. She'll never be happy."

This was all too complicated for me.

"I'm not sure I understand, but if that is your wish, then I'll accept. I'd like for your child to grow up cheerful."

If that was what helped her child's happiness, then I had to agree.

"I'm so glad. I wasn't much of a big sister myself, but I know you'll do a great job of it. I'm really relieved. This has been weighing on me for a while now." With that, Lady Carol relaxed and sank into her bedding piled up behind her.

*A big sister...?*

I'd heard that Lady Carol had been poisoned by her own sibling. I wondered what could have driven her sibling to do such a thing to a kindhearted woman like Lady Carol. I couldn't find an answer. The younger sister must have been upset about something, but no matter how I racked my brains, I couldn't imagine how she could've done something so cruel to the woman before me. If Lady Carol was my big sister, I'd be overjoyed. And yet, her little sister had tried to kill her.

"Riccie, please call in Cafetti."

"Oh, as you wish."

At Lady Carol's sudden request, I went out into the corridor and rang the bell that was sitting on a small table outside. This was how we summoned each other from upstairs.

Cafetti soon came up. "What is it?"

"Lady Carol would like to see you."

"I am here at your call," Cafetti said as we both reentered the room. She approached Lady Carol's bedside. "How might I be of assistance?"

"Cafetti, have Sham Ho and Lilly Amian returned to the royal capital already?"

“I’m afraid I’m not sure. Though peace was restored to the city, there has been some unrest, so it’s possible that they’re still in Kalakumo. Would you like me to summon them here?”

“Can you...keep this secret from Yuri?”

Cafetti’s face turned serious in an instant. She looked back at Lady Carol as if she was offended. “I can’t promise to abide by that request. I’m proud to serve Lord Yuri with complete devotion. If I feel there’s some circumstance that he should know about, I’ll be compelled to inform him.”

“I should’ve guessed. But I’m going to insist—hear me out, and I think you’ll agree.”

“Very well. I can agree to listen. Riccie.” Cafetti gave me a terrifying glare. “Stay in the garden until we’re done talking.”

When I looked at Lady Carol, she gave me a gentle smile and nodded.

As instructed, I left the room and headed straight for the garden. Once outside, I looked up at the little house I’d been living in for the past few months. Somehow, the peaceful atmosphere was gone, and I sensed that something big was about to happen. I wondered what the other two were talking about.

Their secret discussion didn’t take long. I heard the sound of footsteps descending, so I didn’t have to stay in the garden now that they’d finished.

Cafetti looked awfully troubled. When she noticed that I’d already stepped back inside, she said, “Come here.”

“Yes, Miss Cafetti.”

“Riccie.” Cafetti crouched down to my eye level and placed both hands on my shoulders.

*Oh no. She’s going to say something serious,* I realized. Cafetti always did this whenever there was something important.

The question she asked was completely unexpected. “Riccie, do you think I would ever betray Lord Yuri or do anything terrible?”

“No, not at all,” I answered without needing to think. I knew it was impossible. Cafetti would no sooner harm Lord Yuri than I would Lady Carol.

There was more chance of the world ending than her betraying him.

“Good. Then forget everything Lady Carol said a moment ago. Pretend you heard nothing, and never mention our discussion to anyone.”

This came as a surprise too.

“You won’t mention it even to Lord Yuri and Lady Satsuki,” she added. “Do you hear me?”

I was struggling to keep up. All I could gather was that Cafetti was going to do something big, but it wouldn’t harm Lord Yuri.

“Is that what Lady Carol wishes?” I asked.

“Yes, that’s right. You can be sure beyond a doubt it’s what she wants.”

That left me only one option. “Then that’s fine, Miss Cafetti. I won’t say anything to anyone.”

“Good. You’re a smart child.”

Cafetti finally broke eye contact with me as she held me tight. She’d never hugged me like this before. We stayed like that for a while before she eventually let go and stood up.

