

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.



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



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

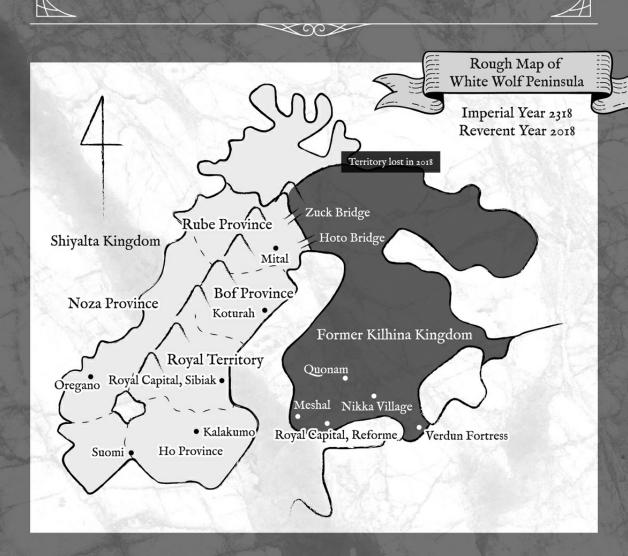
The world is inhabited by two types of humans—the Shanti and the Kulati—that are locked in a battle for survival. Invaders from Kulati nations—who've branded the Shanti as demons—have left only two Shanti kingdoms standing, both of which are on White Wolf Peninsula.

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.

As the neighboring kingdom of Kilhina was invaded by a "crusader" force, Yuri traveled there as the leader of an observation unit made up of Knight Academy students.

As the kingdom was collapsing, he protected Kilhinan refugees from those crusaders, claiming victory in his first battle in the process.





Chapter 1 + Home Soil, the Unit Disbands —

Chapter 2 - Loved Ones — ______

Chapter 3 - The Ceremony —

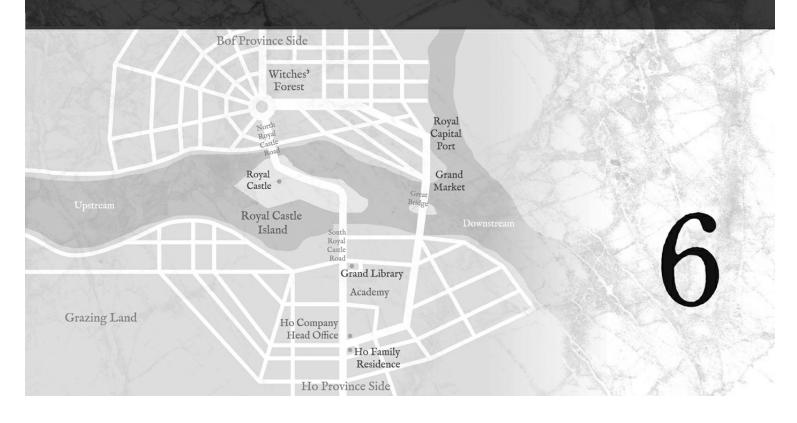
Chapter 4 🗧 A Return to Ordinary Life —

Interlude I - A Window into White Birch —

Chapter 5 - A Run of Good Luck —

Interlude II 👙 Felling a White Birch -

Chapter 6 - A Meeting over Dinner



Chapter 1 — Home Soil, the Unit Disbands

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It was the night after we'd left Kilhina behind and set foot onto Shiyalta's soil. The victory celebration had come to a natural conclusion as more and more people fell asleep, and now the bonfire was starting to dwindle as the night grew late.

I stood up from the log I'd been sitting on and walked into the forest.

"Hey, come here."

I was surprised to hear a voice call to me suddenly from the darkness. The owner hadn't made any other sounds. To make matters worse, my eyes were used to bright light after watching the fire, so all I could see in the direction of the voice was darkness. Whoever it was, they'd hidden themselves in a particularly dim spot among the trees.

"Don't scare me like that."

I'd recognized the voice as Tillet, the royal sword.

"You did well, didn't you?" she said.

"If you want to talk, can it wait a moment?" I replied. "I got up to take a leak."

I could sense her knitting her brow in the shadows. Considering that she must've always lived among other women, she might not have even been familiar with the idea of peeing while standing.

"Get it over with," she said.

"Will do."

I took about ten steps into the forest and quickly relieved myself against the roots of a conveniently placed tree. I hadn't been drinking alcohol, but I'd had to drink a lot of water to make it look like I was. Once my bladder was empty, I shook off the last drops and adjusted my pants.

I walked back to Tillet and told her, "I'm done. What do you want to talk about?"

Tillet sighed. "You're unbelievable if you can do that with someone like me behind you."

"I don't need to watch myself around you, do I?"

"Most people would be on their guard."

She must've heard the sound. It was slightly embarrassing.

"You're not my enemy," I said.

The queen would be thanking me. I certainly hadn't done anything to turn her or the royal swords against me. Tillet wouldn't just do what I told her, so it didn't always feel like we were on the same side, but she definitely wasn't an enemy. It felt most accurate to describe us as acquaintances, as odd as that sounded.

"Not right now, no," she replied menacingly.

I guess what she means is, "But maybe tomorrow... Heh heh..." That's not very funny.

"Let's get to the point—does Her Majesty have a message for me?"

"You're to head back before everyone else so you can report your accomplishments."

My accomplishments? We'd barely achieved anything. It was true that we'd killed many enemy soldiers, but they'd been from a force of less than a thousand operating in a limited region. Our victory hadn't had any strategic importance. There was nothing to say except that we'd fought in the war and hadn't lost any battles. Oh, and sorry for destroying the bridge.

"It gives you an excuse to get away from here, doesn't it?" Tillet pointed out.

I was glad about that, at least. After being away from the royal capital for so long, I was worried about how my business was doing. After I'd gotten this far, I didn't want to waste another week or two on a slow march home.

There was also the issue of my foot. Given how bad my injuries were, I

wanted it treated properly as soon as possible. Whether or not the queen had guessed I'd be injured, I was genuinely glad to have a royal summons as an excuse to hurry back to the royal capital.

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"And I guess I should bring Carol?"
"Obviously."
"All right. Fine."
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The unit had a good command structure in place. It would operate just fine without her. Besides, we were in Rube Province. Liao was in his home territory, and his family was on hand to give him whatever help he needed.

"Come to think of it..." I remembered that there was something I really needed to ask her. "It was your people who took Princess Tellur from us, wasn't it?"

"That's right... I thought that was made clear enough to your soldier."

I'd guessed that the royal swords hadn't wanted to speak too openly. They'd probably announced themselves in some sort of roundabout way.

"Anything subtle would've been lost on that particular soldier. He's not the intelligent, well-read sort."

Not everyone knew how to read between the lines—especially not him.

"I'll take more care next time... Maybe I'll leave a letter or something."

"As long as I know she's safe, it doesn't matter now."

There was silence between us for a while as I waited for her to speak again. When she didn't continue, it felt like a sign that she had nothing more to tell me for now. At the very least, she didn't have another important announcement for me. But then, perhaps hoping for some casual chat, she broke the silence. "The troops you fought off... The Rube family's birds are chasing them down."

"So I heard. Did you people figure out who the enemy's commanding officer was?"

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"Hm? No..."
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I'd been eager to find out their identity, but apparently no one had looked

into it yet. Perhaps no one ever would. Since I wasn't capable of sending a spy of my own to join the enemy's army, I couldn't investigate either. Fortunately, that sort of information tended to be easy to get hold of after the fact. As time went on, it would spread by word of mouth. Once the crusade was over, I'd learn everything I wanted to know via the Albio Isles.

Tillet acted oblivious to my attempts to wind down the conversation and went on talking. "There's a lot of excitement in the royal capital over your victory right now, but also many desperately trying to downplay it."

"Downplay? In what way?"

"They're asking what we'll do about the swelling refugee population—won't they all begin to starve? That sort of thing."

Oh... They've got a point.

Before the war had even started, the Shiyalta Kingdom had already struggled with a constant labor surplus due to the inflow of people. The population would've dropped a little after some of the reinforcements dispatched by Shiyalta had died in battle, but that decrease wouldn't make a real dent in the numbers. After all, less than ten percent of the population were serving as soldiers.

The population was fifty percent male, so if they were all conscripted—aside from the children and the elderly—that would make about forty percent of the population soldiers. However, that wouldn't leave any infrastructure to support the army, making war impossible. If society were reduced to just women, the elderly, and children, people would struggle to put food on the table. There was no way such a society could produce the surplus necessary to support an army that used up massive amounts of resources in the course of its operation.

For example, if a settlement somewhere was attacked by bandits, they'd have enough food in their storehouses for the men to all stop working while they took up arms and fought. That would make about forty or fifty percent of the settlement's population key fighters. But even then, they couldn't all be marched off to fight in a real war.

If about ten percent of the population were part of Shiyalta's army when reinforcements were dispatched, then even a ten percent casualty rate within

that group would only represent a loss of one percent of the overall population. Furthermore, the kingdom wouldn't dispatch its entire army, even as reinforcements, so the death rate for the overall population wouldn't even be one percent. so the death rate wouldn't even be one percent. At any rate, I estimated that the drop in population caused by the war had been less than 0.2 percent.

The number of refugees, on the other hand, was enough to raise the population by a significant amount. Anyone downplaying my achievements could say, fairly convincingly, "Sure he worked hard, but did he save anyone in the long run?"

"I didn't have my hopes up anyway," I told Tillet. "I never expected everyone to be rooting for me to win."

I guessed that she was trying to warn me that there were many people within the nest of witches who opposed me, just so I wouldn't be disappointed when I got there. I appreciated her sparing a thought for a young man who might be a little drunk on glory after his first victory in battle.

"Oh ...? You'll be fine then."

"Is that everything?" I asked.

"Yes. You don't need us to provide an eagle, do you?"

"We've got enough."

"By the way, maybe you're not worried about enemies in the royal capital, but you should still watch out for eavesdroppers around you," Tillet warned.

"He's just waiting for us to finish talking."

I didn't know who it was, but I'd noticed someone had been following me when I'd gotten up to take a leak. I'd been about to ask them what they wanted when another voice had taken me by surprise from deeper within the trees.

I hadn't planned to reveal any secrets here, so my bigger concern had been that the royal sword might mention some sensitive information herself. But then I figured that if I'd noticed someone listening, she would have too.

"Hmph. Then I'll leave you."

With that, I briefly heard the faint rustling of dead leaves beneath the royal sword's feet before she vanished completely. She'd been surprisingly friendly today. Perhaps she'd let her hair down a little since our troubles were over for the time being.

"Well then, who's there?" I called out.

Liao stepped out from behind a tree and into the light of the bonfire. "Sorry," he said, sounding guilty.

"I'd lecture you, but if you heard us, it saves me time from having to explain."

"Explain what?"

"The march from tomorrow onward—I'll leave it to you and Myalo. Can you handle it?"

"Oh, that. Sure," Liao replied, as if the task was no big deal.

"So, what did you want?" I asked him. There had to be something. I highly doubted that he'd noticed the royal sword before me and followed for the sake of listening to her.

"We need to talk," Liao replied. "Is now a good time?"

"Yeah, now's fine."

Talk about what? I've got a bad feeling.

"I'll be blunt—you've gotten quite friendly with Her Highness, haven't you?"

I didn't have an immediate response. So that's what this is. But how'd he notice?

"What gives you that idea?" I asked, without denying anything.

"You know me. I enjoy the company of a woman or two. I got the impression that you and her were awfully close when you arrived in Reforme."

Seriously? I guess I shouldn't underestimate a womanizer's intuition.

It wasn't as if I'd been flirting with Carol the whole time. Liao couldn't be going on much more than a hunch.

"It's just that the two of us went through some tense moments."

"It looked like something more physical to me."

"You're wrong. Anyway, what if I said you're right? What of it?"

Obviously, he wasn't carrying a recording device, so a confession from me wouldn't be worth anything. I had to wonder how he'd benefit from hearing me admit to it. And I didn't feel I was morally obligated to explain myself to him. If I had to explain myself to anyone, that person certainly wasn't Liao.

Liao must've understood that too. He knew he wouldn't get a clear answer from me until I understood his intentions.

"If I'm right, then I'd like your other woman for myself," Liao said.

I was so confused for a moment that all I could do was repeat it back to him. "My other woman?"

"I mean Myalo."

Huh? "What about her?"

"I want to make her my wife."

Ah... But why?

"Don't tell me you've fallen in love with her."

Thinking back, in all the time Myalo and I had been apart, she'd been by Liao's side acting as his secretary.

She was also a leash that I'd put on him to keep him under control. If Liao grew reckless, it was Myalo's job to hold him back. As it turned out, that hadn't been necessary throughout the expedition. Instead, she'd simply been useful to Liao the entire time.

I realized now that they were bound to have developed a strong bond by this point. But from what I'd seen, there was still some distance between them. Their relationship never appeared to go beyond anything work-related and professional. That said, maybe they acted differently when I wasn't around.

"Yeah, I have," Liao admitted. "I know I'll never find anyone who'd make a more reliable wife than her."

He fell for her? Really? Liao wasn't talking like someone who'd just fallen head

over heels. I doubted what he felt was love. To me, it sounded as though he wasn't actually into her; he just thought he'd found a wife who'd serve him well.

"Either way, Myalo's not my property. You shouldn't talk like you'd be taking her from me."

"Yeah, I know that. I just thought maybe you had dibs on her already."

"If you want to make a pass at her, don't let me stop you. I'm not inter—" I hesitated. I've got a bad feeling about this. "I don't have the authority to stop you."

And even if I did... I don't deserve her. It didn't make any sense for me to think about whether I deserved her or not, but nonetheless, that was the conclusion I'd reached.

"Then make a pass I shall." Liao gave me an over-the-top bow, reminiscent of a gentleman thanking a lady.

"But whatever it is you do to woo women in taverns, don't go thinking it'll work on her."

"I don't need a lesson. I've probably got more experience with women than you."

"That's not what I meant."

I was surprised at myself for growing so irritated. I wasn't seething with rage, though—it was more like the annoyance I felt when a fly buzzed around my head.

"Make a pass if you want, but don't get too pushy. If I hear you've forced her in any way..."

I thought for a moment. What if there was a man who assaulted Myalo and used force to make her his own? What would I do?

Liao waited for me to continue, showing not a hint of fear.

I'd kill him. It was the only answer I could come up with. "It'll be the last thing you do," I warned him.

"Whew... Yeah, I know. I won't get too pushy." With that, Liao turned his back to me, signaling the end of our conversation.

"Hey," I called after him.

"Hm? What now?" Liao simply looked back over his shoulder, like he didn't think I'd have much more to say.

"I let you borrow my dagger, and now that you've learned how sharp it is, you want it for yourself. Is that how it is?"

"No... Well, not too far off, actually. But I'm not just thinking of it like a business arrangement. I wouldn't go after a woman I found annoying... Not unless I was just sleeping with her."

It wasn't much of an answer, but it showed that Liao did at least have preferences, personality-wise.

"But Myalo's not like that," Liao continued. "Her only flaw is she's a little slender."

"If Myalo's a dagger, she's a dagger that chooses its wielder."

"What?" Liao said simply, like he didn't understand me.

"She won't stand by a master who bores her or lets her blade grow dull. She has to accept you."

Myalo had always done as I'd told her. When I told her to perform some new task, she dropped whatever she was doing and switched to the new job. But she'd never chosen to obey Liao—I'd merely assigned her to him.

That might've misled Liao into thinking that Myalo was an ordinary person. He probably thought she was no different from the women in cities, daughters from knight families, and his employees. He'd think he could impress her with a promise of luxuries and a high salary, with a few smooth pickup lines, or with offers of a comfortable life.

But Myalo wasn't like that. If she'd agreed to serve her own family, she would've gained a life far more stable and luxurious than anything Liao could've offered. But she'd thrown it all away and chosen a life out here, covered in blood, sweat, and dirt. Liao had failed to understand that she wasn't moved by

the things that moved most people.

"All right. I'll bear it in mind."

I couldn't tell whether Liao had really understood me.

I responded, "Okay. Then fine."

Liao walked away.

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The next morning, I delayed everyone's breakfast a little while we planned for my departure. Then, after some basic preparations—such as securing myself an eagle—I had a quick bite to eat and got ready to set out. I also made sure to give the eagle I'd borrowed some food, and petted its head while it ate.

It all went smoothly. Carol was at my side, and everyone had gathered to see us off. There was nothing left for us to do here.

I took a step closer to Myalo and called to her too softly for anyone else to hear. "Myalo."

"Yes?"

For a moment, I felt guilty. It won't be fair if she hears it from me first, I decided. I won't say anything to put her off.

"What is it?"

"If anything happens, come home right away."

"Hm? Something like what?"

Myalo didn't understand what I meant. Of course she didn't.

"If you feel like you're not safe, I mean. Abandon the mission and come home."

"Not safe...?"

Myalo's brain appeared to begin working as she searched for the meaning of my words, but she continued to look confused. Her thoughts were probably, Why wouldn't I be safe? We've been in constant danger up to this point, so why

wait until this late to warn me to be cautious?

There was no way she could've guessed that I was worried Liao might try something.

"Just remember what I said."

"Okay... I will," Myalo replied, while still looking like she didn't understand.

"See you."

I hopped onto my eagle and quickly fastened my safety harness. Carol had already made her preparations and was waiting for me.

"Everyone, as much as I hate to do it, I'm leaving the rest to you all," Carol said.

Liao yelled, "All troops, salute your captain and Her Highness!"

At Liao's command, the unit members simultaneously dropped to one knee and saluted.

From my eagle, I gave them a basic salute in return, then had the bird take off.

Seeing Sibiak from the air for the first time in many months filled me with nostalgia. I was often away from the place during the Knight Academy's longer vacations, but my latest absence had felt far longer than any before it. It had been like I was returning for the first time in years. That had to be down to my experiences in battle.

I wanted to circle in the air for a while just to take in the view, but there wasn't any time for that. I flew straight and reached the castle so quickly that I wasn't able to process all the emotions I felt. But I didn't stop at the castle—I kept going and headed for the Ho residence.

Carol's eagle accelerated as she came alongside me. I looked over and saw a frightening look on her face. But I simply shook my head, turned away, and descended toward the residence.

The lawn was greener than when I'd last been here. The carefully placed trees

and shrubbery were also thicker than when I'd departed. That had been three whole months ago. It hit me that I'd originally departed with Stardust.

Carol followed me down to land her eagle next to mine.

"What are you doing?" was the first thing she asked.

"You can go on ahead to the castle," I replied while removing my harness.

"What's wrong? Isn't reporting to my mother the highest priority?" She sounded a little angry. Meeting the queen was the very reason we were here, so her anger wasn't entirely misplaced.

"Since it's not a particularly urgent report, I want to clean myself up a bit first. I'll be meeting with Her Majesty, after all."

My clothes were fairly dirty, and needless to say, I hadn't bathed in weeks.

Carol was silent until she'd looked me down from head to toe. "Good point."

I was in such a state that even someone as pushy as Carol couldn't argue over this. It would be sheer rudeness to attend an audience with the queen in my current state.

"Go on ahead," I told her. "I'll see you at the castle."

"Got it. But don't keep me waiting."

I removed my watch from my pocket and opened it to check the time. It was a little after 2 p.m.

I was hungry because I hadn't eaten a proper meal, but I couldn't expect to be invited to lunch at the castle if I were to arrive now.

"It's 2 o'clock... Want to grab a bite first?" I asked, pointing toward the residence.

For a few moments, Carol appeared deep in thought. Or rather, it was probably more like she was fighting temptation caused by her hunger.

"I'll pass," she said finally.

"All right. I'll be there in time for dinner."

"Okay."

I noticed Carol was looking behind me. I turned around and saw the head maid rushing over.

Carol hastily bid her eagle to take off once more, perhaps to spare herself an over-the-top reception from the maid.

Naturally, all that about wanting to fix my appearance was a lie.

If that had been my only reason, I could've headed straight to the royal castle, where I'd be dragged into one of their bathrooms. It wasn't necessary to have visited my family's residence.

I told the head maid to prepare fresh clothes and a bath, then after shaking off a few other maids, I headed to Ho Company's head office across the street, still in my dirty clothes.

When I entered the office, I found the reception area neat and tidy, but not to an excessive degree. A young woman was sitting behind the desk in reasonably smart clothes, flicking through some documents that were out of my view, presumably to check them over.

According to the company president, Caph, she was the granddaughter of a self-made merchant who'd been considerably influential thirty or so years ago. It had taken the family just one generation to squander all of its properties and fortune, but since both her grandfather and father had married beautiful women, she was equally beautiful thanks to the genetics she'd inherited. She'd received a basic education that meant she could read and write, and she had a knack for remembering names and faces. That made her an ideal receptionist.

Behind her, my cousin Beaule was producing a series of clacking sounds as she vigorously worked with the abacus I'd given her. As I viewed her profile, I couldn't detect any happiness or frustration on her face. She was more like a computer performing calculations beyond human comprehension in some unstaffed server room. Despite being busy at work, I got the sense that she was a little bored. She'd mastered the job.

The receptionist eventually realized that a visitor had arrived and looked up from the documents in her hands. When she recognized me, her eyes went wide with surprise, and then she covered her mouth with both hands. After

making her feminine gesture, she cried, "Chairman Yuri!"

Beaule, surprised to hear a loud voice, looked over, similarly wide-eyed. Her chair clattered as she leaped to her feet. "Lord Yuri!"

"I just got back."

"Oh... I'm so relieved. I mean it," Beaule said. She looked ready to start crying.

"So what's going on?"

I considered asking them what had been going on throughout my absence, but these two wouldn't know. I'd get quicker answers by asking Caph.

"We're all doing well here."

"I mean... Where's Caph? And has Harol come back?"

"Mr. Caph went out for a while, but I know where he is. I can fetch him for you," the receptionist said.

"Please do. What about Harol?"

"Mr. Harol? I haven't seen him around lately."

So Harol hasn't made it back yet. Gah. Clouds of despair began to fill my head. Does that mean he never found it?

"I'm going home to change. Fetch Caph for me in the meantime."

"Yes, Sir. I'll do so immediately."

"Thanks."

Did Harol fail...?

I got out of the lukewarm bath, dried myself, and ate the light meal that had been prepared for me.

I'd lived an unusual lifestyle for so long that it had begun to feel normal. I'd seen everything in this house before, yet it all felt new. It was like I'd just moved into a new home, where I had yet to familiarize myself with the environment.

Everything here was different from the battlefield. I'd been unable to bathe, and I'd felt constantly tense as I wondered when the next fight to the death

might start. Now that I'd been thrown back into a cultured life, surrounded by life's comforts, it was hard to settle back in. But I reassured myself that after a week or so it would all feel natural once more.

The head maid appeared with impeccable timing just as I finished the last bite of the bread that had been prepared for me.

"Caph Ornette of Ho Company and a friend of his are here to see you," she said.

"Show them in."

"What about your clothes?"

"I'm fine like this."

I was in my loungewear. These were unassuming clothes designed to be comfortable. Although the head maid hadn't said so, I assumed that she hadn't given me my formal clothes right after my bath because there was a small chance I'd get food on them while eating. Even members of the Ho family didn't have many sets of fine clothes. If I did get a lot of formal clothing made, it would all need retailoring at some point anyway because I was still growing.

"Bring him in here," I said.

I didn't want to get up because my feet were hurting. I could've walked with a staff, but I couldn't be bothered with that either.

"Very well." The maid bowed, cleared the table, and left the room.

After a short wait, the door opened.

"I've brought your guests," the maid said.

Caph smiled as he entered the room. "It's been a while."

Now there's a familiar face.

Behind Caph there appeared another familiar face.

"Hey!"

It was Harol. So he's not dead after all.

"Sorry for being gone so long," I said.

"Don't worry about it," Harol said as he chose a chair near mine.

Caph frowned. This sort of thing irritated him because he considered business manners important. I could read his thoughts: *You might be a guest in a chieftain household, but you still should wait for an invitation to sit down, you brainless oaf!*

"We're just glad you're safe," Caph said.

"Caph, you should sit too," I told him.

Caph took a seat across the table from Harol.

"Want a drink? Liquor, maybe?"

"Sure, I'll have something. We're celebrating," Harol said.

"I'll have one too," Caph said.

That was rare. Caph rarely drank, probably because he didn't want to go back to being an alcoholic.

"Very well. I'll bring your drinks shortly," the maid said.

Even after seeing Harol slouching in his chair with his legs crossed like he felt completely at home, the maid didn't frown. She simply bowed briefly and left us.

"Now bring me up to date about what's been going on. You first, Caph."

"I'll write up a proper report later, but... We had two or three incidents. Nothing major. Most projects are progressing smoothly. Lilly's work has slowed to a stop, but I'm sure her condition will improve now that you're back. In other news, we established a new trade route to the north. It's a deal that relies on Bof Province, so things quickly started falling apart when they heard you'd had an accident. I think it'll be salvaged now they know you're okay, though. Hm, what else..." Caph clearly had a long list of things to tell me, but he came to a stop. "Actually, I think Harol should tell you his news first. You can read my written report later."

Now Harol took his turn. "I found the new continent."

"Really?" My heart began to race.

"Really. And let me tell you, it's one huge landmass. We followed the shore for four days straight and never made it to the opposite coast."

That confirmed that he hadn't gotten confused after he'd discovered something small, like Easter Island.

Wow, he did it. All that investment paid off.

"Well? Were there people?"

"People?" Harol looked a little confused. It was like he'd never anticipated this question.

"I mean, like, indigenous people."

"I didn't see any. We even went ashore and didn't see anyone. There aren't any people or nations there, I'm sure of it."

"What do you mean?"

There could've been indigenous people in a region he hadn't visited. If so, I didn't want to kill them or take away their land if I could avoid it. If there was going to be fighting, I wouldn't be the one to start it.

"We spent four days following the coast without finding a single fishing village. How could anyone be living there?"

Ah, I see what he means. His reasoning was sensible. I asked, "Could something be stopping them from creating fishing villages?"

"No, nothing. We tried fishing and got a massive haul. There weren't high cliff faces across the coast either. The coast wouldn't be deserted like that if there was a nation of people there, would it?"

I believed him when he said he'd fished there. For sailors like Harol, only death from starvation would await if they ran out of food and water. Indeed, he'd once come close to dying that way himself. For that reason, sailors only ate their preserved foods when they couldn't obtain fresh food locally. Even if a ship didn't have large fishing nets, there'd always be a fishing rod or two on

board. They might've fished through most of the voyage and found the waters bountiful.

It was hard to imagine no one living nearby if the sea provided such a rich source of food. There could be a civilization that hadn't invented bows or discovered iron, but without some special circumstances, there'd never be a civilization near the sea that didn't know about fish or fishing.

"That's great. So we can assume there are no indigenous people."

So that makes it virgin soil. There has to be a reason for the lack of people, but I can worry about that later.

"Right," Harol replied.

"The next problem is keeping it secret. How's that going?" I asked.

Caph raised his hand and began to speak. "First, I decided to have all the crew confined to Suomi."

"You imprisoned them?"

It was a helpful decision, but it sounded heartless to imprison the crew right after they'd returned from a long voyage.

"No, I let them visit taverns. But I ordered them to keep quiet, so they won't talk as long as they stick together."

"I trust my first mate to keep them under control," Harol added. "The way things are, they're not gonna get drunk and blab about it."

Information had a natural tendency to leak. A system of information management generally depended on everyone's self-control and sense of responsibility, but Harol's hired crew members weren't particularly exceptional in those regards. I'd expect them to discuss their excitement at finding a new continent, their accomplishments during the voyage, and the work they'd accomplished—either in taverns or at home.

There weren't many people with enough self-control to persevere in keeping their secrets under wraps. Some might even talk in exchange for money. Unfortunately, although we couldn't trust them to hold their tongues, we couldn't keep them confined indefinitely.

"That said, it's been over ten days since the ship got back, and we haven't let them be with any women yet. They'll be approaching their breaking point."

None of them could be left alone with a prostitute. It didn't take much foresight to realize that tales of their adventures would make ideal pillow talk. No matter how much they'd been warned to keep quiet, there'd be at least one idiot who'd blab everything.

When a ship came ashore, the crew often headed straight for a brothel. Denying them that while keeping them confined for ten days was harsh treatment. Some would grow nervous, while others would grow angry.

"Hmmm..."

It was a dilemma. Killing the whole crew would be ideal from an information management perspective—dead men tell no tales. But we couldn't do that. And even if we did, we'd never make any progress if we were constantly killing anyone involved in our work on the new continent. More people would be involved in the project as time went on, which meant more lips we'd have to seal.

"Add an extra five thousand ruga to the payment we've already given to each crew member. That should hold their tongues for a while," I said.

"Hush money?" Caph asked. As the person in charge of our finances, he didn't look pleased.

"At the same time, be *very* clear about what'll happen if someone talks. You'll have to scare them, but also let them know that we reward loyalty."

The information was going to leak out at some point, regardless of whether it took only a week or a year. We'd eventually have countless sailors involved, at which point the basic principles of information management told me it would be impossible to keep them all quiet. So the problem wasn't how to stop them from talking, but how to delay the inevitable for as long as possible.

The most effective measure was possibly a misinformation campaign that made any leaks sound ridiculous. We could spread false information the moment word got out. We'd say it was actually a small island, that they'd encountered it while lost at sea and couldn't find it again, or that they'd

mistaken the northern ice sheets for a continent.

"Sounds like a tall order for him," Caph said.

"Who do you think I am?" Harol snapped back. "Any captain worth his salt knows how to put fear into his crew."

"You handled a long voyage successfully. I know I don't need to worry about your capabilities there," I praised him. "But tell me if anyone quits or suddenly stops showing up. If someone goes missing, there's a good chance something happened to them."

"All right. Got it."

I was learning how it felt to be a mob boss, making sure no one stepped out of line. Although we weren't doing anything illegal, it scared me to imagine someone who knew our secrets leaving our organization.

"We'll start by quietly gathering people up and sending them over there to start a small town," I said. As luck would have it, there was no shortage of people.

Caph raised his hand.

"What?" I asked.

"I'm fine with all that, but what do we treat this new continent and the new town as? Is it all territory belonging to the Ho family?"

"Ah..." I hadn't considered that.