“It’s getting late. Go help Lady Carol get ready for bed.”

“Yes, Miss Cafetti.”

After leaving me to my work, Cafetti headed out the back door looking like she had something on her mind.

*Grown-ups sure have a lot to deal with,* I thought as I picked up fresh white sheets and headed upstairs.

## Afterword

Fudeorca here. It's been some time.

Volume 7 has finally been released. This volume follows Yuri as he gears up for war. Meanwhile, Carol fights a battle of her own as she recovers, Dolla is filled with regrets, while Soim is in his element.

Yuri's enemies are religious figures. But what is religion?

When I was a child, I was surrounded by negative impressions of religion and had that view myself. Looking at history, it seemed as though faith had been the cause of many wars, and—when I looked at the reality around me—I witnessed a religion that gathered money from the faithful, destroyed their lives, and finally conducted a gas attack on the subway system.

But I've learned more since then, and I've come to see things from multiple viewpoints.

Long ago, I would always listen to radio broadcasts from The Open University of Japan while I drove. Sadly, their radio courses ended in 2018, so I've been forced to abandon the habit, but I would always listen as long as the topic wasn't something I found dull. (Oftentimes I'd have to change the station if it was something like the third installment of a course on Portuguese that I couldn't understand at all.)

One such course was "Introductory Thanatology." It was by pure chance that I was listening to it.

Here's what I remember hearing: "Many people think that the majority of Japanese people are atheists. But is that really true? In my experience, only a minority of people remain complete atheists as they enter their final days. If someone can face death without thinking that there might be an afterlife, a heaven or a hell, or that they might be reincarnated to live as another life-form, then they're truly an atheist. But such people are few and far between."

It left me bewildered. *What kind of course is this?* I wondered as I continued



listening with great interest. (Note that this is something I remember hearing just once on the radio many years ago, so I've probably distorted the original meaning somewhat.)

As I listened, I concluded, *That sounds about right.*

It made me realize that “religion” can’t just be a collection of deeply superstitious people. Broadly speaking, it’s the accumulation of our culture and traditions. It’s something we’re born into and grow up with. It’s bound to permeate into people’s thinking. If we accept this broader meaning, then perhaps it’s not accurate to say that most Japanese people are atheists.

During my trip to Italy that I mentioned in volume 1, I heard something very interesting from my guide. Many Italians agree to leave everything they own to the church after their death, providing a major source of revenue for the church. I wanted to know why. According to the guide, the church—in exchange for the person’s possessions—regularly sends out volunteers who take care of the person and make sure they’re not alone in their final days. That left an impression on me. It made me feel there was a beautiful side to religion.

But, of course, religion isn’t entirely positive—there is some bad that comes with it. Faith comes with dogma, and cultural friction arises between those with differing beliefs.

For the adherents of one religion, the beliefs of adherents of other religions are nothing but misguided superstitions. A friend of mine married a foreign woman who was a passionate Catholic, and she abhorred the Buddhist altar they had in their home. “It’s an altar for demon worship,” she’d said before trying to get rid of it.

It’s hard to get along with neighbors who think we’re idiots following deluded beliefs. It might be hard for someone on an island nation like Japan to imagine such a thing, but nations that see each other in that exact way often share a border. Of course, that causes a few disagreements.

I could go on talking about religion for a long time, but I think I’m reaching the word limit, so I’ll wrap it up here.

Thank you for reading to the very end, my dear readers. You have my sincere gratitude.







The Conqueror from  
a Dying Kingdom

7



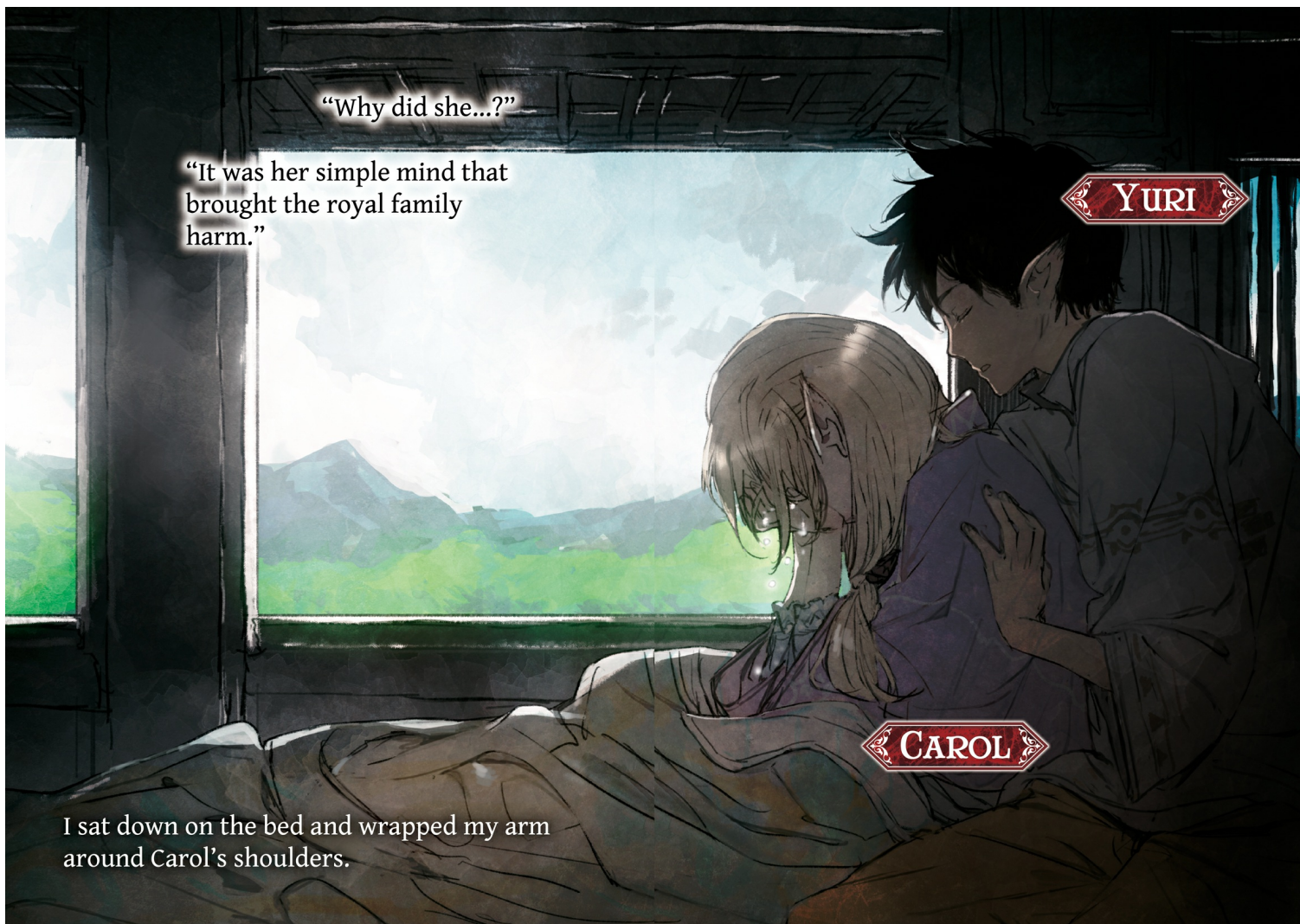
“Why did she...?”

“It was her simple mind that brought the royal family harm.”

YURI

CAROL

I sat down on the bed and wrapped my arm around Carol's shoulders.





“Show them our might!  
The forces of witches  
will learn the power  
of the Ho family on  
the battlefield!”



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The Conqueror from a Dying Kingdom: Volume 7

by Fudeorca

Translated by Shaun Cook Edited by Maral RahmanPour

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