The concept of land ownership allowed for places to belong to an individual. That only applied within our nation, though, and it was completely distinct from the concept of dominion over a territory. Territory was something a nation took by force and worked to maintain.

If I was foolish enough to announce the discovery of a new continent in my upcoming meeting with Her Majesty, the Shiyalta Kingdom would announce sovereignty over the land as a matter of course, and it would all be taken from me. Whatever happened, I wouldn't mention it to the royals. That would end everything. The information would definitely leak to the witches, who'd be desperate to take control of the land themselves. They might even propose

abandoning the peninsula immediately in favor of this new continent.

"I'll have to get advice about that... In any case, I'm not going to let the royal family get in our way. For now, let's forget about the legal arrangement."

"What I'm really asking is whether it'll generate cash," Caph said. "Just building a town won't create profit, will it? Are we going to impose taxes?"

His thinking was as practical as ever.

"Hmm... Well, there's still a lot to think about. We can always charge a fare for the voyage."

"That'll do for now. But if it's going to be the Ho family's territory someday, then I think the Ho family should fund everything. To be frank, the company gambled a lot of money to find the place, and now we're the ones laying the foundations. I don't think the company should offer it up on a silver platter to anyone else."

That made sense. Caph was being entirely reasonable. But I couldn't talk about this with my family yet. Even the Ho family couldn't ensure the information was carefully controlled. For example, suppose I talked to my dad, Rook. He might naively consult with his advisors over it and ruin everything. The news would definitely leak to the witches, and it might even spread all the way to the Kulati.

"I'll give it more thought, but... I think we can just say it's land belonging to the company for now."

"What?" Caph looked puzzled.

"Think about it. This kingdom..."

I fell silent. I thought I'd heard footsteps in the corridor.

"What's wrong?" Harol asked.

Just then, there was a knock at the door.

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"Pardon my intrusion. I've brought your drinks."

The maid gave us two different bottles of liquor, some glasses from a tray,

and a set for making tea.

"Thank you. You can go," I said.

The maid stopped just as she was about to pour a drink into one of the glasses. She looked unsure.

"We'll handle the rest ourselves," I reassured her.

"Pardon me," she said politely before leaving the room.

"I'm surprised you heard her," Caph said.

"My ears have gotten more sensitive."

"They do say war changes people," Harol quipped.

"I guess so." I began pouring a drink into my own cup. "Now go on, have a drink."

The two of them studied the two bottles on the table.

"I knew you'd have good brands," Caph said.

"Yeah. These powerful families are something else." For once, Harol agreed with Caph.

Glass bottles themselves were rather expensive, so any alcohol sold in one was likely to be premium, but apparently these were exceptional. I still had no interest in alcohol, so liquor brands meant nothing to me.

"Think I'll have a drink of this while I've got the chance."

"Same here."

Caph took the bottle in one hand and quickly poured it into two glasses. He only put a little in each glass.

"Is that a good one?" I asked.

"The other one's actually more expensive...but this one came from a Kilhinan distillery. We'll never be able to drink it again."

"Ah..." Which means they don't want to waste this chance.

"All right," Harol said. "Let's raise a toast. It's an odd way to do it, I know."

Odd because one of us was holding a teacup.

"Let's drink to the safe return of our chairman." Caph took the lead, though he didn't speak much louder than he had been. "Cheers."

"Cheers," Harol and I repeated.

With that, Caph and Harol touched glasses with a clink, and then both did the same with my teacup. I tried my tea and found it was just the regular old tea that I often had after a meal.

Caph and Harol both finished their glasses in a single go. I thought they'd been serious about the toast, but it looked like they'd just wanted an excuse to indulge.

Now they were both without a drink. I turned over two more teacups that were beside the tea-making set and poured in some tea.

"We got interrupted just now, didn't we?" Caph said to me, urging me to continue.

"This kingdom's finished," I said. "Three of our five chieftain families are cowards, and the political system's controlled by the witches. Whatever's coming, we'll never recover from it."

To say we had troubles both at home and abroad was putting it gently. The kingdom needed complete restructuring, but I couldn't see a way to do it.

"We don't know when there'll be another crusade," I added. "It could even happen within the next five years."

"When it happens, are you planning on moving Ho Company in its entirety over to the new continent?"

"That's highly likely... It's the best plan we've got. In any case, we can't leave the planning until after the kingdom's already fallen. And if word leaks out before then, people will get in our way, and the new continent will just turn into a copy of Shiyalta. That'd be pointless."

"That's true..."

"Whether we make a profit out of this is a secondary concern right now. Money's important, but we can't use it without our freedom. If we make a loss, we can tell ourselves we spent the money to ensure our safety. That sounds like a healthy investment."

Without a country to live in, there'd be no one to ensure that our rights over our own wealth were respected, and no one to stop outsiders from coming in and taking it all away. Being rich could be meaningless by itself.

"Yeah, you're right," Caph agreed. "If we say we're making it possible to store our wealth where no nation can touch it, it doesn't sound so bad."

"Okay. Are we done talking business?" I asked. "Looks like we've got a ton of things to do."

First, Harol would have to carry over settlers on the next ship.

The excess of people was in our favor, but we had to choose them wisely. The first settlers would have the task of getting the community established—we couldn't just ship over a few random people.

In particular, if we carelessly sent over some of the many people who'd left Kilhina, the Kilhinans might try to start their own nation there to regain their independence. Once the new settlement got off the ground, they could easily declare, "This is the new Kilhina. Shiyaltans need to get out."

To make matters worse, the Kilhinan royal family would continue for as long as Tellur lived. I didn't know how revered the Kilhinan royal family was in the eyes of its people, but Tellur would certainly be something symbolic that they could center themselves around. If there was internal conflict on the new continent at this early stage, it could prove fatal.

"What I'll do first is head for Suomi with some cash," Harol said. "I feel sorry for the crew."

"All right. You do that."

I wanted him to let them be with women soon. He could make reservations at a brothel to deal with that.

"What about you, Yuri? If you're free today, we could gather up the employees and hold a banquet," Caph suggested. "I'm sure they'd love to hear about your travels."

"No, Her Majesty is expecting me. I can't leave her waiting."

The two of them frowned at me.

"You mean she's waiting right now? And you're sitting on your ass here?" Harol asked.

"What're you doing? Are you even prepared to meet Her Majesty?" Caph looked serious.

They both seemed to think an audience with the queen was a big deal, but I knew that the discovery of a new continent would take up more space in the history books than a meeting with a queen or two. Future scholars would probably be willing to pay hundreds of thousands of ruga for a copy of the minutes of this meeting. My meeting Her Majesty, on the other hand, would be of no real interest to anyone. I knew that nothing I discussed with Queen Shimoné would change history.

"I just have to be there in time for dinner. It's not like I have any urgent news for her."

I hadn't actually been told that, to be fair—I'd been the one who'd decided I wasn't going until dinner. It would probably be a good idea to get there a little earlier.

"This goes without saying, but don't make Her Majesty angry. Without her help, we wouldn't have won a recent legal battle asking for royalties related to our paper patents."

I was surprised to learn that Caph felt a strong sense of loyalty toward our queen. I felt that, if anything, it was *her* who owed *me*. I'd agreed to a lot of unreasonable requests as part of the recent expedition. I was still in one piece, fortunately, but I could've easily lost a limb; I could've even died.

"Don't worry. I'm on good terms with her right now."

"That's good to know, but still..."

"We'll have to have that banquet another time. I've got a lot of people to visit."

"Okay, but go see Lilly before too long. I heard she got sick after hearing you'd

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"Okay, I will, I will."

"All right. Are we done? Harol, let's get going."

"Yeah, we should."
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Harol must've been thirsty. He picked up the cup of tea I'd poured for him and drank it all in one go. The sight of Harol drinking must have reminded Caph of his own thirst, because he copied the gesture.

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"See you."
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Caph left first, followed by Harol, who closed the door behind him.

IV

Once I'd changed into formal clothes, I left via the residence's main entrance.

I had fresh bandages wrapped around my injured left foot that were so thick I needed to wear larger shoes. Then, since my uninjured right foot was smaller, I had to wear two thick woolen socks on that foot to make up the difference. I also had a staff to support me.

A carriage was already waiting for me outside the entrance.

"Lord Yuri, please climb aboard," one of the soldiers who guarded the residence said.

As I was about to get on, however, I noticed something unusual going on outside the gate that led out onto the street—a crowd jostling with our soldiers.

"What's this? Who are they?"

I'd seen mobs try to get into the residence like this before during times of trouble in the past few years, such as when there was a shortage of food. This felt different, though. It looked like a crowd of about twenty people, but they were peaceful enough that four of our soldiers—who were standing outside with their spears held horizontally, points still sheathed—were enough to hold them back from the gate.

Are they here to make demands? I wondered.

"It appears word of your return has reached them, Lord Yuri," the guard informed me. "They've gathered in hopes of seeing you."

"Huh?" What the ...?

"We'll pull them away from your carriage as you pass by."

"Okay."

The Ho family had exceptional guards. They'd throw themselves in front of anyone who got too close if they had to.

"Head out," I commanded as I sat on the soft seat, staff in hand.

"Yes, Sir," the coachman replied.

With a gentle crack of his whip, the horse began to pull the carriage forward.

I heard excited cries of "Lord Yuri!" as we passed through the gates. It seemed this was not an attempt by the masses to complain to a local lord about political oppression. It didn't sound as though they had any actual business with me—they were just calling to me because they wanted to. They actually sounded similar to some of the weird Cultural Academy students who'd followed me around in the past.

When I opened the curtain to look out the carriage window, I saw not just girls, but men and women of all ages who apparently had nothing better to do than stare at me as they chatted happily with each other. It was almost like they'd just come to gawk at me. No, that was exactly what they were doing.

What's wrong with these people? Don't they have jobs? They've got nothing better to do than look at me?

They didn't bother me for long because we passed them in no time at all as the carriage headed straight for the royal castle.

It didn't seem like they wanted to attack us. What was up with those people?



On our arrival at Royal Castle Island, the carriage stopped close to the castle's main entrance. I descended from the carriage, only to find myself the subject of several stares once again. This time, however, they were looking at me in a

completely different way. All around me were witches.

I took out my watch to check the time and found it was close to 5:30 p.m. These were the bureaucrats who worked in the castle. It felt odd to call them castle staff, but they fulfilled various roles here. Although they didn't have well-established working hours, they generally left around this time unless they had urgent business remaining. In other words, I'd arrived right at rush hour. I'd been worried that they'd been waiting for me, but I was relieved to realize it was just my poor choice of timing. Caph and Harol were to blame for rushing me. If I'd waited just another half hour, I would've found the place nice and empty.

But witches looking at me with animosity was nothing new, so I decided to simply ignore them. I pretended not to notice them at all as I put my watch away and walked forward with the aid of my staff.

As I passed through the entrance, a voice called to me. "Lord Yuri? Please come with me."

A woman who was dressed like a secretary was the one who'd beckoned me. At a glance, she looked slender in her slacks, but the bulging muscles around her thighs and shoulders couldn't be completely hidden. Even her wrists looked thick where they peeked out from beneath her sleeves. She was heavily built. I guessed she was no ordinary secretary.

"Pardon me, but are you a royal sword?" I asked her.

"How did you guess?"

I almost answered, "I could tell because you've got huge muscles," but I stopped myself in case I offended her.

"Please take a seat," she said while presenting a wheelchair.

It was made of firm wood of the highest quality, and looked even finer than the ones we'd used in Reforme's royal castle. But the design was similar, and the wheels were small as always. Once again, it was more like a chair with some wheels on it rather than an actual wheelchair. Regardless, I was grateful to see it.

"Thank you. Sorry for the trouble," I said as I sat down.

"We're about to start moving," the royal sword warned me briefly before pushing the chair forward.

We headed straight for a corridor, away from prying eyes. Then, she took us around several different corners without a hint of hesitation.

After a while, we passed through an impressive door that I'd seen before and entered a small room that served as a station for members of the royal guard. The guards let us through when they recognized the woman pushing my wheelchair. From that point on, the atmosphere in the castle changed.

Anyone could simply stroll through the main entrance to the royal castle, provided they were properly dressed, but this part of the castle wasn't as easily accessible.

Everything up to this point was a sort of public area, but from here on, we'd be in the private living quarters of the royal family. It was much more relaxed here, as everything—from the construction of the corridors to the furnishings—made it feel more like someone's home than a stone castle.

Since the current queen didn't allow witches to get too close, the royal guard was unlikely to operate beyond the room we'd passed just through. More likely, the royal swords would handle security within this area.

For a while, I was pushed through more corridors, until we eventually stopped in front of a particular door.

The royal sword knocked and called out, "I've brought your guest, Your Majesty."

"Enter," a clear voice, just barely audible, replied.

The royal sword opened the door and pushed me inside. I found Her Majesty sitting at a large, square table made from brightly colored wood. There was no sign of Carol.

"Good evening, Yuri. It's a pleasure to see you."

"I am here at your service." I stood up from my wheelchair and gave a somewhat simple bow.

"You may sit. How are your wounds? Are you unwell?" Her Majesty asked,

looking concerned. Her questions felt like more than mere courtesies.

"I'm fine, though I have to use a staff because walking hurts a little."

I took three paces, aided by my staff, to show that I could walk. Then I turned and said to the royal sword, "Thank you for your help."

"I'll wait outside," she said.

"Please do, and good work," Her Majesty said, giving her permission to leave.

The royal sword silently exited the room.

"Now, please sit down." Her Majesty gestured toward a nearby chair. "Have you eaten dinner yet?"

"No, I haven't."

"I'll have some prepared for you. You'll eat here."

"Thank you. I'd be most grateful." I'd been hoping to do that all along, so I was glad to hear it.

"Yuri." Her Majesty made a point of saying my name. "I'm truly grateful for your efforts during the expedition. You've served us well."

She was praising me. I didn't tremble with emotion or anything, but I was filled with relief. All that work I'd done was appreciated to some extent. It made me conscious that even I had a place within this country's social framework. I could feel the powerful air of authority that a queen naturally held.

"Things didn't go as well as they should have. I'm terribly sorry for that, Your Majesty."

"Oh?" The queen looked surprised. "What didn't go well?"

Perhaps, from her point of view, everything had gone precisely to plan. Considering her original aims for this expedition, that was likely.

"I allowed Her Highness to be placed in danger. I'm terribly sorry."

From my point of view, the expedition aimed to make observations, and getting Carol home safely had taken priority above all else. Since I'd placed her in danger, I could hardly call it a great success. I'd also allowed many refugees to be dumped on us, which wasn't a good thing in principle. In the end, all I'd

really done had been to avoid disgrace. Fulfilling unnecessary objectives was hardly an accomplishment.

"Heh heh. When I heard the news, I felt my blood run cold. I think it took years off my life."

"I can imagine..."

Her Majesty considered Carol and myself rather important to the kingdom. Even if she didn't, when she'd learned that her daughter was in a perilous situation, it was bound to have come as a shock, no matter how the news had been broken. Such updates would normally be enough to plunge someone into despair.

"I'm just glad it all worked out in the end," she said.

But things hadn't all worked out at all.

"Two young students with their futures ahead of them were lost in battle. There were fourteen casualties if we also count those we picked up in Reforme."

"Ah, yes, that's right..." Her Majesty's face darkened, and she appeared at a loss for words.

The two lives we'd lost on the battlefield had probably never felt like something real to her. That wasn't surprising. Overall, the reinforcements dispatched in Her Majesty's name had suffered losses in the tens of thousands. It was unreasonable to expect her to spare a thought for every single individual. Perhaps she should have, but the task was beyond the power of human imagination. Instead, leaders like her were forced to grow numb to it. I couldn't criticize her for that. A leader who claimed to fully understand the enormity of having sent tens of thousands of human souls to their deaths was either mad or a liar.

"I hate to trouble you, but could letters of appreciation be sent to the families of the two Knight Academy students in your name, Your Majesty?"

Our queen had no reason to feel responsible for the twelve students who'd joined us in Reforme. They'd accepted the task of protecting the refugees from the outset, and—as cold as it sounded—their lives had been expended for the

sake of a righteous mission. But the Knight Academy students were different. Although they'd agreed to escort the refugees while in Reforme, they'd been under pressure to do so. A debt was owed to their parents.

"Of course. Please leave all of that to me."

That's a relief.

"I trust that you've heard about Tellur Shaltl. The wealth of the Kilhinan royal family was transported here, and I have the documents to transfer ownership," I continued, producing the document that I'd been given in Kilhina from my pocket and placing it on the table. "The text says that Carol is to be trusted to dispose of it in its entirety. Rewards are to be paid to unit members and condolence money to the surviving relatives of the two deceased. It's also to be used to pay compensation for expenses incurred during the war."

"I have no problem with all that, but...is it right? I'd gladly pay for these things from the national treasury."

"The two students who died did so during the mission to escort the refugees. They would still be with us otherwise. And we had an agreement that the fortune would be used to reward us should the mission prove successful. It feels right to me that Kilhina should compensate their families, rather than Shiyaltan taxpayers."

I hated to sound stingy, but we hadn't accepted the task of moving the refugees because we'd expected Shiyalta to gain from it. It was something we'd done while helping the nation of Kilhina put its affairs in order, so it was fair to ask Kilhina to bear the costs.

Not many people in this country would worry about such trivial details, but I wanted things done in a way that looked proper. At the very least, I wanted anything I'd been involved in to be brought to a neat conclusion. It just wouldn't feel right otherwise.

"Yes, you may be right."

It sounded as though she agreed, though none of this business actually required her approval in any case. Carol had been the one entrusted to dispose of the wealth—I was merely informing Her Majesty of the arrangement.

"As for the royal seal that we brought back..." I began.

Just then, there was a knock at the door.

"Princess Carol is here to see you," the royal sword from earlier said. "And...Princess Carla is also here."

Carla? Her little sister? But why? After a little thought, I realized it wasn't so strange considering that this would be their first dinner together as a family in some time. If anything, I was the one who didn't belong.

But Her Majesty made a face that I'd never seen before. She'd gone far beyond simply knitting her brow. After a little deliberation, she spoke to me in a voice too quiet to be heard outside. "Hmm... Yuri, would you be comfortable with Carla joining us?"

It seemed to me that she didn't want to be the one who decided to exclude Carla. If Carla entered, she'd almost certainly stick around for dinner. Put simply, I got the sense that Her Majesty didn't want to be too obvious about the discord within the family.

Normally, I would've said, "I don't mind at all" in a situation like this without any thought. However, Her Majesty was probably hoping I'd refuse because she'd have an ideal excuse to stop Carla from joining us. Unfortunately for her, it made no sense for a guest to ask for someone else to be excluded.

"I don't mind at all," I said.

As expected, Her Majesty looked like she might groan for a moment, but then she said, "Very well. Show them in."

When the door opened, I immediately caught sight of a familiar blonde head. It was Carla, all smiles as she bounded into the room.

"Yuri! It's been so long!" she exclaimed in her usual energetic voice.

Carla was short compared to Carol, who entered behind her. There was a big difference in their physiques even though they were only a year apart in age. It was enough to make me wonder just how much exercise affected the body of a growing person.

"Yes, it has been some time," I echoed back.

"How was Kilhina?! Were you injured at all?!" Carla rushed right over to me.

I gave her a generic response. "I made it back safely."

It wasn't a proper answer to her question, but I wasn't going to tell her about my injury, even though it hadn't healed yet.

Carla looked at me, puzzled. "What's wrong? You're not your usual self."

It wasn't my injury that she'd noticed, but my unusual way of speaking.

Normally when I spoke to Carla, I was incredibly blunt. But I figured I'd better be gentle with her while Her Majesty was in the room.

"We're in Her Majesty's presence," I replied.

"Oh, I get it... So even you know how to be polite."

Of course I do...

"I heard about your deeds! It's amazing. Allow me to praise you—you did very well."

Ugh... I'm not feeling any sense of authority from this one. My heart isn't moved in the slightest.

I gave her another generic response. "It's an honor to receive your praise."

"Now tell me what happened! Tell me about Kilhina!"

It seemed she was here to hear tales of my travels, though I had no idea what she'd get out of that. She might've been genuinely curious, but long-winded stories about military affairs would probably bore her.

"Perhaps another time."

At that moment, I couldn't be bothered with her. Though even if she were to ask again when Queen Shimoné wasn't around, I still wouldn't waste time on her.

"Huuuh?" Carla made a noise in protest.

"I'd like to hear about it too," Her Majesty said.

I had to bite my tongue.

"I think you're going to have to get used to being asked for your story," Her

Majesty continued. "There's time before dinner is served. Would you really mind?"

Hmmm... I guess it's one way to pass the time until this is over.

Having Carla around wasn't exactly unbearable, but we couldn't talk about anything sensitive. If I mentioned the royal seal in front of this blabbermouth, everyone at the Cultural Academy would know about it the next day.

Even if her royal upbringing had taught her to keep secrets when necessary, someone like her would be so eager to tell her friends that she'd find herself struggling. If we didn't tell her in the first place, it would spare her that trial. Keeping quiet about it was actually in her best interests. That meant we'd have to limit the conversation to harmless gossip. And when it came to that, stories about me were probably a popular topic.

"I'm sure Carla would love to hear all about it while she's here. And it'll give all the students at White Birch Dormitory something to talk about," Her Majesty said.

I knew exactly what she meant. Carla would be our spokesperson, and I was to give her stories to spread through White Birch—or more to the point, to the witches.

When I thought about it, I realized it was important to give a version of events that was biased in my favor and have someone as influential as possible spread it around. I couldn't rely on Sham for a task like that because she barely had any friends.

Still, it just felt like a hassle. I had no particular desire to spread tales of my success. It didn't feel worth the effort.

"If that's your wish, Your Majesty, then I would love to. Unfortunately, I'm afraid my stories aren't at all interesting."

"Just tell us anyway. They're stories about you, so I'll definitely be interested." Carla sat in the seat next to me as she made this odd claim.

Carla was getting way too close. It made me wonder how Carol felt about all this. I hadn't heard a sound from her. She'd silently entered the room without so much as a greeting, then took a seat opposite me without me noticing.

Something didn't feel right. She didn't look angry, but it was like she was making a deliberate effort to stay silent.

These two sisters *had* always had clashing personalities. Since the two never seemed to get along, I figured Carol just didn't want to talk to Carla.

I'd been hoping that Carol would come to my defense, but she hadn't, despite all the pestering I was getting. It looked like she was leaving me to do all the talking, and it was getting hard to refuse since we had nothing else to discuss.

"Well... Where should I begin?" I asked, mostly to myself.

Personally, I didn't want to remember anything that had happened after the battles started. It felt misleading to skip all the dull, sad, and tough things I'd been through, but if Her Majesty wanted me to put a positive spin on things, then I needed a story that was interesting without having to be dramatized.

"Well, why don't I tell you about the time we helped out some villagers being troubled by a bear?"

Shiyaltan food wasn't always served as a series of courses, but in the royal capital's finer establishments, a range of vegetables, meat, fish, and desserts were generally brought out on small plates. Our meal was served in a similar style.

My knife and fork got to work on the food that the royal family's chefs had no doubt made a special effort to prepare for us. It was all delicious. The odor of both the meat and fish had been eliminated flawlessly, leaving the dishes with a delicate aroma. This wasn't food for someone wishing to satisfy a powerful appetite; it was like a conversation between the diner and chef. It wasn't just a source of nutrition; it was a celebration of our culture.

Although I'd eaten similar food in Kilhina, I'd never been relaxed enough to savor the taste.

I thought the portions here were a little small, probably because they were generally served to women only, but they were ideal for talking while eating.

The last dish served turned out to be sherbet. It was mixed with a rich milk, giving it a flavor that also resembled ice cream.

I was just about done wrapping up my stories by the time I'd finished dessert.

"I have a question," Her Majesty said. "Wouldn't you have been in trouble if the enemy wasn't fooled into thinking the bridge had burned down?"

"Yes, but the bridge was burning. Even if they knew it was made of stone, they'd have to conclude that their original intelligence was wrong. After all, any information they'd learned from reading books would be disregarded if it contradicted what they saw with their own eyes."

"That's true..."

"Still, it was a dangerous gamble," I said.

Since Carla was here, I wasn't going to say that our backup plan was to abandon the refugees and cross the bridge ahead of them, but Her Majesty would surely figure that out for herself.

"It must have been so hard for you, Yuri," Carla said.

What's gotten into her today? She's weird. She's sitting so close to me. Maybe I'm just getting the wrong idea, but it's like she's...coming on to me.

Carla was looking at me full of concern, but it appeared a little like an act. On the other hand, I doubted Carla was even *capable* of acting, so whatever feelings she was trying to express, they couldn't have been completely false.

In short, I had no idea what she was doing. It was as if a forty-year-old man was trying to understand the workings of a fifteen-year-old girl's mind. To me, her thought processes seemed like those of a creature from another planet.

Normally I'd just run from her. Having to humor her constantly was taking its toll on me.

Carol continued to remain completely quiet. Her sour mood was another source of stress for me. It wouldn't be so bad if I'd actually done something to upset her, but when she was in a bad mood for no reason at all, it left me completely at a loss. She hadn't spoken at all since she'd entered the room. Her constant silence was making me nervous.

"Well, Yuri, would you join us for some tea now that dinner is over?" Her Majesty asked.

Tea? Normally I would've been looking forward to that... I lamented to myself before replying, "Yes, I'd love to."

"Then I'll have preparations made now."

The queen shot a glance toward one of the maids waiting in the corner of the room, who quickly exited like she'd been waiting for that signal the whole time.

Wow. It's like everything's automated.

"Carol, Carla—I'm sorry, but I'd like the two of you to leave us," Her Majesty said.

Huh? She's chasing them away?

As expected, Carla cried out in protest. "Huuuh?! But I was going to make his tea! Why shouldn't I stay here?" She sounded quite offended.

I know they're family, but can she get away with talking to the queen like that? I wondered. Though, I guess they are at home. Even queens must talk frankly with people when they're not in public.

Her Majesty adopted a strict tone of voice. "Carla, we need to talk in private. There are things we can't discuss in your presence. You have to understand that."

Carla let out a big groan, then begrudgingly muttered, "Well...all right."

I'd expected her to throw a temper tantrum, but it hadn't come to that.

"But you have to come to my room later instead," Carla told me. "I've got something to tell you."

Uh, did I hear that right?!

Before I could stop myself, I'd removed my watch from my pocket to check the time. It was past 7:30.

Don't tell me that's 7:30 in the morning? No, dinner couldn't have lasted that long. That'd be impossible. Anyway, there's no way I'm visiting this brat's room. I wish she'd get some common sense.

I had to bite my tongue to stop myself from speaking these thoughts out loud. I looked at Her Majesty and saw that her composure had slipped a little.

Likewise, the shock and disbelief on Carol's face was all too visible.

Since Carol and Her Majesty were both left speechless, I had to refuse Carla myself. "I'm afraid I'm a little too tired for that today."

"Awww... Oh, well. But you're not getting out of it next time. Promise me."

Has she gotten completely the wrong idea here? There's not going to be a next time. The only reason I've let her put me through all this stress is because Her Majesty's in the room. I'm not going to bite my tongue next time I see her.

"Well, I'll excuse myself," Carol said, speaking for the first time. She stood up, bowed to Her Majesty, and grabbed Carla's hand. "Come on, we're leaving."

"What're you doing?! Y-Yuri! See you later!"

Carla continued to protest as the two disappeared from the room.

When both princesses had left, and I was alone with Her Majesty, she clapped her hands twice.

The door to the room opened, and a royal sword appeared.

"Call Carol back in."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Oh, Carol's coming back?

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Carol reentered the room at the same time as the maid who brought the teamaking set. She sat in the same seat as before.

"Oh, boy... Sorry about that, Yuri."

I'd been worried over nothing—Carol wasn't angry after all. It seemed she wasn't going to sit there like a doll this time.

"Not that it's a problem, but why were you so quiet?"

"Carla would've gotten angry if she saw us talking. Staying quiet's easier than dealing with her."

Now I get it.

"I thought it was because you wouldn't be able to resist lecturing her unless you kept your mouth shut."

"Uh, yeah, that too. I didn't want to make you listen to a petty sibling argument."

I could imagine an argument between Carol and Carla turning into a battle of reason versus emotion.

"Carla seems quite taken with you, Yuri. It's a problem," Her Majesty said.

That sounded right. Carla wouldn't have asked me to date her if she didn't like me. I couldn't have cared less what she thought of me, but the last thing I wanted was for Her Majesty to think I'd deliberately seduced her.

"Yes, it's a problem. I can't figure out what it is that makes her feel that way."

"How do you act toward her normally?" she asked.



"Well..."

I didn't want to give Her Majesty the true answer, but I also didn't want to create a misunderstanding. I decided I'd have to be honest.

"I'm usually quite harsh toward her. To be frank, I've never once been kind to her."

Seriously. Actually, rather than saying anything harsh, I usually just run away. I don't get how that would make her fall for me. Does she just like my face?

"That might actually be what she wants," Her Majesty replied.

"Huh?" Is she a masochist?

"Mother, I'm in full agreement."

Huh?

"There are very few people who talk to Carla like she's their equal," Carol explained. "I would, but our personalities clash... Maybe she was drawn to you because you're the first person to be straight with her."

"Well... That makes sense."

It seemed she wasn't a masochist after all—she just wanted someone to treat her like an equal.

I spoke to Carol like an equal too, but I wasn't the only one. Carol had many other friends besides me who'd gotten over the difference in status. Similarly, Sham had a fairly high social standing on paper, but she and Lilly spoke on equal terms too. If Carla was the only one having this problem, it couldn't be something inherent to White Birch Dormitory. Maybe it stemmed from her personality.

"I wouldn't object to a relationship between you and Carla," Her Majesty said, catching me completely off guard. "But it seems there's no romance between you."

"It's impossible," Carol replied.

Why are you answering for me? Well, she's right, so I guess I won't argue. If I were to date someone, it wouldn't be someone as alien to me as Carla. She'd

drive me mad, I know it. "Indeed. It's not possible," I agreed.

"How about I pour some tea?" Her Majesty suggested, bringing the topic to a conclusion.

Her Majesty got up from her chair and began making our drink. She took powdered tea leaves from multiple small containers that were part of the teamaking set and put a little of each into a large teapot. Then she took an iron kettle and began pouring hot water into the pot from a height.

I glanced at the spot where the kettle had been resting and saw fine engravings on the surface of the kettle stand. I guessed it was made from ancient wood, and it was slightly scorched black since it was often used to support a kettle right after it was removed from a flame. Such items weren't rare, but this one was fascinating because it felt like an antique with much to say about how the owner lived.

Once the pot was almost full of hot water, Her Majesty placed a lid on the top, then sat back down as we waited for the leaves to infuse. It was yet another display of her skills. Although she hadn't done anything unusual, she'd made the whole procedure feel ceremonial.

"But what about you and Carol?" Her Majesty asked, casually resuming the previous topic.

I nervously glanced at Her Majesty's face. There was no hint of humor in her expression. In fact, there was a probing look in her eyes, like she was studying something of great interest.

"If it was Carol, then...maybe..."

"Huh?" Carol looked shocked, but also happy.

"But I'm not considering marriage yet," I added.

"Really?" Her Majesty asked, then picked up the pot and swirled it with a circular motion. "Perhaps being a queen's husband—a prince consort—seems too heavy a responsibility?"

Then, without looking up, she turned over a teacup and began to pour tea from the pot. Apparently the tea hadn't needed long to steep.

I kept my mouth shut as I simply watched her movements.

Yeah, it's heavy all right.

Once Her Majesty had poured tea into three teacups, she used a small pair of tongs to take something deeply colored from a vial and placed a pinch of it into each cup. It looked a little like damp leaves, but I couldn't guess what it actually was.

She slid over a teacup on a saucer. "Here you are."

"Thank you."

Looking more closely, I saw that the mysterious substance added to the cup looked like young buds that had been pickled. Their contents were spreading out through the clear, red tea, deepening the color of the liquid around them. It reminded me of salt-pickled sakura leaves.

"Thank you," I said once we each had a cup.

"Go ahead and try it."

With pleasantries out of the way, I lifted the cup and took a sip.

The strong flavor from the buds enhanced the tea by adding to its aroma, without obscuring it. Although they were like nothing I'd ever drunk before, they were delicious. I could taste their flavor distinctly from the tea, since they'd been added at a late stage and hadn't had a chance to distribute evenly. They tasted fresh in a way that was perfect for cleansing my palate of the rich flavors from dinner. It felt like a fine way to continue the enjoyment after a meal had finished.

"This is incredibly good."

"Is it? I'm glad you like it." She seemed genuinely pleased that I'd praised the tea. "So what do you intend to do next, Yuri?"

"Oh?" I wasn't sure what she meant.

"My feelings are complex right now. I've received some bad news, but also some good news," she continued.

Complex feelings?

There was a hint of tension in Her Majesty's voice, like the tea had made her lower her guard, exposing the uncertainty she held. A strange sense of unease came over me, like a bird having its feathers ruffled.

"The bad news was that Kilhina has fallen. I'll confess, I'd been telling myself that Kilhina would hold out somehow. This creates quite the dilemma."

She was talking while I simply listened, but that was fine.

All things considered, Queen Shimoné could be the nation's sovereign at the most difficult moment in the Shiyalta Kingdom's history. The queens that had come before her had been forced to whip up the kingdom's chieftains and dispatch reinforcements in desperate attempts to repel crusaders many times in the past, but none had lived with the threat of war on home soil. She was the only queen who had been forced to stand on the precipice of destruction.

Given that most queens had enjoyed an unexceptional reign over a peaceful kingdom, the role given to Queen Shimoné was perhaps the most difficult given to anyone since the kingdom's founding.

Her misfortune was immeasurable. The nation in her care would be put to the torch. How would a sovereign feel in such a situation?

The last time I'd joined her for tea, she'd claimed we were there for a casual chat as she began a discourse on history. This time, she'd moved the conversation on to serious matters much more quickly, suggesting she felt under pressure. Now that Kilhina had fallen, she had to be beset with anxiety, no matter how calm she appeared.

"The good news was that you came home to us, Yuri."

Oh...

"It truly was good news. If both you and Carol had died out there, I think I'd have lost my mind. And I'm not joking or speaking figuratively." Her Majesty really was being open about her feelings. I wished she'd be a little more guarded, because she was starting to make me feel awkward. "But you returned to us, glorious in victory. Now there are great expectations for you, Yuri."

"You slew a dragon, single-handedly protected Carol, threw an enemy camp into disarray, guided home civilians from within the enemy's claws, and brought Tellur back with you. To top it off, rather than abandon those civilians, you held off an army of a thousand with just a few hundred soldiers under your command and emerged victorious. It's far more than anyone could have asked for."

Everything she said made me feel worse. Yes, if we ignored all the ways I'd failed and spoke of everything I'd done in glorified terms, then her description was accurate. But really, my supposed accomplishments were no more than a series of attempts to make up for the mistakes I'd made.

"I thought I might have to make some far-fetched announcement on your return, but you've done so much that the public already views you as a hero."

"I'm no hero. Everything I did was a failure."

"Your feelings on the matter are irrelevant. As the population grows restless, people are bound to seek a savior—and they've chosen you."

I didn't understand why she was telling me all this. It didn't matter to me if people looked to me for salvation. Those people were no use to me, and I had to worry what might happen if I couldn't meet their expectations. Would their feelings turn to resentment? I'd be betraying them and letting everyone down.

But I wasn't going to let others decide my fate or live my life for the sake of strangers I'd never met. It would be nothing but trouble.

My thoughts irritated me, so I took a sip of the tea before replying. It still tasted amazing. "I'm thinking about the future, and I'm not going to remain idle. Still, my only aims are those I've chosen for myself. I won't work to fulfill the wishes of the masses."

"But without this kingdom, what goals can you pursue? Whatever your aims, we must win the war first."

That was an obvious comeback.

I had other options because I knew we'd found the new continent, but she didn't know that. If I hadn't found it—if Harol had never returned—then I really would've been left with no option but to pray for victory in war.

To put Her Majesty's thinking into simple terms, I should've been dreaming of becoming an ultra-competent, superpowered commander capable of tearing crusader armies to shreds. But if that really *was* what she wanted from me, I didn't know what to say to her—all the more so now that I knew about the new continent.

"That's easier said than done," I said.

"I know very well it isn't easy."

But does she really? I wondered. "I believe that before we can win the war, massive sacrifices would be needed."

"War always requires sacrifices."

No, she doesn't get it. "By sacrifices, I mean a civil war," I clarified.

"Civil war?"

Unsurprisingly, Her Majesty appeared displeased by the suggestion. The thought mustn't have crossed her mind until now.

"Victory isn't possible as long as the kingdom's armies are distributed between five chieftain families. We can't afford to let our forces be so disorganized when we're already outnumbered."

"You'd sooner fight your friends than your enemies?"

Reading between the lines, she was saying, *That's outrageous*. How can you even consider it? But in my opinion, it was even more outrageous to suggest that we could win against a large army of crusaders without unifying the kingdom beforehand.

Rather than maintain the status quo, we could give ourselves the best chance by abolishing both the chieftain and witch families, then rebuilding the entire nation from scratch.

Obviously, civil war wasn't something I wanted, and that wouldn't guarantee us victory in the coming war regardless. As things stood, however, winning was impossible.

As powerful as the Ho family was, it was just one of five chieftain families. Asking me to solve all the kingdom's problems when my family held just a fifth of the kingdom's power was completely unreasonable.

"That's not what I meant," I replied. "Besides, the Ho family's army hasn't fully recovered, so we're not capable of such a fight."

Ten years had passed since our army had been essentially decimated by the previous war. I knew that we were recovering quite well, but I still felt the need to remind her. In any case, there was no way the Ho family could fight three other chieftain families.

"That's true."

"What I'm trying to say is, even if I do become head of the Ho family, I'll only ever have control over my family itself. Whatever tricks I use, whatever training I employ, I'd stand no chance of repelling an army of a hundred thousand crusaders."

The Ho family had a splendid residence here in the royal capital, and its head was a remarkably powerful ruler of a vast territory. But that's all the family was. No matter how hard I tried, I wouldn't have the power to resist when several nations, all wealthier than Shiyalta, banded together to invade us.

"Well, what if you married Carol?"

She posed the question almost like a surprise attack. I made a conscious effort to keep my feelings suppressed. I haven't done anything wrong, I told myself.

"Then you'd also gain command of the royal guard," she added. "You'd benefit greatly."

There was truth in what she said. However, the royal guard was made up of a first order and a second order, and the second order was more of a private army belonging to the witch families. I'd only really be gaining the first order, which wasn't huge.

Her Majesty looked at Carol. "You haven't been lying to me, have you Carol? You're making your mother worried."

Carol looked guilty, like she had something to hide. She was like a child who'd been caught doing something wrong.

Ah, Her Majesty guessed what happened, my intuition told me.

"N-No, mother, you're misunderstanding."

Unfortunately, she'd understood all too well.

"It's fine. When a man and woman with some degree of affection for each other find themselves in such a situation, it's a natural outcome." She was right, but she couldn't prove anything. She was just guessing, and with time, she'd probably forget about it entirely. She continued, "Yuri, it seems that after all your time dealing with witches, you've truly learned how to hide your true feelings."

Apparently, my poker face was actually proving effective. "No..."

"You shouldn't—it's a favorable arrangement for you. You'd be gaining the royal guard, and you'd be able to justify whatever actions you need to take."

It was hard to argue. But now that I'd found the new continent, winning the war wasn't everything to me. The whole reason I'd put so much energy into managing my business was because I knew how slim our chances of victory were. If I became prince consort now, my focus would have to change.

"Please don't take the things I said earlier too seriously," I said. I figured I'd better say that in case she got the idea that the Ho family was planning a coup.

"I have no intention of marrying Yuri," Carol suddenly declared.

Huh?

Her Majesty, understandably shocked, looked at Carol with her mouth hanging open. "What do you mean?"

Her Majesty's emotions were visible on her face as she knitted her brow slightly. She clearly hadn't expected this reaction from Carol.

"I'll choose who I wed when the time is right. Please don't use the expedition to pressure Yuri into marrying me."

Ah, that's what bothered her.

Her Majesty was essentially trying to convince us to wed for the sake of political advantages. She could offer guidance as Carol's mother, but if she pressured us into marriage this way, it'd be breaking her promise to Carol. Carol was too principled to let it happen.

"Ah, hmm..." Her Majesty closed her eyes, apparently at a loss for words. She had to have a lot on her mind.

I could guess her thought process. She knew that I hadn't forced myself on Carol, nor had I deliberately seduced her, so whatever might have happened between us, she couldn't use it to pressure me into anything. Besides, if I married Carol simply for the sake of honor and nothing else, it wouldn't accomplish anything anyway.

"Very well," Her Majesty said with a brief sigh. "It's for the two of you to decide. I can't force you into anything. But are you quite sure, Yuri? Carol is royalty. She'll have to wed and have children at some point. Are you willing to leave that to someone else?"

When she put it like that, I couldn't help but feel awkward.

"It's certainly good to think it over carefully, but indecision might cost you everything. But I know you're not that type, so I'll only ask you to consider it."

"I'll remember your advice, Your Majesty."

"Phew." Her Majesty sighed a little, like she was exhausted by the burden that rested on her narrow shoulders. "This conversation feels awfully stiff. The tea must have gotten cold. Allow me to make some more."

In an attempt to dispel the heavy atmosphere, she called over a servant and told them to bring us freshly boiled water.

Chapter 2 — Loved Ones

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After leaving the royal castle, I returned to the Ho residence in the family carriage that was waiting for me. Even though it was already past midnight by the time I'd arrived, I was greeted by a familiar face as I stepped inside.

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"Yuri!"

"Lilly, I'm back."
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The moment I opened the door, I saw Lilly sitting on an armchair near the entrance. When she saw me, her face broke into a great smile that reminded me of a blossoming flower. She rushed over, then suddenly threw her arms around me.

Though she'd been taller than me when we'd first met, that was no longer the case—she stood on tiptoe as she wrapped her arms around my neck and held me tight.

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"It's so good to have you back. Welcome home."

"Um, yeah..."
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With her head right beside mine, I could smell her. I felt an urge to press my face against her neck, but then I noticed Sham behind her. She was hiding behind an armchair's backrest, only half of her face visible as she looked at me.

The hug must've lasted about three seconds before Lilly broke away from me and said, "I mean it—I'm awful glad. Are you hurt?"

"W-Well, I injured my foot a little, but it'll heal before long."

Wow, her boobs were amazing. They were like, pressing against me.

"What? Are you okay? Can you still walk?"

"Don't worry about that. It'll all heal with some rest."

"Oh. Good, good. I've been awful worried."

Lilly appeared relieved, right down to her very core, by the sight of me. I could tell I'd caused her a great deal of worry.

"Come on, take a seat," I said.

There were six armchairs in the entrance hall—three on either side of a long table. As expected, Lilly naturally chose the one opposite Sham.

"H-Hey. It's been a while, but I'm back," I told Sham.

Sham was sullen and silent.

"What's up? Did something happen?" I asked.

"That looked dirty," she muttered.

The words felt like a dagger plunged into my chest. *Did she notice the look on my face while Lilly pressed her soft breasts against me?* "It w-wasn't..."

"N-No. It's just been so long... It was like...a greeting. That's all."

Lilly's attempt at an explanation just felt like a weak excuse, so I decided to back her up. "Exactly. A hug like that's normal when you haven't seen each other in a long while."

"You made a dirty face," Sham pointed out.

Uh...

"Well, why don't you give him a hug too, Sham?" Lilly suggested.

"Huh?" Sham instantly frowned. It looked like she was about to decline.

Sham was never fond of human contact, was she?

"Okay," she said.

Wait, she's agreeing?

No sooner than she'd finished speaking, Sham got up from her seat and stood in front of me. It wasn't going to be the same thing since she was so short. When she nervously opened her arms, I crouched on one knee before embracing her.

"Ngh... Yuri, welcome back."

"It's good to be back."

After this brief exchange, Sham separated from me and headed back to her seat, looking slightly embarrassed. She'd never been the clingy type, so it had been a very brief hug. Sham sat down again, but this time she'd shifted over one armchair. I took the seat she'd just given up so I'd be facing Lilly.

When I looked at Lilly, she had a strange look on her face that wasn't happiness, but she didn't look annoyed either. She quickly snapped out of it and smiled again when our eyes met.

"It's some miracle that you're safe. I was awful worried when I heard you'd gone missing."

"I guess it looked like I might die out there for a while, but I made it. Sorry for making you worry so much."

"No need to be sorry now. All that matters is you're all right."

"I wasn't worried in the slightest," Sham said. "I knew you'd survive...no matter what."

It kind of sounded like she was putting on a brave face.

"Heh heh. I seem to remember you turnin' awful pale when we got the news of his disappearance," Lilly teased.

She did? I guess she was a lot more worried than she's letting on.

"D-Don't tell him that!" Sham cried.

"She even got herself into arguments with girls who were spreadin' rumors about you."

"Oh, we're telling him everything, are we? Well then, I guess I can talk about Lilly's sleepless nights."

Lilly's expression turned serious, like Sham had just identified her weak point. "I'm sorry, Sham—let's stop."

It made me curious—what was so embarrassing about sleepless nights? Struggling to get to sleep because of worry was normal. It shouldn't have embarrassed her at all.

"Well, anyhow, we're glad you're here. I heard you did great things too," Lilly said.

"No, it was one failure after another. The reality of it isn't so impressive."

"Oh? Really?" Lilly looked shocked. Clearly this contradicted what she'd been told about me.

"Yeah. I mean, none of it should've happened. I was supposed to have returned a month sooner."

It had been tough. I felt I'd gained a lot of valuable experience, so I couldn't quite say I wanted to forget it all, but I definitely didn't want to go through it again. As some of the more difficult moments played back in my mind, I was reminded of something.

"Lilly, thank you for the watch and lighter."

I took out both pieces—the former of which was a high-quality silver piece made by Lilly herself—from my pocket and placed them on the table.

"Ah, you actually used them?"

I'd done more than that—I'd depended on them.

Lilly left the lighter on the table, but she picked up the watch and carefully studied its lid. Even now, it was ticking away as it kept the time. Next, she removed another watch from the pocket of her Cultural Academy uniform so she could compare the time on both.

"Did you correct it at some point?" she asked.

"No, I didn't."

That was something I'd forgotten to do. I could've set it right in Reforme, but I remembered that I hadn't bothered back then because I'd found it less than five minutes off when the clock bell had chimed.

"I see. It's kept time surprisingly well considerin' how it's been treated."

Mechanical pocket watches went out of sync surprisingly easily—an ordinary, cheap one would be at least fifteen minutes off each day.

"How is it?" I asked.

Lilly might not have corrected her watch every day, but I knew she'd update it enough to be fairly accurate.

"Hm. It's off by about eight minutes."

Eight minutes. In three whole months, it only deviated by eight minutes?

It was hard to be shocked by such accuracy since I'd used quartz watches in my past life, but it was still impressive when compared with this world's ordinary ones.

"Well, I did use an awful good movement," Lilly said. "And I oiled it well, which must've helped."

One movement might gain ten seconds a day, while another might lose twenty seconds. She must've gathered a lot of them and picked out the most accurate. Either that, or being constantly on the move had averaged out any errors caused by its orientation.

"No, it's amazing. I'm impressed."

"It's nothin'. I was hopin' it would deviate less than two minutes per month."

Lilly was trying not to let her love for timepieces show, but I knew how much she cared about such topics. Back when I'd asked her to make the chronometer, I'd thought it might've been too much of a challenge, but she'd taken it in stride.

I suspected that an error of less than two minutes per month was the absolute limit of what was possible given current technology. I'd also heard that she used oils from river fish to oil her mechanisms, so I wondered whether that might have limited performance too.

"Couldn't you sell watches like this at a high price?" I asked. There'd certainly be demand for this level of precision.

Lilly gave me a pained smile. "Well... I really wouldn't want to try sellin' it. It'd be such a chore to make a load of these."

"It's down to love," Sham said. "She made five of these tricky watches just to give one to you, Yuri. She couldn't make more without love."

As Sham spoke, she took another watch from her pocket and placed it on the

table. Aside from the lack of a lid to cover the dial, it looked almost identical to mine.

The lid was there to make sure the glass wouldn't crack if I were to trip while carrying it, but that hadn't been necessary for Sham's watch. Although it didn't take a lot of effort, having to open the lid just to look at the time felt surprisingly inconvenient. Another difference was that my watch had some complex engravings on the metal parts, whereas Sham's had a smooth, mirrorlike finish. The dial and the hands, at least, were completely identical. I guessed from what Sham had just said that this was one of the four siblings of my watch.

"Sham, don't tell him that."

"But—"

"Didn't I tell you I was makin' five of them so a ship's navigator could use some?"

Well, navigators certainly did need good watches.

"That's just your way of getting rid of the extras," Sham replied. "Besides, the time you spent maintaining that one was twenty-one times your average—I checked."

"What...? I didn't spend all that long on it, did I?"

"You did. I used my watch to time you."

Twenty-one times as long...

"It ain't true..."

"You're worrying way too much about whether or not you overdid it, but Yuri's not going to appreciate the effort if he doesn't know about it."

"Ngh... Ugh..." Lilly began to deflate, as if she felt awkward.

"Yuri's not going to be put off when he hears how hard you worked. Right, Yuri?"

Sham must've thought it'd be a waste if all the hard work Lilly had put in remained behind the scenes. She'd probably put in many times more effort

than what a handmade scarf would've required.

Still, I wasn't quite sure how to react. "No, I don't feel that way. In fact, this probably saved my life out there. I'm entirely grateful."

Is that what she wanted to hear...? I really don't know how to handle women.

"Y-You mean it? It ain't botherin' you?"

It didn't, and I couldn't see any reason why it would. I was grateful.

"I'll do something to show my gratitude later," I told her. "Look forward to it."

Okay, that might've sounded weird. And what am I even going to do for her?

I guess I could just give her an expensive accessory with a gemstone on it, but that doesn't feel right. Since she's a company employee, I could improve her working conditions, but that doesn't feel right either. Oh well, she's probably about to say, "Don't go troublin' yourself like that. Just keep bein' good to me, and we'll call it even." That's how it's been up to now.

"Really?!" Lilly looked at me with a big smile on her face.

That's not the reaction I expected...

"Y-Yes. Really."

"Oh, but, you don't need to go so far for me."

"It's all right. I won't overdo it."

Except I've no idea what counts as overdoing it. This is tough. I'll need to talk it over with someone. But who? Maybe Caph? No way I can mention this to Carol or Myalo.

Sham looked happy too. "Isn't that good news, Lilly?"

Despite disapproving of our hug a few moments ago, Sham was now the one encouraging Lilly. It seemed she was fine with me and Lilly getting closer, but we had to go about it the right way. Maybe she was just at a difficult age.

"Yep. Well, I think it's time to call it a day," Lilly said.

"Huh...? Why don't you stay the night?" Sham asked her.

"I would, but Yuri's tired..."

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"You weren't shy around him before. What changed?"

"Sham, shut up, would you?"

"Sure. sure."
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One thing was for certain—today had tired me out, and I just wanted to get some sleep. After I'd already flown a long distance in the morning, I'd also traded stories with different people until I was thoroughly exhausted.

When Lilly stood up, Sham also got up to follow her.

"You're headed back to the dorm, Sham?"

"Yes. We've got to have a strategy meeting."

Strategy meeting? There's a term I didn't expect to hear.

"I've still got a bunch of questions for you, so I'll see you soon, Yuri," Sham added.

It was getting harder and harder to keep up with Sham's questions because I rarely used my brain on math problems lately. I feared it wouldn't be long before I couldn't handle them at all.

"See you later, Yuri. Good night," Lilly said.

"Okay, see you. Good night."

Lilly and Sham both nodded to me, then headed out the front door.

As much as I wanted to, I couldn't simply jump into my bed—I was still in my formal clothes. Instead, I had to call the head maid.

II

The next morning, I went to the academy alone.

I entered the building, climbed a few flights of stairs, and reached the corridor where Ms. Ether's office was located. After walking down the corridor, I stopped outside her door and knocked.

"Come in," a clear voice from within replied.

"Pardon me."

There was a click as I turned the knob and opened the door. Inside, a bespectacled Ms. Ether was in front of her well-ordered desk. As always, she was sitting on a cushionless wooden chair.

A slight expression of surprise appeared on her face when she looked at me. "Yuri, I see you made it home."

"Yes, and I have you to thank."

"Oh, that staff... Were you injured?" she asked, concern evident in her voice.

I wasn't using something like a heavy-duty crutch—it was more like a onehanded cane that an elderly person might use.

"Yes, but I'll recover before long."

"Oh... That's a relief. Please, take a seat." Ms. Ether stood up and gestured toward a chair.

When I reached the chair, Ms. Ether extended her hand toward me. Although it wasn't necessary, I let her support a little of my weight as I lowered myself into the chair.

"Thank you," I said.

"Not at all... But how did it go? Your trip, I mean," Ms. Ether asked after I'd had a chance to sit down and take a breath.

"Ah... Well, it went wrong in a lot of ways."

"I see... Yes, so I see." She paused for a moment, then appeared slightly nervous. "Oh, but you were at war, after all. I shouldn't have even asked. I'm sorry."

"Don't be."

"No, there are certainly no good memories to be made during a war, regardless of whether you win or lose. Though not everyone sees it that way."

"Have you ever been to war, Ms. Ether?"

She spoke like someone who'd experienced war for herself. I'd told so many stories about my travels the day before that I wasn't in the mood to start sharing them again. Instead, I hoped I'd hear some from Ms. Ether. She

appeared to be a pacifist, but perhaps she'd been caught up in bloody battles in the past.

"I don't have any experience taking up arms and fighting on the battlefield in the way warriors do, but I was rather famous for my controversial views in Vaticanus..."

Ah, that might explain it.

"When I needed to demonstrate the validity of my reasoning through debate, I spent time studying rhetoric. Unfortunately, I found that talking people down results in a hollow victory that merely invites resentment."

I gathered that in her younger days she'd won some fierce debates. That wasn't rare for young intellectuals—it was a common way to refine one's ideals. It really shouldn't have been surprising, but I found it hard to imagine her in that situation. Then again, maybe that was just because I'd never actually seen her take part in a serious argument. The only time I'd seen Ms. Ether get involved in debates at all was when she was acting for the sake of teaching.

"But weren't there any listeners who came to agree with you?"

Ms. Ether's arguments always sounded so well-reasoned to me that I tended to agree with her, and she backed up the things she said with evidence and research. Whenever I'd ever had a doubt, or if I'd ever thought there was some inconsistency in what she said, I'd ask, "Why do you think so?" and she'd always reply with a convincing answer. Not once had she replied with something as wishy-washy as, "That's just how it is," or, "Because a canonized pope from long ago said so."

Even though I didn't believe in Yeesusism, I enjoyed hearing academic theories from someone so honest and sincere. Surely, those who were faithful would've been drawn to her all the more.

"There were—mostly the young clergy members."

"Older people tend to be more focused on practical benefits, don't they? They care less about the ideal itself and more about what they'll gain by supporting it," I replied.

Those who knew how to move people through reasonable arguments could

gain power in the process, but only in democratic nations where freedom of speech was a right. Citizens of the Papal State had no means of standing up to oppression. Young people tended to be strong-willed, but lacking in power. They were good at shouting about their ideals, but they couldn't form rational organizations capable of fighting inquisitors who used false accusations and torture.

Revolutionaries throughout history had started by getting the public on their side, but theological debates were too complex for the masses to take more than a passing interest in. To put it bluntly, although Ms. Ether's Me sect might've been correct, it wouldn't increase anyone's salary or generate any additional profit. That made it unlikely that many people would want to risk their lives for it.

The situation might've been different for someone who knew how to stir others into a frenzy, but Ms. Ether clearly wasn't that type of person.

"Exactly. If only I had a fraction of your wisdom when I was your age."

That was clearly a compliment.

"I'm sure you don't mean that," I replied.

"Oh, but I do. Looking back, I realize I'd been foolish in those days. Oh, and I had a fierce temper."

I wouldn't have taken her for a troublemaker, but then again, she had mentioned once that anyone who captured her would get canonized. Canonization wasn't a service someone could just buy, and even the pope himself wasn't guaranteed to be made a saint after death. Ms. Ether must've caused some major trouble at some point. It had to be something on the level of proving that the church's teachings simply weren't compatible with reality.

"I have some regrets now. If I'd just focused on making steady progress instead of being hasty, I could've achieved minor goals until they added up to something big." With that, Ms. Ether fell into a sullen silence.

"It can be hard to move on," I said softly.

I felt I'd seen her expression somewhere before. Then it came to me—my grandfather in Japan used to make the same face sometimes. His personality

and general attitude had been fairly similar to Ms. Ether too. I wondered why I hadn't realized it until now.

"Oh, that's right, we were talking about your trip. How'd I get talking about myself?" Ms. Ether hastily added.

"I was interested in hearing about you. As for my journey, it was mostly filled with bad luck, though one very interesting thing happened."

I decided I'd move on to a happier topic. The mood had grown somber, and Ms. Ether clearly didn't want to relive her past.

"Oh, really? What sort of thing?"

"I saw a dragon."

"What?!"

"A dragon flew to the site of the battle. It was quite a sight."

"A dragon? Wow, I see... A dragon in the crusade."

It was rare to see anything shock her, but she was clearly amazed to hear the news. She must've been imagining the incredible effort required to transport a dragon all that way.

"The church considers dragons an enemy. They wouldn't normally be allowed to join a crusade," she added.

I hadn't known that. The most famous use of dragons was during a major war between the Xurxes Holy Empire and the Korlan Dragon Empire, which had ultimately led to the Xurxes Holy Empire's destruction. Though it had all happened long ago, dragons must've been seen as a natural enemy ever since.

The Korlan Dragon Empire still existed and had a thousand years of history going back to its founding. However, it hadn't been ruled by a single dynasty for those thousand years. There had been various shifts in power and usurpations, changing the nature of the empire. I wasn't particularly knowledgeable about the topic, but each dynasty claimed to be descended from the empire's founder —Ananta I—and therefore the successor to the imperial throne. That was how the Korlan Dragon Empire retained the same identity even after a thousand years. It was more or less like an old brand name that rulers found beneficial to

continue using.

"I figured they'd brought one because we'd caused them a lot of problems with our eagles in the previous war."

"Ah, that's right. Well, that explains it. But, still... Could it actually fly?"

"Yes, it flew." And it had more than enough energy to give me trouble.

"I've seen dragons many times myself."

"You've seen them? Where?"

Dragons generally lived in desert climates, so there shouldn't have been any in the Papal State.

"I often saw them while traveling to the Korlan Dragon Empire for the sake of scientific research."

"Oh. I see."

It sounded as though Ms. Ether was well-traveled.

"But it's not necessary to travel quite so far. People sometimes put dragons on show near Vaticanus."

"Wow."

"They don't actually *enter* Vaticanus, of course, but they visit maybe once every four years. They rent a few fields in a nearby farming village and put up a big tent where they hold an exhibition. Everyone's interested, so townspeople go to it in droves."

It sounded like a circus. I wished I could see it too. If anyone had ever set up an exhibition with a dragon near Sibiak, I wouldn't have missed it for anything.

"Are those dragons raised in captivity by the exhibition's handlers?"

"No, they'd die because the climate on the peninsula doesn't suit them. From what I've heard, the organizers buy dragons that can't fly due to injuries. Since the dragons can't fly across the sea, they're bound by ropes and loaded onto ships... It puts a terrible strain on an animal when it's treated that way. The dragons that reach Vaticanus are worn-out creatures that lack the energy to be destructive."

It had to be a one-way ticket for those dragons. Now the whole thing sounded sad. The same was probably true for the dragon I'd taken down—it was unlikely that there'd ever been a plan to transport it back to Africa.

"So the one that I saw really was pushed to its limit during the journey."

"I'd expect so. To have any energy at all after the long trip to the far north, it must've been in peak condition to start with. But even so, they'd need to burn vast quantities of wood to keep it warm throughout the trip. I'm surprised it was possible."

It seemed Ms. Ether's conclusions matched my own.

"Dragons are quite an important creature in regions that practice Kokorlism. The people there wouldn't approve of dragons being put on show or carried to the north where they're left to die. Dragon exhibitions are more or less a criminal enterprise."

"They are?" Does that mean that the dragon rider I killed was a deviant too?

"Yes. Their dragons are revered similarly to this kingdom's kingeagles. The biggest difference is that wild dragons attack humans, so they're a threat to the lives of ordinary people. Wild dragons can't be tamed, so local rulers have to exterminate them at great cost. It's customary for anyone who kills a dragon to be lauded as a hero. In that respect, you could say that dragons are very different from your eagles."

Anyone who kills a dragon is a hero? That's the first I've heard of it.

It seemed that if I were to go to some far-off country that I was never likely to visit, I'd have a little something to be proud of on my personal record. But that wasn't much use to me. It was like I'd found a winning lottery ticket only to realize it had already expired. It felt like more of a loss than a gain.

Eagles were smart creatures that not only recognized their masters, but showed them devotion. I understood why Ms. Ether would want to compare the different cultures surrounding these two creatures that could be ridden through the sky, but I doubted they had much in common.

"Is that right? From what I saw, it was quite different from an eagle, so it makes sense that the culture surrounding them would differ too."

"Then you saw it up close?" she asked.

Now I felt like I'd said too much. But she was going to find out sooner or later anyway, so I decided there was no point in hiding it.

"Yes. Actually, I crashed into it from above on my eagle, and we basically knocked each other out of the sky."

"Oh, you did? Then your foot..."

"That wasn't how I injured my foot, but you could say the crash after my fight with the dragon was what led to the foot injury. I survived it all thanks to you..." I was about to finish up by telling her that the Terolish she had taught me was what kept me alive, but then I realized she was mad at me.

"Yuri, given your upbringing, I'm sure you've never been discouraged from attempting daring acts like that, but we have a saying in the south: 'Bear no fruit in haste.'"

"Fruit?"

"The saying comes from a tree known as an oko that sometimes produces fruit early, but those early fruits taste bitter and their seeds won't grow. Essentially, it means that no matter how eager you are to accomplish great things, you should wait until you're older." Ms. Ether paused and made a sound like she was clearing her throat, but she didn't continue.

I guessed she was remembering what she'd said about the mistakes of her youth—she'd just mentioned them, after all—and realizing she was just like me. I could glean as much from the look of mild embarrassment that had appeared on her face.

"Well, that's the meaning behind it. What I want to say is...you shouldn't make the same mistakes I've made," she continued. She'd managed to pull it back together in the end.

Her words didn't exactly strike a chord, but I didn't want to make her worry. "Yes, I'll remember that."

"Now... Th-That's right. I wanted to talk about the task you'd given me."

Oh, she must mean the Ether Translation of Me Sect's holy scripture. That's

half the reason I came to see her.

Ms. Ether looked down at the open book on the desk. "I've managed to complete it."

"Thank you. It wouldn't have been possible without you."

"I've been over it many times and repeatedly altered it with annotations, so it might be a little hard to read..."

"Were you going over it again just now?"

"Yes. It's such an important work that I've revised it many times. Since I haven't found any corrections to make for the past two weeks, it may be finished for now at least. I think you should be the next one to read it; then you can point out any areas that need further work."

"May I take a look at it now?"

"Of course."

Ms. Ether picked up the heavy book from the desk and passed it to me. It was a rather thick tome whose pages were originally blank parchment. I opened the first page and saw that Yeesusism's scripture began without any preface.

There were a lot of empty lines, presumably so corrections could be written there later. Sure enough, in many places the text had been struck out with corrections written underneath.

The wording she'd chosen made it easy to understand. Not only was it much more readable than other versions of the scripture, but also compared to most Terolish books I'd read. The current authorized translation of the scripture used a lot of clunky and archaic terms, so people would find this version much easier to digest. There weren't too many difficult words, and the sentences were structured to give the text a pleasing rhythm in Terolish.

After reading a few pages, I found a good place to stop and closed the book. "This must've been a lot of work. I'll have to compensate you later."

"No, I don't need anything."

"Please accept something. It could damage my reputation if I accept the work you've done without giving you something in return."

It was an excuse to give her money. If possible, I wanted to make sure Ms. Ether had the resources to get herself to safety.

"If that's how you feel, then I'll accept."

"Please do."

"I'd like to give you the book now, but..." Ms. Ether paused and looked down at my foot. "Perhaps it would be better if you sent someone to fetch it later."

She was right. Carrying the book in one arm while I held the staff with the other could be a little dangerous—I'd have to navigate stairs, after all.

"In that case, I'll come to pick it up later. I should be walking just fine in a few days from now."

More to the point, the printing press probably needed more work, so I wouldn't be able to publish the book just yet anyway.

We had something like woodblock printing set up, but I wanted to use movable type. Since the Terolish alphabet had just thirty characters, it was much simpler than Shanish, making it the ideal language for getting started with movable type.

"I see. Then I'll hold on to it for now."

"If you don't mind," I said, giving the book back to Ms. Ether. "I'm afraid I can't stay here for very long, so you'll have to forgive me for leaving so soon."

I still had a few other tasks to attend to.

"I see. That's a shame, but I know you must be busy."

I reached for my staff, then slowly rose from my chair. There was a tingling sensation in my uninjured right leg. I'd been favoring that leg the whole time and overworking it as a result, but it wasn't painful.

I lifted my gaze from the floor and looked at the Me Sect scripture that was once again resting on the desk.

I wonder—will this book change the course of history?

I might have been looking at the original manuscript of a holy book that would be printed billions of times over. Then again, if things didn't go to plan, it

might be a footnote in the history books about a heretic's attempt at writing their own scripture.



There was little use in thinking about the distant future. Still, if the world were a lake, then this book might've been a rock about to be thrown. It was beyond my knowing whether the ripples would die out or grow into a tidal wave. For now, the rock hadn't been thrown—it sat here, unknown to the world.

I'd talked with Ms. Ether about such possibilities before. She'd said that our actions could lead to people dying.

I walked to the door and turned the knob to open it.

"Ms. Ether," I said, turning back to look at her.

"What is it?"

"This book could rekindle the flames you stoked in your past. I think it could be a good thing."

"Why is that?"

"Fires don't just burn people. Sometimes fire is exactly what's needed. It can bring warmth to those who are freezing."

Ш

Two days later, as noon approached, there was a great commotion as a carriage arrived at the residence. I soon realized it was Rook and Suzuya here to visit.

When Rook came alone, he'd normally make the trip in half a day riding an eagle. Since eagles couldn't carry a pair of adults, though, traveling with Suzuya meant they had to ride in a two-person carriage.

They occasionally visited the royal capital this way when an event required their attendance as husband and wife. Since traveling by carriage was so slow, it would take three days if they rushed, or four if they traveled at a more leisurely pace.

It wasn't quite a daimyo's procession, but any carriage carrying someone as important as Rook was escorted by about thirty lightly equipped escorts on

plainrunners, plus seventy or so guards on foot.

The reason the mounted guards were only lightly equipped was that plainrunners, having less endurance than horses, wouldn't be able to travel for several days in a row while carrying people in heavy iron armor.

The question, then, was why they didn't ride horses instead, but in that respect, it was like a daimyo's procession—above all else, it had to look the part. It might look like a response to some emergency situation if knights on horseback were dispatched, so having them ride birds was more respectable. I personally thought people had too much faith in plainrunners. After all, another advantage to using horses was that their extra weight gave them more force when charging at groups of foot soldiers. On the other hand, there was historical precedent showing that mounted archers from equestrian tribes couldn't be countered without plainrunners.

The party escorting Rook and Suzuya were here as part of their regular duties rather than being part of some formal event. Once they'd arrived at the residence, the soldiers only had to line up and hear some brief praise from Rook before they could leave.

Those who'd been serving as escorts would later relieve the guards currently stationed at the residence, taking up positions as gatekeepers and suchlike. Being assigned to guard duty here was a form of reward for soldiers. In recognition of good work, soldiers were given a temporary assignment at the royal capital. Here, they could enjoy everything the city had to offer during their time off, which was every other day. Since there was no daily training here at the residence either, the soldiers weren't particularly busy. They could even stay somewhere else overnight—such as at one of the royal capital's brothels—so long as they made it back for the morning roll call.

On the other hand, they were expected to perform their duties efficiently during their limited working hours, and anyone caught slacking would find themselves in trouble. But with so much time to rest, most soldiers did their duty properly.

The soldiers who'd just arrived wouldn't have to start work for several days, so most of them could immediately head out to explore the city... Or at least,

that's what they'd do normally.

When I opened the door to greet my parents, I found things playing out quite differently. Although Rook had had enough time to talk to the soldiers, they were still lined up and looking right at me. For some reason, they hadn't dispersed. Rook and Suzuya were standing in front of them.

"Yuri!"

Suzuya, overcome with emotion, rushed toward me when she saw me open the door and threw her arms around me. I was so much taller than her by this point that her forehead was level with my collarbone as she held me.

"Mom..."

"I was so worried," Suzuya muttered between light sobs.

Feelings of guilt came welling up from somewhere inside me as I realized just how much worry I'd caused her.

"I'm sorry, mom. I didn't mean to make you worry."

"It's okay. I'm just glad you're back," Suzuya said. Suddenly, she released her hold on me, took a step back, and began patting me all over. "Seems like...you're not injured."

Oh, she was checking for injuries.

"Except for the bottom of my foot. But that's fine now."

"What? Really?! Are you all right?!" Suzuya cried.

"I'm fine, I'm fine. I don't even need to walk with a staff anymore."

"Oh... But I'm glad. I'm glad...your life's not in danger."

"Yes, I'm all right."

From the point when I'd crashed up until I was safe in Reforme, people had assumed I was dead. It was now about a fortnight since an urgent message that declared I was safe had been dispatched to Sibiak. But even after it had reached her, Suzuya had probably wanted to see me with her own eyes to be sure I was really all right.

"Suzuya." Rook, who'd been waiting behind Suzuya, placed a hand on her

shoulder. "I'm glad you made it back, Yuri."

"Yes, father."

"We can talk inside."

He urged us into the building with his arm around Suzuya's shoulders. It had to be an awkward scene for the soldiers to watch. If anything, they were looking at us with respect rather than accusing glares, but still. We couldn't force them to watch our private family moments for too long.

Rook looked over his shoulder at the soldiers. "Your escort duty is finished. Disband."

The acting captain of the escort party turned to face the other soldiers. "All those with no immediate responsibilities can disperse!" he commanded in a loud voice.

Once the captain of the unit had given the order, the soldiers began to head in different directions. Normally, Rook would add some casual comment, like, "Enjoy your time in the royal capital; just try not to get carried away." This time, however, he didn't.

We passed through the entrance and headed into a parlor of sorts where we could relax and talk in private. There, the three of us sat on armchairs as a family.

"For now, I'm just glad you're safe," Rook said, sounding genuinely relieved.

It was like he'd finally gotten a chance to relax. In a world where news had to be delivered by a messenger, it was hard to take anything for granted without actually seeing it with one's own eyes.

"I'd like to tell you that you shouldn't have caused your parents so much worry like this, but I suppose it's just the nature of your career..."

Rook was referring to the fact that I was going to become a knight. Being a knight wasn't typically considered a line of work, though—for most, it felt more like a birthright than a career. That is, a child was often chosen to be a knight from the moment they were born. They weren't given a choice in the matter.

"Is your foot really okay?" he asked.

"It still stings a little, but it's fine. I think I'll have a permanent scar."

"What...?" Suzuya looked worried the moment I mentioned scarring.

Whoops.

"Suzuya, it's on the bottom of his foot. A scar there won't make any difference," Rook said coolly.

That's true. It's not like it's on my face or anything. Unless it turns into a face-shaped tumor and starts talking, it won't bother me.

"I suppose so." Suzuya seemed to agree. Her relaxed expression returned once more.

Suzuya had been raised by farmers, so she wasn't normally the type to fret over little things like this. When I was a young child, I'd once seen Rook injure his arm badly while he'd been cutting the grass around our home, and Suzuya hadn't worried too much about that.

Thinking back, the scythes and knives around our home had probably been unusually sharp because Rook had been sharpening them with the same type of whetstone he'd use to sharpen daggers and spears.

"You saw a doctor, didn't you?" Rook asked. "There'll be complications later if it wasn't sewn closed evenly."

"Yes, the doctor said it'll be fine."

I didn't know whether there'd be any effect on the nerves, and I didn't have any way to find out either. At the very least, I *had* been able to check that all my toes moved just fine.

"Then you really are all right. That's good to know."

"Yes."

"It is a relief. You can spend the whole day with us, can't you, Yuri?" Suzuya asked.

"Yes, I can. I've already met with Her Majesty, so I was planning on using today to rest my foot."

"In that case, I'll make dinner today," she said.

Ooh. That's great news. I was surprised at how happy it made me.

There was lots of good food here in the royal capital. Even here in the residence, I'd be served dishes finer than average without having to ask for anything special. There was nothing quite like my mom's cooking, though. Since Suzuya was married to the ruler of a chieftain, she rarely stepped foot in a kitchen or even picked up a carving knife. It was unusual for her to cook for anyone.

"That's great. I'm already hungry at the thought."

"Rook, are you okay with that?" Suzuya asked him.

Given her status, it wouldn't look right for Suzuya herself to work in the kitchen—it was considered beneath her. The clothes she wore from day to day were too expensive to wear during cooking, but someone like her couldn't be seen dressed in rags either. There were a whole host of issues to consider.

"If it's just for today, then yes. I'm looking forward to it too."

"In that case, I'll get started right away," Suzuya exclaimed, heading out of the room with a spring in her step.

"Oh, good," Rook said once Suzuya had left us alone.

Good?

"What makes you say that? Because we'll get to eat mom's cooking today?"

"No. Because there are things we can't discuss in front of Suzuya. The horrors of war aren't something she needs to know about."

He was right about that. I didn't want to tell her about any of that. It would've just worried her.

Rook studied my face and asked in an unusually serious tone, "Well? How was it? The war, I mean."

"I let Stardust die."

"Ah... He was your first eagle. It must've been tough," Rook replied, sounding a little down.

"Yes."

"Eagles are compassionate creatures. They watch humans closely and learn from them. Yours was wiser than most."

Stardust hadn't been a particularly robust bird, nor had he been particularly big, but he'd been sharp.

"Did you pick an eagle like that just for me?"

"I just figured that he was a little too smart to sell to anyone, and that he'd probably get along with you."

The smarter an eagle was, the more likely it was to resent its keepers and peck at them. On the other hand, they'd learn faster, and they could guess the rider's intentions with minimal instructions. Such traits made them ideal for riders who wanted to pull off complex maneuvers requiring an almost telepathic level of communication between rider and bird. For the seller, such an eagle presented both pros and cons. Intelligence wasn't a bad thing, but it meant the buyer had to be chosen carefully.

"Smart eagles choose their masters. If they don't like how they're treated, they'll find a chance to escape. I could just tell how well you'd raised him."

"Do you think Stardust was happy?" I asked, even though it was no use knowing now.

"I can't say," Rook replied. "Maybe we should ask whether eagles are ever happy to fly with a human rider. If I had to guess, I'd say we're just troubling them. We're heavy, we make them live in cages, and we prevent them from flying when they please."

He was absolutely correct. Similarly to how a bird living in a cage could never fly freely through the skies, a captive kingeagle was never allowed to fly without a human rider. We didn't let them roam freely for fear that they might run away. In that respect, we treated them horribly.

"But even if they dislike carrying human riders, they can't hate us that much," Rook continued. "As you know, a properly trained eagle won't just fly off the moment you let go of its reins. And if their rider falls off during flight, they'll even land right where they fell."

Since the Knight Academy was full of inexperienced riders, many of whom

didn't have a good relationship with their eagle, it wasn't too uncommon for a bird to fly off when someone dropped the reins. But I'd never seen a single eagle escape the entire time I'd helped out on Rook's ranch. In the few instances when a lone bird *had* taken off for some reason, they'd always returned of their own volition.

"It's a fact that eagles live longer in captivity than in the wild. In the wild, they have to hunt for their own food. They also fight over territory and sometimes die of their injuries. They can't shelter indoors to escape winter winds either." Just like me, Rook must've considered such things whenever one of his eagles died. He was speaking as if retracing the same lines of thought he'd explored in the past. "Well... We can only guess in the end. It's no different when a fellow human dies—we never know how they really felt."

"That's true," I replied.

"Anyone in my line of work wants to believe that the eagles are happy in captivity, but all we can do is take care of them the best we can while they're alive."

Care for them the best we can... That's a vague concept.

"I'm not sure it's any consolation," Rook said, "but you took good care of your bird. That much I can assure you." Rook was trying to make me feel better, but he meant what he said.

"I did."

"That's enough about eagles. I'm asking about the war. I'm sure some of you killed, and some of you were killed."

It was a strange way of putting it. As much as Rook hated war, he wasn't opposed to the concept. He was certainly no pacifist, so I know he wasn't about to criticize me for taking part.

"You must've found yourself in life-threatening situations. Well? Did you...hate it?"

The question caught me off guard. What does he mean?

"Hate it? I don't think anyone would want to go through all that again," I

replied.

"That's not what I'm asking. What about...never wanting to kill anyone again? Or never wanting to get involved in another battle? Do you have thoughts like those?"

Oh, that's what he's worried about.

They were reasonable concerns. Considering the circumstances that made him leave the Knight Academy, it was natural for him to worry that I might feel the same way.

"In that sense, no, I didn't hate it. I fought because I had to."

"I see..."

"Let me put it this way—if I were in the same situation again, I might do things smarter, but I wouldn't just want to run away."

"That's good enough for me. If you hated all these things—war, killing, fighting—then you'd never be fit to lead a chieftain family."

That was true. Many people were envious of the position Rook held, but most of them weren't cut out for it. Much like someone who knew they weren't suited for organized crime because they couldn't hold their nerve in gambling halls, Rook knew he wasn't cut out for his current job.

"I get it. You're talking about me inheriting your title of lord-supreme and becoming head of the Ho family."

"Exactly. There's no rush, but if you're going to succeed me, you should do it within a few years of your graduation."

Within a few years...? Then I can put it off for quite some time.

"What about you, father? Do you hate the position you're in?"

If he did, I wanted to take over for him as soon as possible. It would free him to do as he pleased, and it'd make Suzuya's life easier too.

"I wouldn't go that far, but it's not a good fit for me. Luckily, it's been going well thanks to your reputation."

"What does my reputation have to do with it?"

"A lot. You could say that I'm only here to keep your seat warm. Perhaps I shouldn't tell you this, but if you hadn't been showing much promise, there'd be a lot of debate going on right now about who Sham should marry."

I wouldn't want that.

"And no one's talking about it?"

"No one. Satsuki's against the whole idea of Sham marrying for political reasons."

"I see..."

"There are also Her Majesty's wishes to consider. If there was some internal conflict that led to someone else succeeding me, the royal family would definitely have something to say."

"Would that matter?"

The title of lord-supreme was held by the Ho family because Her Majesty granted the head of the family that title. In reality, though, the Ho family's authority wasn't borrowed from anyone.

It wasn't the queen that gave us control of our province. After a successor was chosen, the queen would be informed, "X is to be the next head of the family," and her approval would be sought after the fact. It was taken for granted that she'd consent and award them the title of lord-supreme. In theory, she had the power to reject such a decision, refusing to award the title, and refusing to hold any ceremony to acknowledge the succession. However, no queen had ever done so, so that power was untested.

For example, suppose our family's eldest son were to be accepted by the family's retainers, and he had the experience of a hundred successful battles. Then, suppose there was also a second eldest son who was unexceptional and lived a life of debauchery. If the royal family declared that only the second son would be acknowledged as the head of family, there'd be an outcry.

That sort of treatment was beyond what a chieftain family would tolerate. Accordingly, in all historical cases, such disputes had resulted in civil war or assassinations in an attempt to unseat the monarch before the succession was even announced, thus forcing the queen to change their approach.

"It's ultimately for us to decide, but we still have to consider the queen's wishes. It won't bode well for us in the long run if we oppose the royal family."

Well, I suppose there's that.

"I met with Her Majesty just a few days ago. She looked very tired," I said.

"Well, there's no end to her worries. Given that she has to keep the witches in check at every minute of every day while also thinking about the war, it's hard for her to manage it all. I imagine it's taking its toll."

"Yes, you're right about that."

I'd probably go mad if I were in her shoes. Actually, before it came to that, I'd send out my soldiers and exterminate every last witch. She probably had more patience than me, though.

That thought made me remember something. "Oh, that reminds me—it might've been quite some time ago, but did someone appear to offer their services?"

"Oh, yes they did. I forgot to tell you. Gino was his name. I figured I'd take him in."

Gino was the man I'd met in the forest during my preliminary trip to Kilhina, before the start of the war. After we'd shared a fire for a night, I'd given him a letter of recommendation addressed to the Ho family thinking he might enter some government role.

"How did it go? Did you employ him?"

My letter of recommendation had only advised that he be interviewed, so I couldn't assume they'd taken him in.

"I did. He works closely with me. I don't have any battle experience, after all. Having someone from outside the Ho family with actual combat experience is invaluable. He helps me out a lot."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"The region's local rulers might be descended from the Ho family originally, but they're always more concerned with their own households. They're not bad people, but it's hard for them to consider the Ho family as a whole because of

their other commitments."

Basically, they weren't suited to serving as advisors. The Ho family had a wealth of experience in war, but many had households to govern and would speak out in favor of what was most profitable for them. That didn't make their advice completely unreliable, but it meant they might prioritize personal gain over what was best for the Ho family overall.

In that regard, Gino's lack of connections made him well-positioned to give unbiased advice. In management terms, he acted like an external consultant.

"On top of that, he's the former head of a chieftain family. You did well."

"It was just good luck," I said.

"No, it was fate."

Fate? I didn't like the sound of that word. "Heh, father, you didn't join some weird new religion, I hope?"

"Don't poke fun at me."

"No, I wasn't making fun."

It was true that I was the sort of person who scoffed at the idea of fate, so maybe I'd sounded a little too dismissive.

"He's devoted. When I let him take charge, rather than just giving him orders, he devises plans and demonstrates good leadership. He's logical in everything he says, and his intentions are always reasonable."

I'd gotten that same impression of him myself.

"The Ho family's army has restored its numbers, and it's just about ready now. Thanks to his advice, the command structure should be in good shape when I pass control of the family to you. That's what I was thinking about."

He meant that he felt fate had brought him to us—like it had been on my side. A tailwind was blowing, steadily and surely.

But, no, the winds weren't on my side. To an outsider, it might've appeared that everything always happened to go my way, but that was down to hard work. I'd never felt any mysterious force help out. If anything, fate was

hindering me. Nothing was ever plain sailing; it was like making my way through a dense thicket.

Rather than disagree, I decided to move the discussion along. "If you think so, father, then perhaps it's true."

"It wasn't a serious thought. This conversation just made me think... Oh, that's right. We've drifted off topic," Rook said as the realization came to him. "What I want to hear is more details about what happened. Directly from you."

"Tales of my travels...? That's all anyone wants to hear lately."

"Is that so bad? It'll pass the time while Suzuya's cooking."

Well, she was talking like she was going to make something special... I guess we could be waiting for a while.

Chapter 3 — The Ceremony

I

The royal castle's great hall was packed full of people.

Each of the guests was sitting on a chair prepared for them, while many other visitors were standing in the crowd behind those who'd been invited.

As for me, I had one of the best spots—a seat near the middle in the front row. The nature of the ceremony meant that Sham hadn't been invited, but Rook and Suzuya were there beside me.

The ceremony had already started, and men dressed in formal attire were kneeling before Her Majesty with their heads lowered.

"Our courageous chieftains: Orone of House Bof, Kien of House Rube, Bolafra of House Noza. We praise you for risking your lives as you wielded your spears so that your friends might be saved."

When Queen Shimoné finished speaking, each of the three lord-supremes bent the elbow of their arm that rested against the ground so that they could lower their head further.

One of them, Bolafra Noza, kept his head higher than the others, but this probably wasn't a show of disrespect or dissatisfaction toward the queen—more likely, he struggled to bend his knee. I'd never heard anything about his knee problems, but I could tell he was uncomfortable.

"Your deeds have brought hope to the people of this kingdom. We trust that your spears will continue to ward off the evil that threatens us."

After slowly rising from her chair, Her Majesty rested the tip of a long staff, known as a sovereign lance, on the shoulder of the second old man from the right. It was a decorative narrow rod with a straight blade at its tip, and it functioned as a symbol of her authority. The unique shape of the blade featured a series of valleys and peaks. Since the blade appeared to have sections missing,

it was intended to symbolize the queen's blade being placed in the chieftain's care; the shape reminded me of a saw blade from a child's drawing. Its thinness also made it easier for a woman to wield.

"Kien Rube. In light of your contributions in particular, you are to be awarded the Shiyaltan Sun Star medal. You may rise."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Kien rose alone, then took three broad paces toward the queen.

Silence fell over the grand hall. For a moment, the Queen and Kien looked at each other. I couldn't see Kien's face from where I sat, but for a moment I noticed the queen narrow her eyes, like she was studying something.

I could tell that neither of them felt warm feelings toward this occasion. There were no emotions between them, only a sense of duty. I had to wonder whether any good would come of this ceremony. If it did have any value, then these two didn't appreciate it. I was the same in that respect.

But it was necessary—it marked an end to a series of disruptive events and symbolized the conclusion of the expedition dispatched in the royal family's name.

Naturally, the conflict wasn't entirely over for the Rube family—they would continue to engage in the occasional skirmish since they were tasked with defending the kingdom's northern border. When this ceremony was over, Kien would likely rush home to prepare for defensive battles.

But the expedition held at the queen's orders was now over. Much like a sporting tournament, it didn't feel right for a war not to have an opening and a closing ceremony.

After the queen herself had put Kien's medal on his chest, he took one step back and kneeled. "Such an honor is more than I am worth. My descendants will share in this pride for generations."

The Shiyaltan Sun Star Medal was the second-highest honor a knight could be awarded in this region. The highest—the Shantilan Starscape Medal—had never actually been awarded in Shiyalta. As always, we were following the same system that had been used in the Shantila Empire. It had only been awarded

twice throughout history: during the first and third Counter-Yeesus Defense Wars, during which there had been conflict on a scale the world had never seen. Armies hundreds of thousands strong had clashed with each other. Since the medal was only ever awarded to commanders whose accomplishments were history in the making, it was rarely given out.

Although the Sun Star Medal was a step below the Starscape Medal, it too had only been given out twice in Shiyalta—once to the Ho family and once to the Noza family.

In the Noza family's case, a chieftain rebellion in the distant past had caused a civil war to break out. It had been so serious that it had placed Sibiak at risk. The Noza family had been awarded the medal for suppressing the rebellion and liberating the royal castle.

In the Ho family's case, it had been awarded in the distant past. A now-defunct nation, known as the Dafide Kingdom, had expressed passionate gratitude toward Shiyalta and a Ho expedition force that had helped repel a crusade.

A few other regions also had their own version of the medal. In addition to the Shiyaltan one, my family had also had one awarded to them by a nation known as the Timna Kingdom in the distant past, plus another posthumously awarded to my uncle Gok by the Kilhina Kingdom. Needless to say, no other chieftain family had so many Sun Star medals.

Given how lofty the award was, it was understandable that Kien spoke of generations of pride. In fact, it would be rude if he hadn't said anything to that effect. If anything, it was excessive given how little he'd accomplished. All recipients until now had been given the medal for their stunning achievements in wars that had been won. It was certain to raise eyebrows when the same medal was given to a commander who'd dispatched a few reinforcements that had later returned defeated.

Granting awards and holding ceremonies sporadically like this was a phenomenon that could affect any nation experiencing many defeats. It was an easy way to raise morale. The only real cost was the production of the medal itself.

The reason Kien wasn't smiling was probably because he knew that the phenomenon was the reason that he'd been awarded this unusual medal. It wasn't just him who found the whole thing unusual either—the grand hall was probably full of people who understood what was happening.

"There are no forces besides yours that we can rely on to save this kingdom in times of crisis. We expect even greater deeds from you to come."

II

After the ceremony had concluded, Rook and I were invited to attend a conference.

Apparently, there weren't many others attending. The room we were led to, known as the west meeting room, was only as big as a modest parlor.

Inside was a large table and some chairs. There was nothing else to the room besides a fireplace, but the walls were decorated with several paintings in gorgeous frames.

The royal castle had verandas in the rooms where parties were held, but this one simply had a large window—presumably to make eavesdropping less likely. The window was currently wide open, allowing the summer sun to illuminate the room.

Shiyalta enjoyed fine summers. It felt good to walk down streets that were surrounded by lush vegetation. A less enjoyable way to spend a summer day was to sit here, trapped in a tense meeting room with VIPs who couldn't afford to make mistakes, where nothing of consequence was likely to happen.

The meeting concerned secret matters, so Her Majesty, myself, and four lord-supremes—six people in total—were here without any guards. Naturally, there was a great number of chamberlains and whatnot waiting outside, but the room was almost empty.

The big question was why I'd been invited. I'd been wondering that ever since getting the invitation, and hadn't yet come up with a good answer.

The rest of the unit had arrived in Sibiak the day before last, allowing Liao to attend the ceremony that had just been held. Naturally, Carol had attended

too. Whatever the reason for my presence here was, it wasn't because I was heir to the Ho family headship. Maybe Carol wouldn't be here if that were the case, but Liao surely would. At that moment, however, those two were elsewhere busy preparing for another ceremony.

"As for the area behind the mountains, with your leave, I'd like to transgress the border," Kien said.

Her Majesty readily agreed. "I'll permit it. Formal documentation will be dispatched to you later."

The boundaries of Rube Province were under discussion. The province extended across the entirety of the border with Kilhina, but the area behind the mountains wasn't clearly marked out. The mountains ran down the middle of the peninsula, and there wasn't a river or anything to mark the border's position on the side closest to the Atlantic Ocean. Thus, Kien wanted to move his army farther north in that region.

With Kilhina's defenses already in ruin, I didn't think that should've required any discussion.

"I would like to make that land part of Rube Province. Would this be acceptable, Your Majesty?"

But apparently, he didn't just want to move his soldiers forward; he also wanted to expand his territory. It was an obvious suggestion. From Kien's point of view, it was best to send out his army and expand his province immediately.

As for the region near Hoto Bridge, the river formed a natural defensive barrier, so it wasn't necessarily wise to advance beyond it.

The bridge downstream had been destroyed once by a gunship in the war we'd just faced. This meant that any soldiers positioned on the other side of the bridge would fear the bridge being destroyed once again, cutting off the means of retreat they'd rely on in the event of defeat. Those soldiers would face complete annihilation as the river fenced them in.

But this problem didn't apply to the area on the opposite side of the mountains, generally referred to as "behind the mountains."

Rather than a river, the border there was defined by the end point of a fjord

extending deep into the land. The fjord made the land there narrow, but there was no stronghold, and beyond that lay open, undefended land. We couldn't sit back and allow that region to fall into enemy hands.

It was easy to suspect that Kien had aspirations of claiming Kilhina's former territory for himself, but another way of looking at it was that he wanted to move his frontline defenses to a position beyond that patch of open land.

After a little thought, Her Majesty agreed. "Very well. I understand why you'd make such a request, and I won't argue. I'll provide proper documentation for that too... However, you may be forced to bear new responsibilities."

It was generous of her to agree without any argument. Though, at this point, it made no sense for her to worry that the Rube family might grow too powerful. What she needed was for the family to gain whatever strength it could. As for those responsibilities, I could guess what she meant.

"There are still remnants of the Kilhina Kingdom that haven't been completely destroyed. Tellur still lives. She isn't queen, but that's only because she hasn't been crowned. The citizens of Kilhina will acknowledge the authority afforded by her bloodline regardless. If you'd like to avoid future complications, I suggest seeking her approval before you act."

"You are quite right. Perhaps the royal castle can assist me in that regard."

"If we were to pressure her into giving her approval, it would only exacerbate the problems you'll face later. We can certainly make the request on your behalf, but we can't force her. It will ultimately be her own decision."

With Kilhina being more or less destroyed, and Tellur being as timid as she was, it was hard to imagine that any of these problems would ever be an issue. But since the attendees here didn't know what sort of person Tellur was, they were bound to worry... Though that wasn't to say I knew her particularly well myself.

"I've met her just once, so I have little idea of her personality," Her Majesty said. "Perhaps Yuri has gotten to know her while escorting her to us and can give us some insight."

Everyone's attention turned to me.

What? Don't tell me that's the whole reason I'm here.

The issue of how Tellur might act seemed to have come up naturally in the course of the discussion. Given that I'd been conveniently invited here, though, I had to wonder whether they were actually following a prearranged script.

Kien looked at me. "Well, Yuri, tell us about Princess Tellur. Actually, I suppose I should call her Lady Tellur. What sort of person is she?"

Kien and I were sitting as far apart as possible on opposite sides of the long table. I was by far the youngest person here, so I was sitting at the bottom of the table, with the queen sitting at the top. I glanced at her briefly, but she only smiled slightly without giving me any kind of signal.

I guess it's safe to be frank...?

"What I've seen of Lady Tellur suggests that she has no interest in governing or in political affairs. You may be imagining that she's similar to Princess Carol, but I can assure you her personality couldn't be any more different."

"Hm..." Kien looked at me with great interest and stroked his chin.

"If I may be blunt, she's a child as timid as any other," I added.

"Is that so?"

"I don't believe that the problems you're envisioning will ever come to be, Lord Kien. In fact, if your aim is to gain her consent without deceiving her, you may find the most difficult step is to explain the situation in a way she understands."

"Is she really such a fool?" Kien knitted his brow like this wasn't what he wanted to hear.

I mustn't have explained my thoughts very clearly. I hadn't said she was stupid, but I'd implied as much. I must've raised fears that she might be easily manipulated by others in ways that could cause substantial problems. While I couldn't dispel those fears—they weren't unreasonable—it wasn't the point I was trying to make.

"I don't mean to say she's a fool, just that she has little interest in politics and a simplistic view of the world. I suppose I'm saying she's a young girl like any other."

"Hm... I see."

"It may be best if we have her agree to relinquish all authority over Kilhina, should Reforme fall," the queen said.

We still hadn't received word of Reforme's fall because we'd lost all communication with the region.

"I think that would be wise," I agreed. "When Lady Tellur was placed in my care within Reforme's royal castle, the royal couple expressed a similar wish. For someone without the will or courage to fight, royal responsibilities are simply a burden."

"Then there'll be no problems?" Kien said, looking at Queen Shimoné. He was putting the discussion back on track, and he'd be hoping to get permission to start moving his soldiers.

"If that's that, then I'll explain it to her in a few days and ask her to provide permission. Since I don't foresee any problems, I can issue a certificate of recognition before the end of the day. Sir Kien, you're to dispatch your soldiers once you've carried it back with you."

"As you wish, Your Majesty." Kien rose for a moment to give Her Majesty an over-the-top bow before sitting back down. Then again, he'd essentially just received a royal edict, so maybe it hadn't been so excessive.

I glanced at the other attendees. Rook appeared focused, but the other two simply looked disinterested. This wasn't because they found the meeting tedious, but rather because they disliked this idea. Their feelings weren't strong enough to voice their objections, though. Still, as they begrudgingly allowed the matter to conclude, they were making their personal feelings visible. The Rube family was receiving preferential treatment, as had been the case during the ceremony, so it was no surprise that others felt resentment.

Looking at Bolafra Noza from up close, I took him for a bureaucrat rather than a warrior. He had to be about seventy. Most Shanti men were still in robust health at that point, but he was thin and lacking the muscle required to wield a weapon. I suspected that rather than being born weak, he'd been forced to stop

exercising regularly because of his knee injury.

Orone Bof, by contrast, was perhaps a little overweight. Body fat could prove useful in battle because continuous exertion of one's muscles necessitated a reserve fuel source. But even after making that consideration, he had too much of it. I wouldn't call him obese, but he would've benefited from losing some weight.

"I think we've discussed this problem enough," the queen said. "I'd like to move on to the next topic."

How much more am I going to have to listen to? I hope they don't keep me here all night.

"A request has been made on behalf of all chieftain families here, except the Ho family. Yuri, it concerns you."

Ш

What?

This was probably—or rather, certainly—the reason I'd been called here, but I had no idea what they wanted from me.

"Three chieftain families have made a joint request to the Ho family asking that you share the technology used to create fire bottles."

Ah... Okay, I get it now. Is that all?

"I raised the topic with Rook a short while ago, and he tells me that the technology is not within his control, which is why you were summoned so abruptly, Yuri."

I remembered how a messenger had led Rook off somewhere after the ceremonies. When the issue was explained to him, he must've honestly replied that he didn't know about it. That would explain why a messenger had then come to me to say, "A meeting is to be held with Her Majesty and the four chieftains in attendance. Your presence is also requested."

I'd had important plans of my own to see to, but I couldn't just turn down an invitation to a meeting with the queen and several chieftains. If I'd tried, they

would've asked, "What could possibly be more important?" I couldn't have even pretended there was a family emergency since both my parents had attended the ceremony.

"I must refuse," I replied bluntly. "That technology belongs to Ho Company."

"Yuri, this kingdom is in crisis," Bolafra Noza said. "The situation demands we cooperate."

Though thin and bookish, he commanded respect. I didn't feel bowled over by awe, but I did feel as though an important government figure was placing me under pressure.

"You are quite right. Then I propose that Ho Company begin selling the bottles to knights serving under each of your families."

Orone Bof spoke next, with the sort of voice that only came from people whose vocal cords were buried under thick flesh. "It's a powerful weapon. I propose that each chieftain begin producing it themselves."

"I'm afraid I won't agree to share the production method," I said.

As expected, it wasn't just those two who were displeased by my response— Kien was scowling at me. I could tell that he wanted it just as badly. But I'd have to explain the issues to them.

"I made the proposal to Her Majesty," Orone said.

He was essentially saying, "I'm not talking to you. Her Majesty is the one who'll decide." Indeed, he'd been looking at the queen, not me, when he'd spoken. If Her Majesty agreed with them, that would be a direct order.

Fortunately, she was on my side. "Let's hear his objections first. Why would you refuse?" she asked.

That said, there was something unnatural about her tone. I was merely her retainer. Less than that, in fact—I was no more than a student. When she'd politely asked me to explain, it hadn't felt in keeping with her authority over me.

"The first reason is that I fear the information will spread uncontrollably. If the Kulati were to learn of my method, they'd use the same weapon against us. That's one reason I'm hesitant to teach it to anyone."

Orone cut me off. "Are you saying that we'd sell it to the enemy? We're far more dignified than witches. The very suggestion is an affront."

"Please hear me out," I continued. "The second reason is that it can't be produced outside of Ho Province. The base components can't be manufactured. Even if I *did* share my method, you wouldn't be able to use it."

"Hmph..." Orone fell silent.

"Spreading the knowledge among local rulers could harm the kingdom, hence my refusal. The reason is quite simple, so I hope you'll agree with me."

Bolafra Noza was wise enough to offer a logical counter-argument. "And how do you know we can't produce the base components? I can't accept that without knowing more."

"I've conducted surveys," I told him. "The substance only exists in Ho Province."

"You surveyed my territory without my permission?" Bolafra knitted his brow. He clearly didn't like the sound of that. After all, I'd been searching his province for strategically important resources without his knowledge.

"It wasn't without permission. When the surveyors from my company requested leave to enter your province, the documents they supplied stated they were seeking a new form of resource. Approval was therefore granted on your territory."

"A survey so important shouldn't have been discussed with some mere underling. The request should've been made to the provincial capital."

He was right. When dealing with someone with minimal authority, even the most suspicious of requests were sure to be granted when accompanied by a bribe.

In this case, bribes weren't even necessary. Leave to enter a province wasn't important paperwork—such documents were stamped en masse in an average day's business. Officials wouldn't particularly care whether every single one was carefully checked. Unless the request came from someone who appeared

particularly suspicious, leave to enter would be granted without a second thought.

"It's only recently that the importance of that survey became clear. My initial intention was merely to market a liquid that happens to burn particularly well. At the time of the survey, I had no idea this resource would turn out to be of such importance."

"You've got an answer for everything, haven't you?"

"Lord Bolafra, what sense is there in arguing over this point? Are you accusing me of entering your province unlawfully?"

"Hah... Forget it."

It was a perfectly normal thing for any family to pay attention to the territory of their neighbors. Even in peacetime, when there wasn't a threat of war, people tasked with intelligence gathering would be placed in villages near the border because the movement of troops near national borders was important information. Obviously, they wouldn't start by declaring, "I'm so-and-so, a retainer serving the such-and-such family, and I'd like to study your troop movements."

If someone tried going a step further by having spies infiltrate various organizations, they'd never pose a greater threat than the royal swords—they were always engaged in such activities already. Most likely, the only new information any spies would bring back would be gossip, such as stories about some local ruler having an affair. In short, spies were rarely employed because they weren't worth the cost.

My Aunt Satsuki had taught me these things long ago. It was the view held by the Ho family, and the other chieftains probably saw things the same way.

"You couldn't have made your surveys in earnest. There has to be land you didn't check." The corpulent Orone still didn't sound satisfied.

"Actually, I think our efforts were quite earnest. Please allow me to explain why."

"Let's hear it."

"I fear that the substance extracted from my province may be of low quality. But much like timber and iron ore, we can't judge a sample without another to compare it against."

Crude oil was a mixture of many different components. Oil that contained more of the lighter fractions would best suit my purposes. Conversely, heavy oil content made it harder to extract the flammable light oils from the asphalt-like mixture that it was quickly reduced to. Additionally, from a production standpoint, it would pay to have more oil fields—that was why I'd searched for them.

"A higher-quality substance could be highly beneficial while we're attempting to refine our production methods and explore new approaches."

"So that's why you went looking for it?"

"Yes. We invested a substantial sum searching over a wide area... Though we didn't waste any effort surveying areas that were likely to fall into enemy hands."

"That's not a particularly pleasant thought."

I ignored Orone and continued, "The problem is...I can't be sure that the same substance doesn't exist within Kulati territory. Their territory is so vast that I'm sure they'll have it somewhere. You may disagree, but I see no benefit to the kingdom in teaching others the production method."

"Hm, I see." Kien Rube, who'd been quietly listening to our argument, now spoke up. "That's quite rational. If we have no means of making fire bottles, then teaching us the production method simply invites a risk of the knowledge falling into enemy hands."

"Yes, that's right."

"You have a point. It would seem we're forced to concede. However..."

What? He's got another argument for me?

"Unless we know what the base component is, we can't be sure you aren't lying to us. What you claim is some new resource might be something familiar that you're extracting and transporting to the Ho family."

Kien had a point, but if it were such a simple trick, it'd be their own fault for falling for it. If they really wanted to know, this was a case where they could dispatch spies and learn through espionage. I wouldn't blame them if they did. If I'd been dealing with witches, I would've taken it for granted.

This group might've been doing their best to coerce me into handing over my secrets for free, but this wasn't some school classroom where they'd ostracize me for refusing to play fair. The culture here was quite different. That said, I might've been the only one thinking this way after excessive contact with witches had poisoned my mindset.

"We have no way of guessing what the base component might be. It could be mined from the mountains, grown in a field, or extracted from a marine creature for all we know. Who's to say you aren't gathering it from somewhere in secret?"

"Lord Kien, I understand your concerns. However, suppose the enemy really did learn my production method. You yourself said it's a powerful weapon, and it's you the enemy would use it against. I hope you understand that that's the very thing I'm trying to prevent."

"Yes, I realize that. However..." Kien paused for a moment. His expression became menacing as he turned away from me. "If the scenario I just described was, in fact, correct, you'd know about it, wouldn't you, Rook?"

Ah, that's where he's going with this.

I looked at Rook. He was sitting calmly, unflinching as the battle-hardened veteran stared him down. With a slight movement of his head, he looked to me for approval. It was a gesture he'd practiced well.

"My conscience is clean." I made a point of speaking just as I would in any casual conversation.

"If that were the case, the Ho family would bear the full responsibility," Rook said.

"In my capacity as queen, I'll hold you to your word. Lord Kien, is that enough for you?"

"Yes, Your Majesty." The stern look on Kien's face faded as he relaxed in his

chair.

Phew.

"Then let's consider this topic concluded," Her Majesty said. "I'm sure everyone is tired. We'll take a break."

Seriously?

It was almost like Kien had put on an act to quell the emotions of Noza and Bof, and that the debate had died the moment that Kien caused the two complaining men to lower their hackles. I didn't think he'd acted, but the effect was the same. When the queen had taken his side, the matter was settled in no time at all. Although the other two men didn't look happy, they didn't try rekindling the same arguments again. They knew it was game over.

It was a happy outcome, but I hadn't won any friends. They must think I'm a stubborn brat...



Bolafra Noza and Orone Bof had both bowed to the queen before leaving the room. They must've gone to give instructions to their subordinates.

I'd need to increase security around my production facilities from now on, but I didn't have to order the change immediately.

"Sir Kien, I don't think there'll be any other important issues raised. If you wish to return to the north, you may let a representative take your place at the next meeting."

"With your leave, I shall do just that." Kien bowed to the queen where he stood.

The queen then stood up and looked at me. "Goodbye," she said with a slight smile. It was like a look of understanding given to a co-conspirator.

After I'd nodded to her, she simply left the room without saying anything more.

Her Majesty had been regal through and through. Naturally, she hadn't been as laid-back as she had when we'd drunk tea together—that wouldn't have commanded respect.

It was only now that I felt I had a chance to catch my breath.

"Phew... Looks like I've caused you some trouble. Sorry," I told Rook softly.

"Seriously. You don't back down easily," he muttered back.

"Because I'm not doing anything illegal."

My discoveries were entirely my own, and I had no obligation to share them. It made no sense that they expected me to gladly do so.

"I'm not angry. If you're exporting those fire bottles, it helps the economy here."

"Yes, I suppose so."

Since the concept of licensing didn't exist in this world, we wouldn't have gotten anything if they made the firebombs themselves. We could've achieved the same thing through the patent system, but I could never file for patents related to oil refining because the filings were always public. The simplest solution was for Ho Company to sell the firebombs themselves, raising tax revenue for Ho Province in the process.

Though it was unfortunate that we didn't have the concept of licensing fees, it was fortunate that this world had no laws against monopolies. Full control over a product meant I could set the price to whatever I pleased. I could sell items for tens of times more than they cost to produce, similar to how high-quality spirits matured over decades. And I was going to get all the money I could out of it.

Suppose I'll head home for now, I decided.

But then I met eyes with Kien. He was staring right at me, so I couldn't avoid his gaze when I turned my head.

I rose from my chair and bowed to him. "Lord Kien, thank you for supporting my case."

"I owed you a debt, Yuri," he said.

A debt? For what? Something about his son?

If he meant for my accomplishments during the war, then maybe he did owe

me.

"Is it related to Liao?" I asked.

"No, for what happened at the border."

Oh... Does he really owe me anything over that? If anything, it feels like I'm the one who owes him.

"If we'd lost Princess Carol, I would have had to offer up my head," he explained.

Ah, I guess he would've.

It would've been unforgivable if he'd retreated while ignoring the enemy forces chasing Carol and left her to die. He would've disgraced himself as a warrior... Though I didn't think he would've been executed over it.

"Please don't think about it. It was you who pursued the enemy after the battle," I said.

"Ah, that. I didn't take command personally, but I sent a stubborn bunch after them."

"Yes, I got that impression."

It wasn't the type of mission that run-of-the-mill soldiers could handle, so he must've dispatched an elite force.

"During the pursuit, the enemy repeatedly left behind detachments that sacrificed themselves. It allowed their commander to escape," Kien added.

Apparently, the commander had made massive sacrifices to ensure his own safety. A strategy like that was easily devised, but difficult to execute. It would work fine if soldiers were mindless robots, but humans weren't brainless. They would know when they were being routed. Anyone with any common sense being asked to join a detachment serving as the rear guard in such a situation would know that it meant death.

Though it sounded like a contradiction, ordinary soldiers didn't fight to die—they fought to live. None of them would be happily willing to enter a battle if it guaranteed their death. They'd never continue to fight in such a situation unless they had unusually strong feelings of patriotism or unwavering faith. As it

turned out, however, the enemy had done just that.

"Everyday soldiers aren't capable of executing such strategies. I'm surprised your ragtag group withstood them," Kien said.

"They weren't wearing armor. They were also exhausted from a long, forced march uphill. Even the most elite soldier wouldn't fight well in such conditions."

They were also going hungry after I'd burned some of their supplies.

"There was that. But still, it was a commendable first battle. I'm sure Rook was proud," he said, turning to Rook.

"I'm always proud of my son," he replied tactfully. Clearly, he'd gotten used to dealing with conversations like this one.

"Let's just hope our sons don't have to fight each other."

Kien's surprise remark left Rook looking confused. His face seemed to say, What? Why would they?

From Rook's point of view, there'd be little to gain from two chieftain families warring with one another, especially given the current political situation. He must've wondered whether there'd been some argument—or perhaps even a fistfight—between me and Liao.

When he couldn't find a suitable response, Rook instead settled into a suggestive silence. It was a wise choice. Rather than a careless remark made in confusion, a heavy silence would carry him through the conversation safely.

"Women are nothing but trouble, right, Yuri? They have a way of getting between two men who should be working together."

I knew it, I thought.

Rook looked at me as if he couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"Yes, such things do happen. Though Liao's interest in women is much stronger than mine," I said, hoping to dismiss the idea.

"Hah." Kien sounded a little amused as he stood up.

Is that all he had to say?

As Kien strode confidently past Rook, he rested a hand on his shoulder,

squeezing it forcefully. "I'm expecting much from you. The others don't seem to realize it, but your gain isn't another chieftain's loss."

By "the others," he must've meant Noza and Bof, who'd left a few moments ago.

"Indeed, Sir Kien. Fortune be with you."

I stopped short of saying, "Nor is your victory our loss." As a youngster, it was better not to sound too bold. Instead, I simply said, "Goodbye."

When Kien left the room, only father and son remained. The things Kien had said had left an awkward atmosphere between the two of us. The question was how to fix it.

"I don't know what he meant, but make sure your mom doesn't find out," Rook said, looking a little uncomfortable.

"There's nothing for her to find out. I haven't been cheating."

Whoops, I thought. But it was too late to take the words back.

A moment later, Rook grinned as he realized the implication of what I'd just said.

IV

That same afternoon, the Knight Academy's training ground looked different than usual.

The field had been carefully prepared—every single blade of grass had been cut to the same specific length, despite the vastness of the area. Pillars stood proudly on the field, supporting the ends of the striking banners hung between them. The best tables and platforms in the academy had also been brought outside and combined to form an award podium.

In front of the ad-hoc podium were 31 students from the academy, plus 288 soldiers who'd joined us in Reforme—essentially, the former students of Reforme's equivalent of the Knight Academy. Finally, a little farther back stood a group of about 10. They were the ones who'd left the unit before the journey's end. They hadn't participated in what came after our stop at Reforme,

so they wouldn't be receiving the same medal as everyone else.

As for me, Liao, and Myalo, we were standing together as representatives of the entire group.

Surrounding us were fellow students of the Knight Academy and witches-in-training from the Cultural Academy. There were also a few ordinary people with no connection to the academy. When these people were also included in the count, it was clear that there were too many people here for a ceremony to be held in the Knight Academy's hall. That was why we were outside.

Carol, who was standing on a platform a little above everyone else, began to speak in a loud, sonorous tone.

"Before we present the medals, there are fourteen brave warriors who couldn't be here today, but are worthy of commendation. They fought against an enemy with superior numbers so that innocent civilians fleeing Reforme might live, and there they lost their lives. Those fourteen warriors include two students who set out from our academy just a few months ago—Faltore Layla and Maxim Larlay. I'm sure some here knew them as classmates, friends, or family members. When one of our own falls in battle at such a young age, all I can do is remind those still with us that they died as honorable knights, worthy of the highest respect. When they fought for us against a force several times their size, they ensured our victory and saved the lives of thousands of civilians. Such is a righteous and commendable deed for a knight. Had they instead dropped their weapons in fear for their lives, those innocent civilians would have been brutally torn asunder by the enemy."

The speech had been written with some input from Myalo, but Carol had memorized it perfectly and recited it smoothly.

"I will not forget their sacrifice. As I express my sorrow at their deaths, I'd like to honor them with posthumous medals. May their families live on with pride."

Three types of medals would be awarded during this ceremony. One was a Shiyaltan medal. Ever since the point when the unit had first set out, it had been decided that all participants would receive this medal.

Another one had been hastily conceived of in Kilhina, and it was meant to be given to the thirty-one surviving unit members who'd stayed to the end, the

two who'd died, and the unit's four leaders. As had been agreed, a large amount of money would also be given to each recipient.

The third and final one was for the 288 soldiers who'd marched with the unit from Reforme. It had also been hastily created out of pity, since these soldiers would have otherwise received nothing. It was like a participation award, and there wasn't any money with it.

When Carol sat down, Tellur stood up to take her place.

"Ah, uh... I'd like to take this opportunity to express my appreciation to those who saved the lives of my people..."

Tellur was a lot more nervous and struggled to get the words out. She didn't appear very comfortable speaking to a crowd. That was no surprise given how shy she was.

"Uh..." she stammered before reaching into her pocket and pulling out some written notes. "As a r-representative of the Kilhinan royal family, I'd...like to thank all the brave warriors here today. My f-final duty as royalty was to save our people from op-oppression and see that as many as possible were able to reach safety. Such tasks would normally be...carried out by the people of Kilhina, but when our strength proved in-insufficient, we requested the aid of Sir Yuri Ho, who gladly offered to support our cause. Words of appreciation would not suffice. Instead, I would like to present the final medal that Kilhina will ever award."

After she finished, she put the notes back in her pocket and sat back down.

Final medal ever? I had to wonder who'd written that speech for her. The speechwriter had clearly taken advantage of Tellur's weak will.

From Shiyalta's viewpoint, it was reassuring to hear Tellur make such statements, but the Kilhinans still held on to national pride and a desire for independence. Any Kilhinan who was sensitive was bound to be in a foul mood after hearing her speech. Unfortunately, it was necessary to prevent the Kilhinans from regaining their former pride. There was always a risk that they'd look to Tellur in hope of rebuilding their kingdom, thus sowing the seeds for future conflict.

"We'll now begin conferring the medals, beginning with the unit's commanding officer, Yuri Ho."

At the facilitator's instruction, I stood up and bowed before walking forward toward Tellur. Following the script, I bowed again—though more deeply this time—in front of her.

"Sir Yuri Ho, I present to you the Golden Eagle Medal for Bravery." Tellur placed a lily of the valley in my hand.

"I'm honored to accept it."

The reason she'd given me a flower despite claiming it was a medal was because the Golden Eagle Medal for Bravery's design still hadn't been finalized. The lily of the valley was chosen as an alternative because it was the flower featured on the Toni Shaltl family crest and in most Kilhinan medals.

The award ceremony was being held before the medals had even been finished for the sake of the 288 soldiers from Reforme. The Knight Academy students could obviously stick around for a long time, but the same wasn't true for the soldiers—they'd all have to start new lives somewhere.

There'd be all kinds of trouble if we forced the soldiers to stick around and wait for over a month while the medals were completed, so it had been decided that the ceremony would be held before then. We also couldn't wait for a design to be finalized by creating new medals. Instead, a large quantity of the Shiyalta Kingdom's standard iron medal awarded for fighting bravely had been bought and modified slightly by blacksmiths to alter the design.

I shifted sideways slightly, placing myself in front of Carol this time.

"Yuri Ho. I present you with the Broad-Winged New Star Medal."

After bowing and raising my head, Carol put the medal on my chest herself. She had been the one who'd suggested placing each medal on the recipients' chests.

The Broad-Winged New Star Medal had a completed design because it had been commissioned by Her Majesty before the observation unit had even set out. It wasn't some sought-after award given to people with titles like lord-supreme or lady-of-virtue, but it was still a fine-looking medal that I judged had

been made by a skilled artisan using a cloisonné technique.

"I accept with gratitude and happiness, Your Highness." I gave her an old, formal greeting before saluting her.

Carol grinned in response and appeared to have trouble going back to a straight face. I'd only said it to catch her off guard and get a reaction out of her, but she looked genuinely pleased.



Once Carol and Tellur had finished awarding everyone's medals, the ceremony ended, and I moved to the Knight Academy's hall along with the observation unit. We had the room reserved for our final banquet, and there was a large round table in the process of being set up in its center.

Here, I took the podium for the first time. The award ceremony had been an event where royalty, represented by the two princesses, bestowed medals on those beneath them. It hadn't been the right place for me to give a speech.

"Looks like it's all over. Thank you to all of you—I mean it. The ordeal we've been through was far longer than anything we'd originally planned. We had to face one unforeseen problem after another. Honestly, I've barely had a moment to rest. I hope you'll all forgive me if I seem disorganized."

It was behind us now, but when Carol and I had crashed, it had been the start of a span of bad luck. Fortunately, most of it had worked out all right in the end.

"Those who were with us since we set out from this building, and those who joined us after Reforme. You're all here, aren't you? I hereby declare the observation unit disbanded. Thank you. We made a good team."

After I finished speaking, I deliberately made myself relax by repositioning my feet a little farther apart and releasing the stiff posture I'd been holding. Then, with a loud clap, I changed my mood entirely.

"I'm not your captain anymore. No more superior officers or subordinates. We're all here as equals now—as friends. So let's enjoy ourselves. There's no need to arrange ourselves in neat rows anymore. You must be feeling cramped. Spread out a bit. As soon as I'm done talking, we'll have our final banquet. You're not going to drink standing side by side like that, are you now?"

The unit members looked a little surprised, but they gradually broke up the rows they were arranged in.

"Come on, spread out. More than that."

After a bit of encouragement, they made themselves disorderly enough.

"We had enough pride and honor at the award ceremony. I'm going to talk about something a little more useful," I continued.

Carol glared at me. I sensed that she wanted to argue with that. Everyone else looked a little amused, but curious about what would come next.

"Naturally, I mean money. After a lot of thought, I've decided that since we put our lives on the line, I'd like to give the reward money to you all directly, rather than sending it to your families. Right now. In coins."

Unsurprisingly, that drew a lot of happy smiles from the unit members. One even balled his fists and cried out, "Yeah!"

Fifty gold coins was worth about five million yen. Although the average knight family was wealthier than commoners, most weren't exactly rich. If the money was given to the parents, most students would never see it.

"It's fifty gold coins per person. I haven't told your parents or the school any more than necessary. That means that no one knows about the reward money that accompanies the medal. That said, word'll spread soon enough, so be prepared for a few complaints if you're planning on blowing it all on brothels and gambling halls right away. You'll need to sign for your bag of coins as you collect it. As you can see, the banquet's ready to start, so you can collect it as you leave. And I'd better warn you just in case: if you get drunk and lose it, you won't get a replacement."

With thirty-one people, there'd be at least one who headed out at night with their giant sum of money and got robbed. Someone would head into a high-class brothel to enjoy the best night of their life with multiple women, only to wake up and find their bag of gold coins gone. Scenarios like that didn't take much imagination.

The real problem, however, would be addressed next.

"All right. As for those of you from Reforme—no cash reward was arranged for any of you. However, you'll need money to support yourselves more than anyone else here. Shiyalta would look terrible if we put you all out on the streets after you fought with us so bravely. For that reason, Liao, Myalo, Princess Carol, and I have decided to combine our reward money—along with a little extra from Princess Tellur—so we can give each of you fifteen gold coins. That should be enough to live on for a year here in Sibiak, or longer if you leave the city. If you all had to find simple work immediately to support yourselves, it would limit your ability to pursue a career."

I didn't want to make them live like destitute students who were forced to work part-time to fund their studies.

"Unfortunately, we're unable to help you find new posts as officers. You've all been given your knight medals, but you all look young. Most knights don't graduate from the academy until they're over twenty."

The youngest of Reforme's aspiring knights had been chosen to join us, so every single one had been pulled out of their academy and mobilized before their training had been finished. They had been given their knight medals as part of war-time preparations, which meant they were technically knights, but hadn't studied the entire curriculum. They looked too young to have graduated.

"I'm sure the same applies in Kilhina, but our chieftain families lead rigid organizations full of second and third sons that are already vying for those same posts you might pursue. Few newcomers can find a place in their service. It's not unheard of for a knight from outside the family to secure a role as an officer, but you won't find it easy."

In truth, their chances were negligible. Even a knight renowned for their feats in battle would struggle. It was too high a hurdle for these youngsters. Their best hope was that an observation unit member from a prominent knight family might recommend some of the soldiers to their relatives.

"You could, of course, join an organization as an enlisted soldier. Experience like yours would be warmly welcomed. If you perform well, there's every chance you'll have a successful career. In that case, the shining knight medal on your chest will serve you well. The rest will depend on your hard work.

However...there is another path you can take."

Whatever future we were headed for, I didn't want to see the people around me suffer misfortune. There was only so much I could do for them, and I wasn't willing to bend over backward, but I could at least give them some words of advice and point them in the right direction.

"You could lay down your spears and live like commoners. That's the path of those who don't want to fight in battles as knights and those who want to avoid future wars. Though it may mean rejecting everything you've believed in, it'll open a new world to you. You could use those fifteen gold coins to start a new trade. Or, if you're interested, come join my business. The name is Ho Company. We'll find work for you, and we're known for paying better than most places. The company's Sibiak office is across the street from the Ho family residence."

That was everything I'd wanted to tell them.

"That's all I have to say. Is there anything else anyone wanted to talk about?"

I looked over at the other leaders, but they all shook their heads. Liao had already had plenty of time to give speeches while he'd led everyone here.

"Today will be the last day that we're all gathered here. Tomorrow, we start new lives. Now, I want you all to drink well and make tonight a night you'll never forget."

With that, I left the podium. Someone began to clap, then others joined. It soon became a thunderous applause.

V

"Sir Yuri, a visitor is here to see you."

The banquet was well underway when a member of the academy staff came over to inform me. I guessed that it was the employee I'd summoned from Ho Company.

"Oh, don't go," a drunken former unit member pleaded.

I got up from my seat. "It's probably someone from the company. They'll

know more than I do about vacancies."

I had no problem with the mood of the banquet, but as the only sober person, I felt a little out of place. Besides, I was tired of pretending to drink the alcohol people kept pouring for me.

That'll be a good chance to escape, I decided.

"Chairman Yuri, you can't just do this without consulting anyone."

The man from the company looked cross with me. He was probably doubly annoyed since I'd called on him while he was busy with work.

"Sorry, but these men can all read and write, and they're disciplined. We can make use of them, right?"

"Perhaps we can, but some of these people will be sons and brothers of powerful nobles. Normally we start people off as lackeys. That means they'd have some commoner for a boss hitting them across the head. Isn't that just asking for trouble? They'll all have been trained to fight at that knight academy of theirs. What if one of them kills someone?"

"You can explain to them right now that they'd have a commoner for a boss. Anyone with too much pride will just walk away. If we can see someone's going to be useless to us, we'll fire them after a probation period."

He sighed. "You're asking me to accept most of them, but there are hundreds here."

"Two hundred and eighty-eight, to be precise. But I doubt more than one hundred will come to us. Most will want to go on being soldiers."

"I'm not so sure..."

The man was still muttering complaints to himself as he headed into the hall. He seemed to be a little unnecessarily worried, but I was glad he felt able to voice his concerns without being afraid of me.

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"Yuri."
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[&]quot;Whoa."

Myalo had startled me by suddenly appearing from around the corner in a corridor dimly lit by lamplight. She must've been lying in wait.

"Myalo? Wh-What is it?"

"We need to talk. Do you have a moment?"

"Sure. I wanted to talk too... Now's fine."

"This isn't the best place."

"Then let's go somewhere else. Hmm... I know a place."

I began leading Myalo toward an auditorium. It was a little far, but it was probably the best choice.

"Um, where are we going?" Myalo asked after we'd gone a little way.

"The auditorium... Though it might be locked."

"I wonder. It's not normally locked."

Much like a college lecture theater, the auditorium was a room that contained little more than stacked rows of desks and seats. Since there was nothing in particular to steal, it wasn't generally locked up.

"But why the auditorium?" she asked.

"It's a large room, so anyone eavesdropping outside won't hear us."

"I wasn't going to talk about anything particularly secret."

"It's just a precaution."

We soon reached the auditorium. I picked up a lamp hanging on the wall outside, opened the door, and stepped into the pitch-black room.

Illuminating my feet as I walked, I chose a seat right in front of the speaker's podium and placed the lamp down on the desk.

Myalo sat beside me. Rather than sitting facing each other, we were side by side. It made it a little difficult to talk.

"This was a mistake," I said. "I should've chosen a different room."

"No, this will make it easier for me to talk."

"Okay..." But talk about what? I think I can guess, and I'm not sure I want to hear it...

Myalo got straight to the point. "The warning you gave just before you left was about Liao, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"He said he wished to court me on the assumption we'd marry."

"Ah..."

Yeah, I figured.

"I agonized over it quite a lot. I soon guessed what you'd warned me about, but I couldn't understand why. I thought that after what happened between you and Carol, you perhaps wanted to put some distance between us."

Ugh...

"No, it's not like that. What did Liao—"

Myalo cut me off and calmly added, "By the way, I don't know if you've noticed, but I'm angry."

"Oh... You are?"

"That's right."

I hadn't realized that. I decided I'd best avoid giving her any lame excuses.

"You don't understand women, do you, Yuri?"

"I guess not."

"Maybe you think that after what happened between you and Carol, you have no right to interfere with the relationships of others, but I wish you'd told Liao no."

"Uh...what? What should I have said? 'Myalo's mine. Keep your hands off her'?"

"Y-Yes... That's right."

Was that really the right answer? Really...?

I hadn't even considered saying it at the time. But maybe in my attempt to do

what I felt was right, I'd been too focused on my own feelings. Maybe the response I'd given to Liao was a selfish one that hadn't pleased anyone except me.

"And, well, since I thought you wanted distance between us, I accepted his proposal of courtship."

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"Oh... Y-You said yes?"

"That's right."

She did...? Ugh.
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"Since I've never gotten to know any men besides you, I thought that maybe I'd find some good in Liao too if I just looked at him differently. You see, I thought you were distancing yourself from me."

So you keep saying... She must be really holding back right now.

"So, on the road, I discussed his future prospects in detail. Then, when we reached Mital, I met Lord Kien and his wife, and Liao introduced me as his fiancée. I had to wear a dress, and I got invited to a fancy dinner gathering..."

Mital was the capital of Rube Province. It could be reached from the river by following a road for a short distance. They'd likely led the refugees there and reached the city within one or two days.

"Everything was going great. Liao hadn't planned everything perfectly, since it was all rather sudden, but when the maids learned of a special guest, they got to work quickly. They washed me and gave me new clothes. It had been so long since I'd worn a dress like that. I attended dinner, where Kien and his wife were joined by Liao's younger brother and sister. We talked about our travels and of Rube Province. Then, Liao explained how well our courtship was going. Not everyone there was entirely happy about it, but they were good people. The men were the energetic sort I associate with chieftain families, and the women were sweet and affectionate toward the men. It was a perfectly harmonious family environment."

It sure sounded like a happy place—kind of like where I'd grown up. I gathered that the Rube family's gatherings were quite a lot bigger than mine, though.

"Then everything became distant, and I felt like something wasn't right," Myalo continued, her tone growing lonesome. "Everything was like I'd imagined it would be. The invitation to dinner, the reception...even the conversation. None of it was unforeseen. When I imagined that I might marry into that family and spend every day living that life...the fine food that had been so good suddenly tasted like sand in my mouth. It all felt like a story that I'd grown tired of reading. The realization made me laugh despite myself."

Since we were sitting side by side, I couldn't see Myalo's face. I wanted more than anything to see her expression, but I felt that turning to look would be like prying into her secret thoughts. Instead, I just gazed at the podium, faintly lit by the lamp.

"I didn't hate the idea, but I knew that marriage just wasn't what I wanted."

I was sure she was being honest when she said she didn't hate the idea, but that she felt it simply wasn't the place for someone like her. Like a saltwater fish thrown in a freshwater lake, she'd never fully adapt.

"Well, the important thing is that you realized it. You can find another life that suits you better."

"But what is that, exactly? There's no pivotal role for me in your life, and I can't just live an unremarkable life as a woman. I don't fit in with witches either. It makes me think I'm horribly flawed somehow."

Myalo was searching for answers like a child hopelessly lost in a forest.

Such worries normally affected young men, but as someone who knew her well, I wasn't at all surprised to see her think this way. Myalo tended to identify things that pleased her before working for the sake of those things. But now, it was like she had to stop to find herself. She was working without knowing what she was working for. It must've been the result of cracks forming in her identity, and I knew all too well why it had happened—it was my fault.

"Look."

I drew the dagger at my waist and let it clatter on the desk loudly as I dropped it close to the lamp. The side of the polished blade was like a mirror, reflecting the lamp's flames.

"This is the dagger I used on our expedition. It's quite a good one, even compared to the others that have been with the Ho family for generations. I've killed many people with it, and I barely felt any resistance as I cut through their flesh."

Myalo looked at the dagger with great interest. "Yes, it's a fine blade."

"What if this knife said to me, 'I've failed as a kitchen knife'? I'd hate for it to worry about that."

I gently gripped the dagger's handle and drove its point into the desk with no more force than I'd place on a pen. It felt like plunging a stick into a bog as the blade sank into the desk. It was odd how deep the dagger went.

"I need this blade specifically. I leave my kitchen knife at home."

I took my hand away and left the dagger standing freely.

"That's because you're not a cook, Yuri."

"Right. And you shouldn't marry a cook—it'd be a waste."

Relief had washed over me when I'd learned that Liao hadn't been good enough for her, but I also hated myself feeling that way. At the same time, I clearly understood the true reason for the slight sense of loss I'd been feeling since I'd returned to the capital. I just couldn't relax without Myalo at my side.

"But you do have many others, don't you?" she asked.

"People, you mean?"

"Yes."

No way.

"There's no one else like you," I replied.

"I see..." There was a hint of happiness in Myalo's voice. "Do you want me?"

"Yes. I need you. I want you to be my tool."

"Heh heh. That sounds like a demand an abusive husband would make." Myalo laughed quietly. It sounded like she was enjoying herself. "But if you want me, then you have to ask for me."

"Is that necessary?"

"It's how women are. The thought of chasing after a man who belongs to someone else gets me down."

Those sounded like her honest feelings, but her concerns were misplaced. I turned to my side and saw Myalo looking straight at me. It was a nervous gaze, aimed directly into my eyes.

I suppose I'll have to brace myself, then say it.

I put my hand over Myalo's on the desk. "Myalo, I need you. Stay with me."

My tone was naturally passionate.

"Very well. My life is yours to use."

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Myalo had a relieved expression—she must've known she'd found a place for herself.

"We should head back," Myalo said as she rose to her feet.

"No, there's more to talk about. I have a favor to ask."

"Already? All right, what is it?" Myalo's response was instant, suggesting she'd recovered quickly.

"I'm about to tell you something that I can't tell Carol or anyone else. I haven't even told my parents."

"Okay."

"However, it's something that requires the involvement of a lot of people.

Too many people know already. The current situation's dangerous, and we have to act fast."

"Okay. And that situation is...?"

Myalo didn't grasp the significance of my words, but that wasn't surprising.

I'd been listening closely, but just to be sure, I looked over my shoulder to ensure the door behind us was still closed.

"I've discovered a new continent," I told her. "I'm fairly certain that it's bigger

than this kingdom and Kilhina combined."

"What...?"



"It might even be bigger than all the nations of Yeesusdom combined. No one seems to live there—there aren't any countries. We can build a new one of our own."

"Wha—"

I looked at Myalo and saw her mouth hanging wide open. If I ever needed an image to illustrate the concept of "dumbfounded," I could sketch a picture of her face at this moment. It took her a good thirty seconds to recover.

"Ah, um... Where is it?" Myalo asked once she'd pulled herself together.

"Beyond Aisa Island. You pass Aisa, then continue twice the distance you've already traveled. It takes advanced seafaring technology to get there, and right now, that technology belongs entirely to me."

"Is this...a joke? If you're serious, it's an amazing discovery."

"Exactly. The name of the captain who made the discovery is probably going to be remembered forever. Shimoné, Carol, Tellur... His name's going to be better known than any of theirs. Maybe it'll be Captain Harol, or Harol the Explorer—I'm not sure what title he'll get."

"Do you mean Harol Harrell?"

How does she know that name? I wondered for a moment. But then I remembered the three of us used to attend Kulatish lectures together during our first year.

"Yes, he's the one. It'll be his name in the textbooks. He might be just as famous as Khanjar Khan and Carulginion Pestoparsley."

"The scale of what you're saying is incredible."

The scale really was huge. Not long ago, Harol had been a ruined man on the wharf in Suomi—a man who'd been shaved bald like a monk. And now this.

"Let me go over my thoughts with you. First, we establish a nation on the new continent. I don't know what it'll look like, but it'll be distinct from the Shiyalta Kingdom, so I'm calling it a nation. Maybe it'll be ruled by a royal family at some point, but I won't let it be structured like this kingdom. I'm sure you know why. It needs to be free from the cancer known as witches. And of course, it won't

belong to the Ho family either. That would create too many ties to Shiyalta."

"This is amazing." Myalo looked intoxicated, like she was sharing my vision. "If all of this is true, then it'll overthrow all the old systems. It's actually possible. It's like a dream come... Huh?" Myalo suddenly furrowed her brow and began thinking. It appeared doubts were forming in her mind.

"What is it? Got a question?"

"Um, but... You can't have... Huh?"

After mumbling to herself for a few moments, she looked at me. Her expression was a complex mixture of wonder, admiration, and awe that I'd never seen before.

"Yuri, is this what you were aiming for when you started your business? A place where the royal family, the witches, and even your parents couldn't stand in your way? You planned it and did it all by yourself? You made money, built a ship, and thought of a way to cross the sea, all for the sake of finding a new continent...?"

Myalo appeared to have reached that conclusion in an instant. It was my turn to be surprised.

"That's right."

"It would've been so much easier if you'd just shared your idea with the royals or your own family, but you didn't..."

"Was that dumb of me?"

"I don't think so. But it's a little frightening, I suppose..."

This was having some sort of effect on her that made her hands tremble.

"So you understand how big this is?" I asked. "Only you and I get it. Everyone else... They're certainly not stupid, but they can't grasp politics on this level. That means they can't handle the situation correctly."

That was the biggest problem I faced, but its scope meant it was beyond something I could handle alone. I had no confidence that anything would go to plan from this point on.

"You said a moment ago that I have a lot of people, didn't you?" I referred back to what she'd said earlier because this was something I needed her to understand. "Caph Ornette and Harol Harrell—they're no good. Carol Flue Shaltl? Obviously, I can't tell her. There's royal pride in every last drop of the blood that flows through her." I could've named others, but they were all unsuited to this task. "Myalo Gudinveil. Do you understand me? There's no one but you. You're the only one."

"Yes, I understand. This is something only I can do," she replied confidently.

"Then I'll tell you how things stand."

"Okay."

"I learned of the new continent's discovery about a week ago. It was just after I got back. The only people who currently know are me, Caph Ornette, Harol, and his crew. The crew members are the biggest problem. There are dozens of them, and they've got big mouths."

Myalo shared her thoughts immediately. "Yes, that is a problem—a serious one."

"But I can't just kill the people who helped make the discovery for the sake of keeping them quiet. Experienced sailors are valuable, and I'll need them to repeat the voyage."

"Yes, that's right. If anything slows you down now, it'll all be for nothing."

"Fortunately, they were detained in Suomi. We let them venture outside again a few days ago. They haven't had time to reach the royal capital."

Looking back, it had been thanks to Harol's skillful handling that they hadn't been roaming free until I returned.

"I assume you've given them something to keep them quiet."

"Of course, but at the same time, I can't sew their mouths closed. Once sailors reach shore, they drink so much they lose their memories. If one of them were to talk, they wouldn't even know it."

"I can imagine."

"Either way, as we send out bigger fleets, it'll mean more sailors, which

means more loose lips. We can't go on this way."

Myalo groaned while thinking. "Yes, it's a tricky one."

"The Ho family will be fine. My dad's at the center of it all, and I can distract him if I have to. The problem is the royal capital."

"You're right. This tends to be where information gathers. Even chieftains often seek information in the royal capital. It's a lot more efficient than sneaking into another's province." Myalo was proving knowledgeable as always.

"Information gathering isn't a chieftain specialty. They're not the ones I'm worried about—it's the witches and the royals."

The Ho family's territory bordered on that of the Noza family, but they weren't as powerful as they used to be. They wouldn't pick a fight with us. Since Noza Province was the only one bordering Ho Province, it would be difficult for any of the chieftains to interfere in our business.

"The royal family is definitely our enemy here too," I continued. "They'll want the new continent more than anyone else, especially since Queen Shimoné's at her wit's end. Once she has proof of its existence, she'll be willing to cast me aside to take it for herself. In a worst-case scenario, she might be willing to go to war with the Ho family for it."

The royal family could rally together the other chieftain families. That posed a major threat.

"I understand. The royal swords in particular are dangerous."

"Ah, yeah, they're our enemy too. This all makes my head hurt."

We'd only be at odds over this particular issue. It wouldn't change the fact that we were on the same side. Unfortunately, that just made things more complicated. Either way, it felt like I had to keep this information from them in particular, and the queen too—she seemed a little unstable lately.

"Do I have a full picture of the situation now?" Myalo asked.

"I think so... Oh, we plan to secretly gather up people in the middle of Ho Province to be the initial settlers, then have them take up permanent residence on the new continent." "I think that's a good idea. You can't gather people from the royal capital, so putting the word out to refugees that there's work for them in Ho Province should draw in enough people."

"That's what I'll do. Ho Province is already overcrowded, though, so I don't think I'll struggle to find people."

That was everything Myalo needed to know.

"How long do you think we have?" I asked.

"I'm not sure. In the worst-case scenario, the plan could fail in about a month. If things go well, we might have five or even ten years."

"Hmmm..."

"What gives us an advantage is the absurdity of all this. I've spoken to you directly, and I know you well. That's why I believe it's more than nonsense. But it'll be different for others. If the source of the information is a drunken sailor, few will believe it," she added.

She was exactly right—the implausibility of it all was a powerful weapon for us to yield.

"But we're going to be sending real people and supplies over there," I said.

That fact wouldn't be doubted. We could come up with an elaborate ploy to fool people, but many of the actions we took would have to be real. If we were gathering up people and sending them out on ships, it might show that the talk of the new continent wasn't complete nonsense.

"That's a chance for me to show my skills. I can sow the seeds of confusion with rumors about people being sent to Aisa Island, or I could even say that the excess population is being sold as slaves to the Albio Republic. Those rumors would be a lot more believable than absurd stories about settlers being sent to some new, perfect continent. People will unconsciously gravitate toward the wrong explanations."

It surprised me to hear Myalo talking about something similar to normalcy bias. She obviously wouldn't know the name of the phenomenon, but it was a common tool in the world of fraud and trickery.

"What matters is whether powerful people believe it or not," I said.

"Yes, you're exactly right."

"And Queen Shimoné will want to believe it."

"Ah... Yes, you're right."

False rumors would throw off the witches. They'd think the truth was too absurd. But it was the opposite for Queen Shimoné. She might seriously investigate rumors of a new continent while she was desperately looking for a way out.

"I'll have to put my mind to that problem."

Given her intellect, I had high expectations for the result, and I was curious to know what she'd come up with.

"Is there anything you think I should do right now?" I asked her.

"Please don't allow the crew members to come to the royal capital. A secondhand rumor is much less credible than a story from an eyewitness. And once the royal family's suspicions are raised, the royal swords might abduct one of them and force them to reveal everything."

I was glad that I'd gotten Myalo in on the plan. She'd just presented a possibility I hadn't even considered.

"Got it; I'll do as you say. Anything else?"

"Hmm... That's all I can think of for now."

"All right. Use this to fund whatever measures you take," I said, plopping a weighty, bulging bag of gold coins down on the desk.

The bag contained a hefty sum of 150 coins and weighed over two kilograms. Money was surprisingly heavy, so it would've been hard to carry any more.

"I...can't accept this."

"It'll make things difficult if you don't. You don't have much of your own to spend, do you?"

She'd easily declined the fifty-coin reward earlier, but Myalo couldn't have had much money since the old woman at the Gudinveil household gave her so

little.

As one of our leaders, Myalo had probably felt pressured to give up her reward when the others had, but she should've kept her share. A hundred gold coins wasn't a huge sum for me, Carol, or Liao, but it was for Myalo.

"To be honest...no. Okay, I'll take it. But I'll work hard enough to be worth the investment."

"It's also your salary for now, so use it for personal needs too. Oh, and don't even think of keeping track with a ledger—I'll be annoyed if I ever find out you have." If I didn't say anything, Myalo probably would've provided me with a record of every single ruga spent.

"Ah... Yes, very well. I'll use it at my own discretion."

"Great... Well, I think we're done talking."

If there's nothing more to say, I guess I'll head home.

"Are you going back to the dorm? I'll go with—"

"Yuri," she cut me off sharply.

What now?

"What's up? Something else you wanted to discuss?"

"If I'd accepted Liao's proposal, would you have told me any of all this?"

Ah, that's what's on her mind.

"If you were all over him and enthusiastic about your upcoming marriage, I might not have. But that wouldn't be you. I'd always planned to tell you."

"Why? I could be lying to you—I could still be seeing Liao."

Why would she lie...? Clearly, I didn't understand how women thought at all. I didn't even understand why she'd suggested the idea. The most I could figure out was that there was something she wanted to confirm.

"Even if that were the case, and you were fooling me this whole time, you wouldn't keep seeing him after learning all this. Everyone follows their true nature; no one can go against it."

"You think it's not in my nature?"

"Suppose you sold the information to the witches—everything would be ruined. It would go against every value you hold. You wouldn't do it; that's obvious to me."

"You're quite sure of that?"

I turned to look at Myalo's face and saw she looked almost anxious.

I don't get this.

It was as if she thought the witches' blood in her veins might override her personality, that she might turn out just like her old grandmother at a crucial moment. That wasn't possible, though—this was no fairytale.

"I've known you for how long now? Eight years, I think. If I was the type of person who doubted things I knew certain, then I wouldn't be capable of making any decisions about anything. It's like...you know that dumbass Dolla fell head over heels for Carol, don't you?"

"Yes."

"So suppose I heard a rumor about how he's started dating a boy—something about them doing unspeakable things with each other in their dorm beds every night. Then people start saying he's a pervert. Would I believe it? Would I say, 'Oh, I thought he only had eyes for Carol, but I guess I was wrong'? Of course I wouldn't. Dolla's in love with Carol. That's one thing I'm sure of."

"You mean it's just as unlikely in my case too?"

I thought that example would make it easy to understand...

"More than that—I think it's completely impossible."

"Really...? Well then, that's fine."

She'd come to accept something, though I still couldn't understand what had shaken her just now. It was like some spell had been cast on her, throwing her into confusion for a moment. I wondered whether there'd been some deeper meaning behind her questions, and whether I'd given her the answers she'd actually wanted. On the other hand, maybe it had all just been a sudden whim of hers.

"Well, don't worry. I have turned him down."

I'd already guessed from our conversation that she'd called off the engagement.

"Do you mind if I ask how you broke it off?"

I needed to know, because things might end up being a little awkward between me and Liao next time we met.

"While I was at that dinner I mentioned, Liao was working hard to tear down the barriers that stood in the way of our marriage. I realized that if he'd kept it up much longer, our breakup was going to get messy. So I simply told him that I couldn't continue to court him, and then I left."

"Right in the middle of dinner?" That sounds harsh.

"Yes. Oh, but I worded it as gently as I possibly could."

Knowing Myalo, she'd probably carefully chosen words that wouldn't injure anyone's feelings, but it had been harsh no matter how gently she'd delivered the news. That said, if she'd allowed Liao to continue making rapid arrangements to pave the way for their marriage, the breakup would've been much more difficult for him too.

"It's just how it goes. Relationships can be like that," I said.

"Indeed. Please put more thought into what you say to people next time. It would've been better for us all if you'd discouraged him."

She still wasn't letting me off the hook for that.

Was it really all my fault? I found that a little hard to swallow, but I felt she was wordlessly pressuring me into conceding. Okay, fine. It's all my fault. I'll accept it.

Chapter 4 — A Return to Ordinary Life

It had been a month since our return to Sibiak.

A daily routine is a powerful thing. Being back at school had gradually erased the tension that the returnees from the war had been giving off—like a rank body odor—and helped us settle back into our ordinary lifestyles.

It was early afternoon, not long since the morning training had finished, and a large group of students of all ages had gathered in front of the dorm.

"Well? Can you move?" I said.

"Yeah," Dolla replied.

He was fully clad in a Kulati set of iron plate armor. I'd found it collecting dust in the storage area of a used goods store. After some intense haggling, I'd gotten it for two hundred ruga. It had since been worked on by a blacksmith to make it fit Dolla's body. The hole in the plate over his heart gave the set some extra charm.

He produced scraping sounds as he stood up from the chair—a result of the joints not being lined up properly, causing iron parts to rub against each other.

Since we were just messing around with the armor, I'd saved some money by getting an apprentice to work on it as a practice job. It might've been a hopeless project from the start, though—the armor plates scraped with Dolla's every movement. In addition to the existing spots of rust, new blemishes had appeared on its surface after it had been heated in a furnace and beaten into shape with a hammer.

Dolla tried taking a few small steps while clad in the armor. "It's damn heavy."

It certainly looked heavy. Even if it wasn't an old set with an unlucky history, we couldn't have expected much for the price I'd paid. If the armor had appropriately curved plates, it would've offered the same protection while

being a lot lighter. Unfortunately, this set wasn't so cleverly designed. All of the defense it offered came from the iron's thickness. It might've weighed over fifty kilograms in total.

"All right. Let's try it," I said.

I held out a thick, wooden spear made from a hard wooden rod—the one Dolla had recently been using in training. The tip was covered by a straw bundle. The reason for the straw was obvious: if he used a wooden rod without any padding, he'd injure someone. In fact, there was a real risk he'd kill someone. No one would've dared train with Dolla if his spear wasn't padded like this.

Dolla took the weapon from me, then assumed his stance. He became a fearsome sight in an instant.

I stood ready with a narrow spear. We were standing a short distance apart, our points aimed at each other. As I considered how I might breach his iron fortress, it brought back memories of past predicaments.

Around us, a ring of noisy students had gathered to witness the spectacle. Dolla suddenly relaxed and lowered his spear. "I can't see a thing."

His thick helmet had a slit no wider than a person's little finger in front of his eyes. I'd thought he'd merely find it a little inconvenient, but it turned out it was completely blinding him.

I should've known that thing would block his view.

"All right. You're giving up then?" I lowered my spear for a moment.

"I can't even see, and it's ridiculously heavy. How am I supposed to do anything?"

I tried riling him up a little. "The enemy fights in armor just like it. Looks like it's too much for you, though."

"I didn't say I won't try it."

Dolla readied his spear again; as did I.

There was a *thud* as he lunged forward at me.

I took a step back to dodge, then he approached again. This time, he aimed his attack at my waist. Once again, I dodged easily.

Dolla had just used a common combination of attacks. When an opponent leaned sideways to dodge a thrust aimed at their chest, their lower body would remain in place, making it an ideal target for the next thrust.

But of course, the combination was supposed to be executed too quickly for most people to keep track, giving them no time to dodge. Dolla was too sluggish for that. His movements today looked lazy compared to his regular ones.

"Keep going," I said, counterattacking with a thrust aimed at the inside of his elbow joint.

Dolla moved his elbow just slightly, causing his armor to deflect my spear. As expected, the armor gave him incredible protection. It was good practice for me.

Dolla wordlessly swung his spear, and I dodged it while stepping in closer. This time, I was going to aim for his neck. I'd directed my spear toward a blind spot created by the narrow eye slit, but Dolla tucked in his chin, covering the exposed part of his neck and blocking the attack.

Dolla's every movement was sluggish, but even slight actions were enough to block any attack I attempted.

"Interesting," I said. "Let's keep going."

After fifteen minutes of fighting, Dolla suddenly lowered his spear.

He abandoned the fight, turned his back on me, and plopped down in the large chair he'd used while donning the armor. He yanked at the cord around his chin to untie it, then removed the helmet to reveal his face, red and covered in sweat. He was also breathing heavily.

"Haah, haah, haah," he panted.

"Is it really that tiring?" I asked as I got closer.

I'd worked up a sweat too, but I hadn't gotten myself out of breath.

"Haah, haah, of course...it's...tiring. Stupid."

He was gasping for breath. Dolla definitely didn't lack stamina—in fact, he was fitter than me. He spent day and night training, but fifteen minutes fighting in the armor had been too much for him.

"I learned a lot," I told him.

I'd confirmed once again how much trouble an armored opponent could be. I hadn't even figured out a good way of dealing with this heavy iron trash.

"Haah...damn. It's not...right. Something's, haah, wrong with...this armor."

"Must be why no one else bought it."

"Stupid. Haah, you, haah, should've...noticed."

Maybe it was only an ornament that no one was expected to wear? I wondered. No, there wouldn't be a hole in the chest in that case.

I didn't know what beast of a soldier could've created a hole like that, but I was sure that the original owner had died on some battlefield. Maybe he had been an easy target because his armor was so heavy he hadn't been able to move. If it could reduce Dolla to this state, then it was more than likely.

Too much armor was generally better than too little, but a set that was too small was unwearable. Since Dolla hadn't been able to fit into it when I'd first bought it, I'd had the blacksmith widen it. That meant the original wearer had to have been someone smaller.

"It's good for practice though. If you put this on, even the average students can train with you."

"I can't...use a spear...in this thing."

"What? You swung your spear just fine."

He'd certainly managed to brandish his weapon, even if he hadn't been able to take me down at that speed.

"It's good training for you too—it's good for everyone. Two birds with one stone, you could say."

The question of how to deal with an opponent in plate armor was an important one to consider. The opponent's vulnerable points had to be

targeted through the gaps between the plates, which required both precision and speed. It was worthwhile for everyone to practice it.

"Haah. I'm done for today, anyway."

Despite gasping for air a moment ago, Dolla had already caught his breath. He had the fitness of a monster.

"Got plans?" I asked.

"Yeah."

What? He does? That's unusual.

"What are you doing? You're not going anywhere dressed like that, are you?"

"Don't be stupid."

That was the third time Dolla had called me stupid.

After changing my clothes, I waited in the dorm's living area until Dolla emerged from our room.

All that sweating in the armor must've been beneficial—rather than reeking of body odor, he was as fresh as someone who'd just washed with well water.

He was wearing some fairly formal clothes. It was fancier than my outfit, which was only a step above casual.

"Why're you dressed like that?" I asked.

"What, you think I don't own smart clothes? Of course I do."

That was definitely a lie.

"You brought those from home, right? I bet they're your dad's."

He didn't respond.

I wouldn't normally criticize the tailoring of someone else's clothes, but Dolla looked a little weird. His outfit was smart enough, but it was a little too big around the chest and shoulders, and it wasn't the kind of thing he'd normally wear. I was sure it belonged to Galla.

"Is it rude if I go wearing this?" Dolla finally asked, sounding a little

downhearted.

"Well, not really... It should be all right."

"It's better than wearing my uniform, right?" he asked weakly.

Dolla's uniform had seen a lot of rough treatment, so it was more than a little shabby. A few stains wouldn't have mattered so much, but the areas of faded color and the various patches made it look no better than a commoner's clothing.

"That's true. I think it's fine."

I'd stopped caring about his clothes already. We'd both been summoned, but I didn't understand why he'd been asked, nor did I understand why he was suddenly worrying over his appearance when he normally wore his uniform for everything. It was like seeing a gorilla trying to put on human clothes. Once the gorilla had successfully gotten dressed, the proper thing to do was to praise it for the effort, rather than complaining about a few imperfections.

"Let's head out as we are." I got up, planning to set out.

"Dolla?" a voice called out—Myalo had just entered the living area. "You're heading out right now?"

Dolla turned to look at Myalo. "Yeah, that's right."

When Myalo saw Dolla's face—or rather, his overall appearance—her warm smile vanished. Her expression turned serious, and she firmly stated, "Dolla, I'm afraid I can't let you wear that."

"I knew it... It'll look rude, won't it?"

"Not rude, just... You are going to see Princess Tellur, aren't you?"

"Yeah," Dolla replied.

"Then this isn't quite right." Myalo seemed reluctant to explain the issue too.

"Just tell me what the problem is," Dolla said.

"It's outdated. It's something an old man might wear."

Uh-oh. She actually said it.

She was right—Dolla's clothes were really old-fashioned. He was like a fresh college graduate wearing an old, double-breasted suit. It would look just fine on Galla, but it looked wrong on his son. Maybe another student might've gotten away with it, but it just didn't fit with his image.

"Oh, but there's no time left..." This was clearly taking its toll on him. He looked like a shadow of his former self.

"You're right... What should we do? We have to do *something*..." Myalo put her hand to her chin and gave it some serious thought.

Do we? This is all so weird.

I couldn't understand why Dolla cared so much about his clothes, nor why Myalo was getting hung up over it either. He could wear whatever he liked. Sure, he couldn't show up in his workout clothes, underwear, or a suit of armor, but he was dressed formally enough that no one would punish him for it. There wasn't a rule against dressing like an old fart.

"Yuri, you must have clothes over at the Ho family residence."

"Huh?" Me? "I'm...not sure. Getting the right size could be a problem."

"Take him to the residence and lend him some clothes. Please."

"Lend him my clothes? Dolla?"

"Yes. Can't you?"

Seriously? Is this really worth the trouble? And why's Myalo getting so into all this? It's like she wants to make everything go well, but I can't figure out why. Did she just realize it's her dream to be a gorilla handler?

"Okay, I don't mind..." Lending him some clothes wouldn't be a problem.

"And fix his hair with a little oil, would you please?"

"Is it really worth it?"

"It doesn't matter how you look, since you're just keeping Dolla company, but he has to look the part."

Keeping him company? But the message from the queen was addressed to me...

Looking again at Dolla, I had to admit that his hair was a little too messy since he'd cut it himself. I'd gotten used to it after seeing him every day, but now that Myalo had pointed it out, I could see why something had to be done.

"Though I'm sure I warned you to visit a barber before today, Dolla. Are you taking this seriously?"

"S-Sorry. I forgot..."

"That's not an excuse. Get yourself together."

Why's she angry now? I've never seen Myalo like this.

"O-Okay." Dolla winced, apparently overwhelmed by Myalo's unusual attitude.

A quick exit's the best way to deal with this. "All right. Let's just get going. Come on, let's go."

Dolla and I hastily left the dorm together.

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Once at the residence, I called for the head maid.

"I need you to make him look half decent. We've got fifteen minutes," I said, gesturing toward Dolla.

She looked at me as if to say, "Are you serious?" Her eye twitched as she searched for the words to say in response. This confirmed my earlier suspicion: looking at Dolla every day had blinded me to how much of a mess he was.

"Far be it from me to deny your requests, little one, but there's not much I can do in fifteen minutes. I'm afraid there's no one here today who can cut our guest's hair. I could call for someone, but we'd have to wait for them."

I knew it. It's his hair that's causing the problems. But I wish she'd stop calling me "little one."

"One of my female friends said that if I brought him here, you'd be able to give him a bit of oil to flatten his hair down."

"Ah, I see." The head maid clapped her hands together in agreement and nodded. "Then I'll do just that, but he'll still need a shave."

"Really?"

Dolla had at least shaved his chin.

"I mean his sideburns—oil won't flatten those. And while I see that he has shaved his chin, there are still whiskers on his cheeks."

I turned to look at him. Sure enough, his cheeks were thick with hair.

"Okay then; I'll leave it to you. But do we have clothes? Something that'll fit, I mean."

"That won't be a problem. We have clothes from previous generations here. I'm sure one of Lord Gok's outfits can be adjusted to fit."

Come to think of it, Dolla's build wasn't so far off Gok's. I suspected his old clothes would fit perfectly.

"All right. Please see to it."

"This way, please," the maid said to Dolla.

"O-Okay..." Dolla was still overwhelmed as he was led deeper into the residence.

The head maid called out to another maid as she was walking away. "You there. I suspect the little one is off to visit someone important. Please do something about his hair."

"Yes, ma'am." The maid gladly agreed, then approached me.

"What do you think?" Fifteen minutes later, the head maid had returned with Dolla. She was pointing at him and looking quite proud of her work.

"Looks...good to me."

"I can tell you're trying not to laugh," Dolla said.

"No... No... Pfft. Seriously, you look good."

Once I'd gotten over the initial urge to laugh and had done my best to pretend the person I was looking at wasn't Dolla, I realized he *did* look pretty reasonable.

The great tufts of hair sticking out from his sideburns and behind his ears had been trimmed down, and all the hair above had a wet look from the oil the maid had applied. No one could tell what his hair had looked like originally. Plus, he'd always had a good body. All he needed was a pair of glasses, and he might've resembled an intellectual gangster.

I'd only laughed because it was so surprising to see Dolla looking this way. He didn't look odd at all. Well, the hair was a little unorthodox, but maybe he'd pass for a trendsetter. If he'd looked like he had something to hide or if he appeared embarrassed, his overall appearance would come off as strange, but that wouldn't be an issue thanks to his bold personality.

"Very nice work. This is why you're the head maid."

"I'm glad you're pleased." She bowed her head and curtsied.

"Is this really all right?" Dolla asked.

I gave him a thumbs-up and said, "Yeah, you look great. The clothes suit you perfectly too."

"You laughed at me just now."

Doesn't trust anyone, does he?

"Please don't worry," the head maid reassured him. "On the Ho family's honor, I swear that wherever you go in your current state, it won't be an embarrassment."

"All right. I can relax then."

Okay, maybe it's just me he doesn't trust.

"I'll prepare a carriage for you both," the head maid said.

"It'll be quicker if we go by bird," I replied.

"I'm afraid that would ruin the work I've done on his hair."

"Oh. I guess we will take a carriage then."

I wouldn't normally care about Dolla's hair getting ruined, but since multiple people—Myalo included—had invested effort into it, I didn't want it all to go to waste.

"All right. Let's go."

"Yeah, sure, little one," Dolla replied.

Now I was mad. I kicked him hard in the shin.

"Ouch!"

"Never call me that again."

The head maid moved closer to Dolla, crouched down, and brushed away the dirt where I'd kicked him.

When she rose to her feet once more, she told me, without a hint of irony in her voice, "I wish you a pleasant trip, little one."

The swaying carriage took us to a place a little downstream of Sibiak where the river water began to turn brackish.

It was hard to make good use of the land here. The river turned into a mesh that divided the ground into a network of so many small islands that bridges couldn't be built to connect them all. This area looked beautiful when viewed from above, but the lack of any variation in elevation on the surface made it less than spectacular when viewed from ground level.

The people here mostly made a living by fishing, which proved profitable thanks to the number of consumers in the nearby capital.

A portion of the land was occupied by a residence belonging to the royal family known as Taltznen Palace. Upon seeing it for myself, I realized that it was nowhere near as big as the name suggested—it was more like a villa than a palace. Ignoring the outbuildings for workers—such as gardeners—and the sheds for keeping animals, the building was no bigger than my own family's residence in the capital. The lack of any barracks for soldiers on the grounds made the place less safe, but they were probably positioned some distance away in the forest since the royals often came here to enjoy vacations.

As we disembarked from the carriage, a woman hurried toward us, bowed her head, and greeted us. "Welcome. I am the chief attendant, Hinami Weerts."

The role of chief attendant had likely been granted to her by Princess Tellur

herself. She had to be about five years younger than me, so it felt odd that she had such a lofty job title.

"I'm Yuri Ho. I'm here on Her Majesty's orders."

"We have been expecting you. Please come this way."

It seemed she'd be guiding us in.

I took in the view as we walked toward the building. The garden was as carefully maintained as one would expect, and there was a view of a wharf jutting out into the river across from it. A boat just big enough for five or so passengers was docked beside the wharf. The numerous trees around it provided ample shade from the sun, while the beams of light that made it through the branches created a relaxing atmosphere. I wished I could spend my days off fishing from that wharf.

Although I'd initially thought this place was too small for a royal residence, the size might've made it more relaxing. As nice as it was to have a massive manor with spacious gardens, the increased scale came with its own problems. If a stroll to the riverside for a cup of tea required a twenty-minute walk, for example, it could take the fun out of it.

"Please step inside," Hinami said as she held open the door to the main entrance.

"Pardon us."

"Pardon us..."

The building's interior was structurally impressive, but not much expense had gone into decorating it. It was similar to the Ho family's main manor in that respect.

I'd met enough nobles to realize that they could be divided into two types: those who hated the idea of living in anything other than a gorgeous and luxurious dwelling, and those who thought that fancy decorations existed solely to impress outsiders and didn't belong in private spaces. The latter type didn't want to see golden plates in their homes. Whichever queen had built this palace, she had clearly belonged to that category.

We passed through the entryway, headed up a flight of stairs, and reached a room on the second floor.

"Please wait in here."

Dolla and I entered the room, where we found a fairly large round table and four chairs. Beyond the table was a balcony of sorts.

"I'll return shortly," Hinami told us before closing the door behind her. We then heard her footsteps as she hurried off. She was probably going to summon her master.

Does she manage this whole building herself? I wondered.

A villa like this would normally be staffed by full-time housekeepers who doubled as maids. Without constant upkeep, it would have to be cleaned completely before it could be used at short notice. I couldn't see any staff of that sort, so unless Tellur had fired them all, the building must've gone unused for so long that no one was maintaining it anymore. Naturally, they wouldn't have given her a building full of cobwebs and told her it was her new home. At the very least, the royal family would've ordered that the place be thoroughly cleaned first.

"Think we should sit down?" Dolla asked.

"I doubt it matters. Feel free to stand up and look out the window if you want," I replied.

We didn't have to sit while we waited because we weren't here for anything particularly stiff or formal. I decided to take up my own suggestion and look outside, so I headed over to the balcony and looked down at the garden a story below.

It had been designed to produce an impressive view. Much of the picturesque landscape was visible from the second floor. It wasn't quite high up enough to call it a vista, but I could at least see a couple of distant islands, giving me a refreshing sense of being out in the open. I also noticed that the trees had been carefully managed so as not to block the view, which meant someone had to have been maintaining the place recently.

Dolla sat down, showing no interest in the world outside.

"Not there, Dolla," I said.

He got to his feet in surprise. "Why not?"

"That's the seat of honor—it's Tellur's place."

"Oh, I think I heard about that in a class." He was utterly clueless.

"You think? It's the first thing we learned. How'd you forget?"

The Knight Academy didn't have much focus on such protocols, but there was a required course called Etiquette I. If Dolla had forgotten it all so quickly, I felt sorry for whoever had wasted their effort trying to teach him.

"I should sit at the opposite side then?"

"Yeah."

Dolla moved over and sat himself down on the chair closest to the door. Given who he was, the lowest seat at the table was his natural place. I watched him as he put his hands together over the table and then sat there, doing nothing.

What's with him? He looks like he's going to get lost in thought.

I wanted to go over to the balcony's railing to get a better look outside, but I stayed near the door that separated the balcony from the room—I was worried about how it might look if Tellur were to walk in then.

The angle of the sun meant that sunlight hit everything from my chest down, warming me just a little. I continued to stare outside since there was nothing else to do.

As much as I liked this riverside villa, I decided that something by a lake was probably better. The flow of a river made it necessary to keep rowing any boat, whereas a lake would make it possible to gently drift out into its center on a calm day.

The idea of taking the boat out to fish at varying spots on the lake also sounded fun. That said, I'd never actually fished before, so I couldn't be sure I'd enjoy it at all. At some point, I could take it up as a hobby and find out, but I hadn't had enough free time for that recently.

I heard the click of the door's latch.

"Princess Tellur is here to see you."

I turned and saw her. With her blonde hair in two braids on either side of her head and a simple dress, she didn't look much like royalty.

I guess she wants to look pretty, but is that really a proper way for royalty to dress while meeting people?

I was fairly sure it wasn't. If Carol were to meet with envoys in public dressed like this, I'd probably do a double take, question her sanity, and advise her to take a vacation—that's how odd it was.

But rather than voicing any concerns, I bowed to her from where I stood. "It has been some time, Your Highness."

When I raised my head, I saw that Tellur and Dolla's eyes had met.

Hm...?

Dolla looked lost for words. As for Tellur, she looked a little shocked and embarrassed by Dolla's hair and outfit.

Well, she clearly doesn't mind having Dolla around. Hmmm...

"Um... It's good to see you again, Your Highness," Dolla said.

"Yes, I'm glad to see you well, Sir Dolla."

Am I invisible or something? What's going on here? It's as if... Oh, right. Now I get it. Everything fell into place. So that's what this is. I get it. Yep, I see what's going on.

"Dolla, step outside for a moment," I said.

"Huh?"

"Go on—wait in the corridor."

"Um..." Tellur muttered, looking like she was losing all hope.

As the room turned against me, I could almost feel a curse being placed on me as retribution for standing between two young lovers.

"I'll call you back in before long. Now leave."

"F-Fine."

After I'd told him for a third time, Dolla obediently opened the door and stepped out of the room. He shut the door behind him, leaving just the three of us.

I took a seat without waiting to be offered one.

Hinami was annoyed by my behavior. "That was awfully rude of you."

"Oh, I'd like you to stay here and hear this," I told Hinami. Then I turned to Tellur and gestured toward a chair. "Please take a seat."

"A-All right..." she said before sitting down. She'd turned slightly pale, like I was scaring her.

Well, she clearly doesn't like having me around.

"Phew... Don't worry, I've guessed what's going on. I'll make sure you have ample time to talk with Dolla. But I've got business that I'd like to take care of, so please allow me to handle that first."

Explaining that with Dolla still in the room would've required some very careful wording, and I wanted to save myself the trouble. It would've been awkward for all of us.

"Okay..."

"Miss Hinami, you're quite right to be angry, but summoning me was just an excuse to get Dolla here, wasn't it? So please forgive me for wanting to get my duties over with first. This also works out better for them—it'll give them more private time to spend together."

"Oh... V-Very well..."

"If you're okay with that, then please take a seat. This won't take long, and you should hear it—you're the one who's carrying out duties here, after all."

"I understand." Hinami quietly took a seat in a chair near me.

"Two items of business bring me here. The first is that the Kilhinan royal family's wealth has all been disposed of, and I can tell you how much has been left to Princess Tellur. The records are right here."

I placed a tube containing the documents on the table.

"Assets with high liquidity have been sold for cash, while any assets with artistic value have been retained. Those can be sold also, or you could go and collect them if you wish to keep them—the choice is yours. However, if we leave those items stored in a guarded safe house belonging to the Temper family, which is where they are now, the storage fee will be one hundred thousand ruga per month. I'd like you to be aware of that."

"A-All right..."

Did she actually understand what I just said? Oh well, it's not my problem. Let's just get this over with.

"Secondly, I had a response from the holy mountain. They've given you permission to join them. If you decide you want to be a priestess, you could go there."

The holy mountain was a place of worship deep within the mountain range, close to the royal territory. When a member of royalty like Tellur lost their kingdom and had no way to make a living, they often took up a religious role in the mountains to avoid the shame of working alongside the commoners.

Fortunately for Tellur, she hadn't come to Shiyalta empty-handed. There was no need for her to become a priestess because she had enough wealth left over to live a fairly comfortable life, provided she didn't overindulge.

"That's all I had to say. You don't need to make any decisions just yet." I removed my watch from my pocket and checked the time. "Hmm... It looks like you'll have an hour and thirty minutes. Please get to know one another. I can show myself around the garden, so there's no need to worry about me."

I got up and opened the door to exit the room. In the corridor, Dolla was standing with his back leaning against the wall. I closed the door behind me as I stepped out.

"Go on in. I've ruined the mood, but I'll leave you to fix that." I kept my voice down so the two women in the room wouldn't hear.

"I just wanna say that I'm not in love with her. Don't get me wrong."

I didn't doubt it. Given the dedication he'd shown Carol, it was hard to imagine the target of his affection switching to Tellur that easily. Dolla's feelings wouldn't change that quickly.

"Then why'd you worry so much about your clothes?"

It seemed he expected little to come of his meeting with Tellur, and yet he'd done what he could to make himself look good.

"I just...didn't want to show her any disrespect."

Ah, those are his true feelings, I thought to myself.

I could tell because of the difference in how he reacted toward Carol. He obviously hadn't fallen in love. I didn't know exactly what he felt, but I imagined it was fairly complicated.

"Well, it's none of my business... If you'd rather leave, I won't stop you."

"Umm, but..." The suggestion displeased him. He clearly wanted to stay.

"Then go talk to her." I gave him a pat on the shoulder, then headed downstairs by myself.

After I'd spent twenty minutes looking around the garden, I was left with nothing to do. I went to the wharf, sat down, and spaced out.

Another hour and ten minutes to go... This is taking forever.

I soon heard a voice behind me. "Um..."

I twisted my upper body to look and saw the chief attendant, Hinami.

"Could I speak with you for a moment?" she asked.

Instead of answering her question, I asked something that I'd been thinking about. "Got a fishing rod?"

"A...fishing rod?"

"Yeah. I'm bored, so I figured I might fish."

"There's probably one in that shed..."

"Can I take a look?"

"Yes..."

I got up and headed over to the shed.

Hinami appeared nervous as she watched.

The shed was full of rope used to moor boats, but among it all I found a fishing rod. The fishing line was already set up, hook included. The last step was to flip over a nearby rock to find a bug that I could stick on the hook.

I've no idea what I'm doing, but I guess this bug should make good bait. Can't see why not.

I returned to the wharf, sat down, and cast into the water.

"Um..." Hinami was still behind me.

"What's up?"

"I wanted to talk with you about something."

"Sure. If it's going to take a while, you should sit down. Unless you don't want your clothes getting dirty, that is."

"Thank you," she said before laying a handkerchief of sorts on the ground and sitting on it. "Now, if I could speak with you..."

"Go on."

"Will Princess Tellur be allowed to live here indefinitely?"

Ah, Tellur's living arrangement...

Tellur had lived in the royal castle until just three weeks ago, but then she'd been transferred here instead after news of Reforme's fall had reached us—though "transferred" was a polite way of saying she'd been kicked out.

"My advice would be to move out soon. Then again, if the royal family gets sick of her, they'll soon tell her to get lost. She can probably stick around until they do. But make sure she pays for this place's maintenance."

Tellur had the money, after all.

"I see... Um, is this kingdom's royal family shunning Princess Tellur?"

What a blunt question.

"I shouldn't speak for the royal family since I'm not a member, and I'm not sure you'll understand what I mean, but...I don't think they want anything from Princess Tellur. Politics is like a theater, and they want her off the stage. It doesn't mean they want her dead either."

"I see. They won't...do anything, then?"

"If Princess Tellur does take the stage, the Kilhinans will focus on her instead trying to be part of Shiyalta. The last thing anyone in government wants is to see a nation forming inside a nation. That's the real reason she was moved out of the royal castle. Having her around causes problems."

"Ah, okay. Then what she really needs to do is live here quietly."

"Basically, yeah."

I got the impression that this attendant was just an ordinary girl. She lacked Myalo's exceptional wisdom, but she wasn't a simpleton either. I could tell she was concerned for Tellur. Despite her young age, she must've sworn loyalty to her already.

"Since when were those two like that?" I asked.

"Huh...?"

"It's my turn to ask questions," I said, making up my own rules. "He didn't seem all that friendly with her when we were on the road."

I'd never thought there was any chance of Tellur getting along well with Dolla, so my realization had come as a shock. I suppose I'd unconsciously assumed they were as incompatible as oil and water. I couldn't imagine how a timid girl like her had taken a liking to Dolla—it was like learning that the quiet girl who spent all her time reading books in the library was dating a loud playboy. I'd been wondering about it the whole time I'd walked around the garden, but I hadn't found any answers.

"I believe the trigger was a conversation they had near the bridge. I don't know what happened... For some reason, she suddenly became interested in Sir Dolla. After the battle, she asked one of your nightcloaks—or whatever you call them—to take her back."

"What? She turned back?"

The royal swords brought Tellur back to the bridge again?

"Yes. She was concerned for Sir Dolla's safety. The two of them were able to meet once more, and they talked for a while."

"Oh..."

I'd had no idea. Myalo must've known about it, though. She might not have heard their conversation, but she'd been able to guess how Tellur felt.

"They also got to speak at the recent award ceremony."

"Ah, right. Okay then..."

I had no idea... Well, whatever. It feels like everyone's leaving me behind, though. They're growing into adults—even Dolla. I felt a strange sense of loneliness.

"Okay... I see how it is. Thanks."

"There was another thing I wanted to ask," Hinami said.

"Sure, ask away."

"What should I do with Princess Tellur's property? I don't understand the issues..."

Oh, that.

"Besides the things she really needs and the heirlooms she can't sell, get rid of it all."

"Heirlooms she can't sell...? Like what?"

"Like family trees recorded on parchment—things no one else would want."

"Oh, I see."

"If there's a witch you can trust, then you can rent a vault from them to store her money. It'll be a lot cheaper than the Temper family's guarded safe house."

The Temper family's safe houses were famous for being completely free from any risk of being burgled, but the hundred thousand ruga per month in storage costs was extortionate. On one hand, that was the price one paid to keep their assets hidden, but it showed just how much of a stranglehold the Temper family had over their customers. Tellur would be an easy mark.

"If you don't trust anyone at all, then convert it all to gold bars and bury them where no one will find them. That'd be my choice."

"Understood."

"That's about it. Hope it was helpful."

"Thank you, it was."

Now it was my turn again, but I had nothing more to ask. "I'm out of questions."

"In that case, may I excuse myself? I'll need to make more tea for the couple upstairs."

"Sure. I'll continue fishing."

Not that I was catching anything. Fishing was something I'd always wanted to try, but so far I wasn't particularly enjoying it. Maybe I would've had a better time if I had a mentor to advise me.

"I'll bring you something to drink shortly." After Hinami had gotten up, I sensed her bow briefly before she left.

The annual Academy Togi Tournament had come around once again.

It was the third tournament since I'd started paying attention to it, and just like the two before, it was full of strong players. Here and there, I spotted a few people who'd played in my first tournament.

Individual skill levels within each dormitory at the Knight Academy hadn't changed much, and the same applied to White Birch Dormitory. There were exceptions, of course, but many of the same representatives had entered the tournament two or three times.

Myalo had represented our dorm in last year's tournament, so it was my turn again.

Jula Lacramanus had since graduated, and none of this year's entrants were from the seven witch families, so it was laid-back this time. Tournaments only lasted two days, and the final day's game happened in the evening, so it wasn't so bad if I just thought of it as a break from my usual routine.

Myalo had lost the previous year, probably because she'd held back. She knew that things could've gotten difficult for her if a traitor from the Gudinveil family had made the Knight Academy win a second consecutive year.

According to Myalo, the strongest players in this tournament would be Lyrica Kuklillison and someone named Eylrita Davich.

I'd played Lyrica during the semifinals of the tournament before last. She'd been a strong opponent.

I'd heard that the other girl, Eylrita Davich, was no older than eleven. She'd certainly looked that young when I'd seen her at the opening ceremony. Apparently, she was an exceptional togi player despite her age. She'd also entered the tournament the year before—the same year that she'd entered White Birch Dormitory.

According to Lilly, there was a good deal of disagreement over whether it was right for a new student to take the place of a senior student in the tournament. However, no one wanted to give the enemy a chance at a second victory after the embarrassment I'd caused the year before, so she'd been selected for the sake of ensuring the Cultural Academy had an array of strong players.

"Let's make it a fair game."

"Indeed."

I shook hands with Lyrica Kuklillison as the final match began in a familiar fashion.

Eylrita had already been beaten by Lyrica in the semifinal.

Lyrica was wearing a tight dress that showed off the shape of her body. It was nothing like the ridiculous traditional outfit that Jula Lacramanus had worn last time. Given her slim figure and lack of breasts, her clothing wasn't quite sexy but suited her nonetheless.

As for me, I was wearing the same evening party outfit that I'd worn last time.

"Begin," Her Majesty commanded happily from the sidelines.

I heard the timekeeper roll the dice before declaring, "Yuri to move first."

No cheating this time? I guess it was the Lacramanus family pulling the strings before.

The first move needed no thought. I moved a pawn forward to open a path for my plainrunner.

"It's some time since we last met."

Oh, she's talking to me. She must want to chat.

"Yes. Two years, I believe."

This game was bringing back memories, and I'd never felt any ill will from her, so I gave her an unguarded reply. To be precise, it had been two years and one day—that was, if I didn't include any times we might've passed each other in a corridor.

"I've been practicing hard, hoping that I might face you again," she said before choosing her kingeagle as the piece she'd move first.

"Really? I'm flattered."

"And yet you didn't enter last year."

"I lost the qualifiers in my dorm..."

"Yes, she was quite an impressive player too. It was the first time someone had lost to me intentionally."

Sounds like she saw right through Myalo.

Our pieces continued to clack against the board as we played. She wasn't spending as much time thinking as she had in our previous game.

"I imagine you've grown even more skilled by playing against her repeatedly."

"Yes, that's right," I replied.

"I've had a well-matched opponent join my side of the academy too—Eylrita, that is."

That figures.

It was hard to improve without an opponent of equal or greater skill.

Thrashing beginners didn't count as practice, and playing with a major handicap wasn't much use either.

"I played her in the semifinal final and won," Lyrica said.

"Oh, you did?"

"But I doubt I'll be so lucky from next year onward."

If her skill was already close to Lyrica's at age eleven, she had a lot of potential. Players developed fast at that age, so she'd quickly improve.

"I realize that I'm an exceptional player myself, but I can't keep up with a genius like her. Nor can I spend an entire day ruminating about togi like she does."

"If you're willing to praise her so highly, then I expect she'll be the champion next time around," I said while moving a piece. "This tournament is going to turn into a one-sided game."

If she was already that good at eleven, then there was a chance she'd be the champion every year for the next decade. If she loved togi and didn't mind putting a ton of effort into it, there wouldn't be anything to hold her back.

I didn't think that was a bad thing, though. It had always been considered a given that the Cultural Academy would win the togi tournament. It was incredibly unusual for the Knight Academy to win at all.

"Looks like we're approaching the midgame," Lyrica said. "Let's give the game our full attention."

"Yes, indeed."

That signaled the end of our chat. I'd have to focus too if I wanted a chance of winning.

I lost the first game but won the second. Just after we'd gotten beyond the midgame of the third, Lyrica spoke again.

"You appear quite relaxed," she said softly.

It sounded like a straightforward remark. I didn't sense any hidden meaning behind it.

"Yeah, I am."

I was, surprisingly. It didn't feel like a fight between us—rather, it was like I was playing a game for fun. Given how many people wished they could've been sitting here instead of me, my attitude probably wasn't something to be proud of. Regardless of my calm composure, I was still playing to the best of my ability. As long as I wasn't laid-back enough to make embarrassing blunders, I had nothing to feel guilty about.

"I suppose it's unlike battle because the loser doesn't die?" Lyrica remarked.

Ah, she's right. That might be why I'm not worried about winning. I felt like she'd just peered into the depths of my heart.

"You may be right, but I'm also enjoying the game. I hope you didn't think I was taking it too lightly."

"I realize that. I didn't mean it as criticism." As she spoke, there was no hint of displeasure on her face.

"Maybe I'm more relaxed since you're an honorable opponent. When I play against someone who intends to not only defeat but also humiliate me, my reputation is on the line."

I was dragging up an old dispute. I regretted it a little the moment I said it, wondering if it sounded like a jab at witches in general.

"Yes, that incident was quite disgraceful," she said apologetically.

I couldn't help but glance at the spectators. While they weren't chattering among themselves, many of them looked surprised. Politically speaking, what she'd just said was problematic—it was direct criticism aimed at one of the seven witches.

"Oh, but you don't need to worry," I replied. "Losing against an opponent of your caliber won't damage my reputation in the slightest."

She wasn't from a knight family, was she?

I tried to remember what I could about Lyrica. I was under the impression she was a witch, though I could've been mistaken. Another possibility was that she was just eccentric, but I didn't think so.

"I'm honored that you would say so," she said.

"I'm starting to worry about the hourglass. Let's finish this discussion later."

The game had stopped completely. We were on my turn, so I was running out of time.

Since we'd both been speedy during the previous game and the one before that, we'd each been left with tons of time to spare. Spending a little of it on chat hadn't been a problem.

"Very well. That was rude of me."

I made another move, then Lyrica quickly made hers.



"I concede." I lowered my head as I admitted defeat.

I heard girls—no doubt students from White Birch—cheering from the spectators' seats.

"It was a good game." As Lyrica spoke, she reached out to shake my hand.

"Yes, I had fun," I said while shaking her hand.

"Could you give me some of your time after this?" Amidst all the cheering, Lyrica's voice was audible to me alone.

Time? She wants to meet up somewhere?

"Ideally, it'll be just the two of us," she added. "Somewhere away from here."

It seemed I was right. I responded with my honest feelings. "I'm not sure I should."

"Don't worry—I'm not about to confess my love for you."

If it's not that, then what is it?

It was common for idiotic girls to ask me to autograph their copy of an erotic book, but I doubted that was what Lyrica wanted.

"Okay...where?" I asked.

"I've reserved a meeting room here in the royal castle. See me in Conference Room 152 once this is over."

Conference Room 152 wasn't really the hundred-and-fifty-second meeting room. All the numbers started with 1 on the first floor, and it was the fifty-second sequentially numbered room. All rooms, big and small, were given a number—with the exception of closets and storage areas, that is.

Meeting rooms in the royal castle's public areas could easily be reserved by anyone who did business here. Lyrica must've used her connections to get us one.

An invitation from a witch had instantly put me on alert, but the royal castle's security was provided by the first order of the royal guard, which was directly under the royal family's control. It was unlikely that I'd be assassinated here.

"Sure. See you there."

After Lyrica had given me a fairly lengthy handshake, she turned to Queen Shimoné to give her a curtsy and a bow. Lastly, she bowed to me.

Queen Shimoné maintained a smile, but I could tell she was a little bored. She probably would've found it more interesting if I'd won.

Carol, who'd been in the VIP seating area along with the queen, came over to talk to me.

"Pity you didn't win, but it was a good match."

The endgame had been highly technical. I doubted she'd understood the complicated strategy that had left me unable to avoid checkmate. Carol's togi skills hadn't improved much recently.

"Yeah. By the way, do you know where Conference Room 152 is?"

"Room 152? At the end of the north corridor. Why?"

"No reason. Forget I asked."



After greeting a few friends who'd come to watch the match, I slipped away

and walked toward the north corridor.

I left the great hall where the tournament was held, and after turning a corner or two, found myself in a deserted area of the castle. Working hours had long since finished.

Lyrica was already waiting for me at the end of the north corridor. She was standing idly in front of the conference room's door.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

"Not at all." Lyrica politely bowed her head. "I'm glad you actually came. Thank you."

The truth was that I'd considered turning back two or three times on the way here. I wondered whether it had been wise to accept her invitation. I'd been keeping my hand on the handle of a concealed dagger the whole time, but I hadn't sensed any threats so far.

"Please, step inside," she said while opening the meeting room door and gesturing into the room.

"No, after you."

"Oh, you're right. Very well."

Once Lyrica was inside, I stepped in after her.

Lyrica transferred the flame from the lamp she was holding to the candles on the desk, dimly lighting the room. When I took a seat, she sat in the chair opposite mine.

"You're awfully wary," she said.

"I am. I'm always nervous when going somewhere by invitation."

It wasn't so bad in the royal castle, but if she'd suggested somewhere else—such as an unfamiliar teahouse in the city—I definitely would've refused. This was one place where the thugs that witches commonly worked with couldn't hide in large numbers.

"Perhaps it was rude of me to ask you here. Forgive me; I'm not used to handling secrets. I don't wish you any harm."

Although the Cultural Academy was full of witches, most of the students lacked experience in scheming and deceiving others. It mustn't have occurred to her that this situation would fill me with misgivings.

I decided to get straight to the point. "So, what do you want to talk about?"

I didn't mind talking to her, but I didn't want our conversation to go on any longer than it had to.

"I'll say it clearly—I'd like to join your party."

"My...party?" What's she talking about?

"It doesn't matter to me whether I'm a Ho Company employee or a Ho family knight."

The idea of me employing Lyrica made no sense at all.

"I don't understand... You're Lyrica Kuklillison, right? The Kuklillison family is..." Sure is a hard name to say... Where'd it come from? Maybe it's rooted in Ancient Shanish. Witches specialize in that language. "Forgive me if I'm mistaken, but I believe it's a witch family," I finished.

"Yes...you're quite right."

"I'm afraid I have to turn you down in that case. I can't trust you."

I didn't think she intended to be a spy, but she might function like one all the same.

"I'll cut ties with my family, just like Myalo has."

So she noticed I get along with Myalo and got the wrong idea?

"Please consider her an exception. The two of us have been through enough together to build trust."

"I'm prepared to go through considerable risk for this. You may eliminate me if you ever learn of connections between me and witches."

"Eliminate?" The discussion got heavy all of a sudden.

"I don't mean you can eliminate me from my post. I mean in the sense of execution."

"Oh, okay." Um... What era does she think we're living in?

I'd never once executed a person in the course of running the business. I wasn't a heartless slave driver.

"I've been learning Terolish in preparation. Do you think you'd have a use for me?"

Huh? Terolish?

"How about we speak Terolish now?" I suggested, switching languages.

"Very well."

"So how'd you get this idea into your head?" I asked.

"Firstly, my family isn't particularly rich. We're insignificant, in fact. My mother is chief of the cleaning department of the royal capital's sixth district."

"Oh ... All right."

I got the impression that it was a very minor post, but I'd have to ask Myalo for some insight later.

Shanish had its own witch-related terminology, but Lyrica was translating it all into well-chosen Terolish terms. She'd probably considered her words in advance.

"The world of witches is waning. If I have to work somewhere, I'd rather do something impactful and meaningful, rather than picking up litter on the streets."

That was just a figure of speech. Obviously, she'd be employing others to pick up the actual litter.

So that's a job handled by witches? I guess it would be. Someone has to do it.

"'On the wane'?"

"Kilhina is out of the question, and the royals are completely focused on chieftain families. Witch families are regarded as a nuisance."

Yeah, because they are.

I might've spoken my thoughts out loud, but there was no sense in

complaining to her when her family was actually serving a useful function by keeping the streets clean.

The witches' work wasn't all extortion and corruption. They also kept the city functioning and managed records. For example, the Grand Library's librarians were all witches, but they worked each day from morning until night. There might've been some small surplus that they'd be able to skim from the library's budget, but for the most part, they were a group of diligent workers rather than a crime syndicate.

"That's why I'd like to change to another career."

"You're going to quit being a witch?"

"Yes. Witches are merely people who accept some responsibilities granted to us by the royal family. In other words, we're left with nothing if the royal family turns its back on us."

Wow. I guess witches have struggles of their own.

Her Terolish wasn't bad at all. She was struggling with the intonation a little, but she could probably talk to a Kulati without much trouble. She'd clearly been studying for much longer than half a year.

"You think there's no future in it?" I asked.

"That's right."

I realized now that when she'd criticized the seven witches during our game, it might've been her way of making her stance clear.

"I see. I'm interested."

"Really? Does that mean...?"

"I can't give you an answer now. I'll need to learn more about you. I might find something suspicious."

Given that she was from a witch family, I already had enough reason for suspicion, but if her family had a reputation for espionage or betrayal, I'd have to keep her at arm's length.

Well, I guess it's all up to Myalo in the end. I can't decide this.

"Yes, I understand. That's a natural precaution."

"I'll also need your family to give up its responsibilities and leave the royal capital."

"I see... But why?"

She clearly hadn't been expecting this. But for me, it was the bare minimum I could ask.

"No matter how sincere you might be, there's a chance you'll be swayed by persuasion or threats from your family. A contract won't prevent that. You'll be a potential risk."

"Oh. I wonder how I'll convince them..." Lyrica looked understandably worried.

"As for your salary, it'll depend on the work you do, but we normally pay a good rate of about ten gold coins per month."

"That much...?" Lyrica looked shocked.

Is that a lot? I know her family's minor, but she's still a noble.

"Your starting salary won't be quite so high, but Terolish speakers have a lot of potential. That's how much you can expect in the future."

"Really...? My family has savings, so perhaps I can convince them."

"When I've discussed the matter with others and reached a conclusion, I'll contact you."

"Thank you. I'll wait to hear from you." Lyrica bowed her head low.

"I think we're done talking for now." I stood up.

"Thank you so much for hearing me out." Lyrica extinguished the candles as she thanked me.

With the lamp as the only light source, the room grew dark.

Staying cautious, I let Lyrica leave the room first, then followed her out. Once she'd locked the door, we walked along the corridor. She'd have to return the key.

When we reached a place where corridors formed a crossroads, she walked straight forward without hesitation. I, on the other hand, was careful to look left and right before proceeding. To my right, there was nothing but a wall lined with lamps that were always burning. To the left...

"Whoa!"

A person was standing there, their back leaning against a wall.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

It was Carol.



Carol glared at me. "That's what I want to ask you."

"Me? I was talking to someone."

What's up with her? It feels like she's accusing me of something...

"Talking about what?"

"Nothing much. It's private stuff."

"I want specifics."

Specifics? But I just said it's private...

"Good day to you, Princess Carol," Lyrica interrupted our conversation and bowed gracefully to Carol. "I hope I haven't caused you any concern. I was the one who wanted to discuss matters with Lord Yuri. I wanted to know whether I could serve the Ho family and abandon my career as a witch. He was kindly giving me a moment of his time."

Shouldn't she be keeping that to herself? I wondered.

"Hmph... Is that right?" Carol looked at me.

"Yeah, that's all it was."

"Please rest assured that my intention isn't to enjoy Lord Yuri's company."

Ah, now I get it.

It turned out Carol had harbored the same suspicion that I'd had initially. Lyrica's dress didn't help matters either. It wasn't too bad since she was so

slender, but if her boobs had been just a little bigger, it would've been pretty racy. That said, I wouldn't expect Carol to understand subtleties like that, so maybe she thought it was racy enough already.

"Is that right?" Carol looked at me again.

"Yes, that's right. I'm not hiding anything." Nothing at all.

"I must be in the way. I'll leave you both alone, if I may," Lyrica said.

"Okay. I'll get in touch if there's a job for you," I replied carefully.

"I look forward to hearing from you. Goodbye." Lyrica gave a quick bow, then walked away.

"Sorry..." Carol said, once Lyrica was out of view.

"Don't be. You did nothing wrong."

"But I was here waiting for you, even though you told me to forget about it."

That was true, but I didn't actually expect people to forget things just because I'd told them to.

"Well...you shouldn't have let her see you waiting. She's not a friend of mine just yet."

"I couldn't help myself... I thought, 'What if it's a tryst?"

A tryst...? I had to stop myself from laughing out loud. If there's a man who'd ask for directions to a hookup spot from the very girl he's cheating on, I wouldn't like to meet him. Even Dolla wouldn't be that stupid.

"I wasn't cheating. Nothing happened just now—or ever, in fact."

"But since we left the village, we haven't, you know..."

What's this...? That's kind of hot. Her expression, combined with the way she'd blurted out her feelings, stirred something inside me.

"I worried you might be getting it from other women instead..."

"No, it's just, um... I don't know where we'd do it. It's tricky here in the capital. We can't just do it anywhere."

My home, the academy, the dorm, and the inns were all out of the question.

That didn't leave many options. There were places like high-class hotels where we might've been able to go anonymously just once, but we couldn't do that repeatedly.

"Really...? You already thought about it?" she asked timidly, her eyes turned up at me.

She didn't normally act like this, and it was cute to see. But even with no one around, voices tended to echo through these corridors. Talking here made me nervous.

My fears turned out to be well-founded.

"Wait, someone's coming," I said.

"Huh...?"

Someone was approaching, and they were making no attempt to walk quietly. As they strode over with a lamp in hand, I eventually realized it was Lyrica. She'd come back.

"Forgive me. Something just occurred to me."

"What is it?"

"I reserved the meeting room, so I thought it would be fair if you were the one who returned the key."

Carol knitted her brow in confusion. "Huh?"

I knew what Lyrica was getting at, of course—she thought we might have another use for the room.

"Oh, you're right," I told her. "How rude of me. Yes, I'll return the key."

"If you wouldn't mind. Good day to you both," she said, placing the key in my hand before turning and walking away again.

Carol remained quiet until Lyrica was no longer within earshot. She pointed in the direction Lyrica walked off and asked in an irate tone, "What's with her?"

Clearly, she didn't understand what Lyrica had just done.

"You idiot. Lyrica just did us a favor. She was thinking the same thing you were."

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"Huh?"
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"She thought maybe you're here for a tryst."

"Huh? Seriously?" Carol was speechless for a moment. Then she fell to a crouching position, buried her face in her knees, and groaned. "Ugh... Aaahhh..."

"What's wrong?"

"This is embarrassing... I don't want people thinking I'm like that."

Like a horny student who doesn't care where she does it? Carol's worrying too much.

"I can't believe I've been so stupid..." Carol said.

"Well, there's no undoing it now."

"How am I gonna look her in the eye? I'll die next time I see her."

"You're not going to die."

Plenty of rumors about us were circulating already, and those hadn't bothered her. Maybe this was different.

"Well? How about it?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" Carol looked up at me from her crouching position.

I held the wooden keyring, with the room number burned onto it, and shook it. "Wanna use it?"

"What...?! Don't be stupid!" Carol suddenly shot up to her feet with a completely red face.

That's cute.

"I'm serious," I said.

"But... Really?"

Is that a no? It's not like anyone's going to hear. And I want it pretty bad too... Frankly, I was raring to go.

Carol looked unamused. "What are you thinking? It's one of the royal castle's conference rooms."

"You yourself thought it'd be a good place to hook up if we wanted to..."

"But...there's no bed or bath." She shrugged nervously while avoiding my gaze.

She's right. It would be a little weird. I guess she wants to keep everything vanilla when it comes to sex. I'd better give up...

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"So you don't want to?" I asked.

"What?! I didn't say that..."

"Then you do want to? Let's do it."

"Um... Huh?!"
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I grabbed Carol by the hand and began leading the way. With barely any resistance from her, we arrived at the conference room. I took one of the lamps from the corridor, unlocked the door, and entered. Inside, I reignited the candles.

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"We're really doing it here? But I can't get this dress dirty..."

"Don't worry about that." You're about to take it off.

"And it's a meeting room... We can't leave it dirty."

"Don't worry. We're not going to go all the way."

"Oh..."
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I put my arms around Carol's waist and pulled her close.

Though she was muscular, she still had the soft body of a woman. It felt good to hold her. With my arms wrapped around her waist, I felt her back to check that she wasn't wearing a corset.

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"Well? Don't you want it?""Ngh... Don't...talk into my ear.""Your ears are sensitive, aren't they?""Nghah..." Carol moaned in a nasal voice. "Idiot. Men like you are...haaah..."
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With awkward movements, she put her arms around me. As my hands explored her back, my right hand moved down to her butt and squeezed it

gently.

"Ah..." Carol wasn't resisting me at all. She was pulling me toward her eagerly.

Looks like she's up for it.

With my free left hand, I began undoing the buttons on the back of her dress.

"Liar..."

When we were finished, Carol lay sprawled on the table.

The candlestand was on the floor. We'd put it there so we wouldn't knock it over. The four candles it held illuminated the ceiling, except for an elliptical shadow created by the room's table. Its light bounced off the cream-colored wallpaper and faintly revealed Carol's naked body.

"What'd I lie about?" I asked.

"You said we wouldn't go all the way..."

"Yeah, I did."

It had been a small fib to stop Carol from being nervous. Having learned just how adverse she was to doing anything weird, today had been enlightening.

"Pervert, stupid, idiot, moron, misogynist," she spat.

"I think I did quite well today, if I do say so myself. I give myself a pass."

"You lied and then went all the way with me in this meeting room. What kind of person does that?"

That's a bit rich, considering how into it you were.

"It's what you'd call a youthful indiscretion."

"Don't use that as an excuse! Idiot!" Carol suddenly sat up. She'd finally gotten her energy back.

"They say it's memories like these that make you smile as you get older."

"I doubt it."

"We'll remember how we made the most of our youth."

"I'd rather forget."

Carol sat on the table's edge like it was a chair, then awkwardly remained in that position.

She'd have to wipe her lower body clean before she could reach for her clothes and put them back on, but there was nothing to use. She might've had a handkerchief in the pocket of her dress, but it was folded in half and draped over the back of a chair.

I reached into the pocket of my jacket, which was hanging on a chair, and pulled out some folded paper. "Here, wipe yourself clean," I said, tossing it at Carol.

"Wh-What are you..." Carol looked at me in disbelief.

I shouldn't have thrown it like that, should I? I felt like I'd just kicked a hornet's nest.

"I get how it is... Your attitude totally changes once you're finished, doesn't it?" Carol trembled as she lowered her gaze. She looked angry.

I understood why. Plus, I was the source of most of the mess covering her. "Um... Sorry. Pretend I didn't do that. Here, I'll wipe it off."

"It's fine... I've read about this. I know how men suddenly change once they've gotten what they want." Carol began using the paper to wipe herself clean.

What? There are books about postnut clarity? That was basically my state of mind. The best thing to do was to apologize.

"They do, but... No, that's not what this is. I'm sorry. I should've stopped to think. I know I'm in the wrong."

"Do you actually feel guilty, though?"

"I do, I do. I'm in the wrong. I was picky about where our first time happened, but I should've known this wasn't the right place for our second time either."

"Oh, so you'd be fine doing it here if it wasn't our second time?"

Uh... But she seemed pretty into it herself once we got going.

"No... Even after that, it wouldn't be right."

"You don't take anything seriously, do you?"

"I said sorry. Anyway, we don't need to do it like this again because I've thought of somewhere better."

I wouldn't want it to be like this every time, though once in a while might've been a nice change of pace.

"Dare I ask...where?"

"In the mountains where Ho Province borders the royal territory, there's a place called Liliga Hot Spring. They can take care of our kingeagles, and there are guest rooms some distance apart from each other. That should be safe, right?"

"Ngh..."

"We'd have our own indoor bath, of course, and no one can follow us if we're on eagles. It's not exactly cheap, but I can pay..."

"Then why didn't we go there in the first place? Why are we in a conference room?"

Why...? Because someone said that if I go too long without sleeping with you, it looks like I'm cheating! The words were on the tip of my tongue, but I held them back knowing I'd regret saying it.

"I'm a man, and I haven't had any release in a long while now. And that dress looked so good on you, I couldn't help but get excited. I know I shouldn't have done it..."

Was that enough to cheer her up...? I looked at her face.

"Y-You mean it?" She turned away, embarrassed. She'd finished cleaning herself and was putting the dress back on. Her tone was still firm, but there was a little happiness mixed in.

"Let me button it up for you."

"Please do."

I stood behind Carol and began fastening the buttons one by one. Somehow,



Interlude I — A Window into White Birch

When I opened the door to my room in White Birch Dormitory, the sight that awaited me was all too familiar.

"Lilly... You're listening to that thing again?"

"Huh? Oh, it's you, Sham... No, I only just opened it." With a nonsensical excuse, Lilly hastily shut the music box's lid.

The steady sequence of notes came to an abrupt stop. That was how its mechanism worked.

"You must've heard it thousands of times already. I know I keep saying this, but I don't know how you're not tired of it."

I put my books down on my desk and sat on the chair.

"I know, but it's..."

It had been two weeks since Yuri had given Lilly the music box.

It was a machine made overseas; nothing like it existed in this kingdom. At first, I'd been just as interested in the spring-driven mechanism that created the music. I liked new ideas, and the unfamiliar melody, created by some foreign composer, was like nothing I'd heard. I'd enjoyed listening to it the first dozen times.

Lilly, however, would sit at her desk, be it morning, midday, or evening, and listen to that same music endlessly. She'd grin at the box, wind it and listen, wind it and listen...and so on, sometimes for half a day at a time.

I didn't complain for the first three days, but listening to the same simple, thirty-second melody on a loop was starting to drive me insane.

After I'd told her how I felt, Lilly kept the box closed whenever I was around. But even then, she'd stare at the silent object. It was like she'd never been particularly interested in the music—seeing the box was enough for her.

"You sure do love Yuri, don't you?"

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"Yes... I do."
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I was looking at her face in profile, but I could still see the emotion in her eyes. The bitterness of her unrequited love, or whatever it was, touched my heart. Well, I guess it was wrong of me to declare it unrequited.

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"Um..."
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"What is it?" Lilly replied as she continued smiling at the box.

"Remember those metal parts you made for Yuri recently—the ones that needed quenching and tempering?"

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"Um... Huh?"
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"You had to heat them, right? But the internal structure of the metal would've ended up weakening if you'd overheated them." Where am I going with this? I'm supposed to be talking about romance. "I think maybe you can overdo it when it comes to love too."

"This ain't something that's under anyone's control. It's more like wildfire."

"Yeah, but..."

"Aaah..."

Uh-oh. There she goes again.

"I'm older than Yuri is. That's the problem, I bet."

"No..."

"Or maybe he likes his girls a mite thinner..."

"Um, no..."

"That's gotta be it—he thinks I'm fat."

"No, you haven't even made a move on him yet. That's what you need to think about."

She was like someone who said, "I can't get to my destination because this saddle's so uncomfortable," then set out. I wished she'd stop going over the same thoughts in her head on a loop. It was getting her nowhere.

"How do I make a move?"

"Well..."

My gaze fell to her breasts. All she really had to do was hug him again like she had when he'd first returned, but I also hated the idea of Lilly doing dirty stuff with Yuri. I decided to keep that idea to myself.

"I don't know... It's not like I've got any experience," I replied.

"Then what am I supposed to do?"

"If you need romance advice, how about asking a romance expert?"

She answered my question with another question. "A romance expert? Like who?"

Despite it being my own suggestion, I couldn't think of anyone. I wondered who I'd talk to in her shoes. *My mom, maybe?* "Um, I don't know... Maybe you could research it in books?"

"Books...? Hey, how about I ask an author?"

"An author?"

"I mean Pina Colata."

Huh?

Pina Colata was a well-known author of culture books. She'd written tons of novels and sometimes came to me for feedback.

When I'd first read her work, it was because I'd wanted to know why Yuri was in them. Unfortunately, they hadn't made any sense to me. I didn't get why he was always paired up with another boy. Like most boys, Yuri liked girls, so the pairings she wrote about didn't even make sense.

More recently, she'd written an original novel that hadn't featured any actual people. I'd tried reading it, but it was all too complicated for me to understand. It was a weird story about a girl at White Birch Dormitory who everyone looked up to because of her grades, good looks, and family background. Every night, when she went to bed, she dreamed about turning into a giant caterpillar. She began to worry about the differences between humans and caterpillars, and eventually, she fell in love with another caterpillar in one of the white birch trees.

I couldn't make sense of it. No amount of worry could make a person turn into a pupa.

"Um... You know there are some big differences between her novels and the actual people she writes about, right?" I said.

"I'm not so sure... She ought to have some good insights into how people think, or she wouldn't be able to write at all. There ain't any harm in asking her."

"Are you serious?" Uh-oh. She's losing the ability to think rationally.

"Yeah, why not? Wanna come along, Sham?"

We knocked on the door, and a voice from inside called, "Come in."

"Excuse us," we said as we stepped into Pina Colata's room.

Pina wasn't there. There was only her roommate—a girl named Komimi Culotte. This was someone else who did work for Yuri sometimes.

I can't believe we're here...

"Oh, it's you, Lilly. And Sham too."

"Um, I wanted to consult with..." Lilly stopped to correct herself. "I mean, I wanna ask Pina somethin'."

Komimi tended to be a little protective of Pina and wanted to get involved in anything she did, so Lilly had to be careful what she said.

"Pina isn't here. She's doing some extra Ancient Shanish study."

"Ah, I see."

Apparently, Pina hadn't finished taking Ancient Shanish lectures yet.

Useless subjects like that were a source of headaches for me too. Next year, I'd have to grapple with the final required course on the subject—Intermediate Ancient Shanish III. I'd passed Intermediate Ancient Shanish II without too much trouble. All I'd done was push any irrelevant thoughts out of my mind and memorize everything. Still, part of me wondered whether graduating was worth the effort.

"Then we'll be back another day. Sorry to bother you."

Just as Lilly was about to leave, Komimi called her back. "Wait—I wanted to ask about the material for movable type parts. Do you know when it'll be ready?"

That was my job, I was the one who replied. "Oh, don't worry. I figured out how to get the tricky metal."

"Tricky metal...? What do you mean?"

"We needed a metal that expands upon solidifying. Lead alloys contract, making them poorly suited for this purpose because they'll end up smaller than the molds for the movable type pieces. But I fixed that by adding something to it that cancels out the contraction. Though there's still an issue with it wearing too quickly with friction because—"

"Oh, that's good. I'll leave it to you."

"Okay..." I was going to explain how scarce some of the materials are...

"Things are going smoothly here, so just get your side of things done as quickly as possible." Komimi's gaze fell on the desk she was sitting at, where some neatly arranged sheets of paper sat, each with a glyph drawn on it. They were likely letters of the Terolish alphabet, but they were alien to me.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Calligraphy... Like handwriting practice. The retail price of that holy book we're printing is going to depend on how nice it looks—at least somewhat—so I've got to get the shape and width right for every character. I'm doing it under Chairman Yuri's orders, even though I've never studied Kulatish..."

"Sounds tough."

It looked like hard work. It didn't really interest me, though. As long as text was easy to read, I didn't care how it looked.

"Well, it's good practice for when we make movable type for Shanish in the future, so it doesn't feel like a waste of time."

"Oh, okay..."

I wondered whether they'd use the same technique for Ancient Shanish in the future. Even modern Shanish required a lot of different glyphs. Extending it to Ancient Shanish would probably increase the amount by a factor of ten at least.

I wondered just how many movable type pieces we'd need. The number could easily explode. Once it got to a certain point, managing all the pieces would be more work than making them. Whoever made use of them would be like a librarian going back and forth between bookshelves as they tried to keep the mountain of type pieces organized.

Terolish, however, was another matter. It required just thirty different glyphs, so whoever assembled the pieces could just line them up on a desk in front of them and sit down. Simple.

"Is it all right if we go now?" Lilly asked, sensing that the conversation between me and Komimi had come to an end.

"Yes, of course."

"Okay, sorry for botherin' you." Lilly bowed her head and then stepped out of the room.

"Oh, I just remembered. Pina might be in the Grand Library," Komimi spoke up as we were leaving.

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When we got to the Grand Library, we found Pina Colata sitting in a chair, reading a thick book that—I noted as I peered over her shoulder—was written in Ancient Shanish. It looked tough. Just based on the single line I read, I could tell it was full of difficult expressions.

Apparently this was extracurricular. If she was reading books like this by herself, though, it probably wasn't for an intermediate Ancient Shanish class. Based on the text, it was more likely for Advanced Ancient Shanish II, or maybe even III. It was so far beyond my level that I couldn't even guess which.

"Pina. Pina," Lilly called to her softly.

Pina didn't react.

"Pina," Lilly said again while patting her on the shoulder.

"Wah!" Pina leaped up with a piercing shriek.

I couldn't help but look around us. Fortunately, we were the only ones nearby. Still, that scream of hers had carried well enough that someone was bound to have heard it.

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"Ah, who are you?"

"Lilly Amian," Lilly replied in her unique intonation.

"Oh, um... Lilly? Um, do you need something?"

"Actually, I wanted to discuss somethin'."

"Oh? What is it?"

"Yuri."

"Huh?" Pina twitched like she'd been caught doing something she shouldn't.
"I d-don't write culture books about Yuri anymore... S-Sorry."

"What? No, it ain't that. I ain't mad at you at all."

The tension faded from Pina's face. "Oh, uh, okay..."

This is a weird conversation...

"Are you busy right now?" Lilly asked.

"I wouldn't say so. Just studying a little Ancient Shanish."
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"Do you enjoy it?" I couldn't help but ask.

There were people out there who, for reasons beyond my understanding, actually enjoyed learning that language.

"Well...I'm learning new expressions."

"Expressions?"

"People who read books tend to be cultured, so they respond well when I write sentences that incorporate Ancient Shanish. I don't want to make things too complex, but it's boring if I keep it too simple. You could say it's a little extra flavor for my writing."

"Oh, I see... Sounds tricky."

So she needs it for her work somehow? I don't get it.

"We ought to talk someplace else," Lilly said. "Wanna head to a teahouse?"

The teahouse would be Ginkgo Leaf. It was right in front of the Grand Library.

"All right. Let me just put these back."

Pina closed the large book with a thump, creating a cloud of dust. It clearly wasn't read very often.

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Lilly and Pina were sitting across from each other in one of Ginkgo Leaf's private rooms, deep in discussion. Meanwhile, I was drinking the good tea and listening in disbelief.

"So...you want to get to know Yuri better... Is that it?"

"Yes. You know stuff, right? You've spent all that time watchin' him... I thought maybe you'd know somethin' I don't."

This felt wrong. Maybe this was what people meant when they said love is blind.

If Lilly wanted someone who'd watched Yuri a lot, then his roommate Dolla was the obvious choice—they'd spent much more time together. She should've asked him.

"But I depict male characters in my novels as the girls in the Cultural Academy see them... I doubt they're much like the real people. I've never actually dated a boy in reality..."

"Yes, I know. It'll just be somethin' for me to consider."

"Well, if that's all you want... But I can only talk about the Yuri from my stories. You have to understand that."

"Okay, I do."

I wonder if she really understands that. It doesn't seem like it.

"You want to know what it would take to be Yuri's wife or lover?"

Lilly leaned forward and nodded. "Right. Exactly that."

Pina shared her analysis of Yuri:



In that case, let's talk about what Yuri wants.

Yuri carries a hunger for love. And since he hungers for it, he treasures those who can provide it. He'd even give his life if that's what it took to protect those who show it to him—that's how compassionate he can be.

Although he might appear disinterested in romance, that's a facade. Don't be fooled into thinking he doesn't need a wife or lover. He's not blind to the love people show him. He's highly sensitive to it, and feels strong emotions when he's showered with affection.

I think a lot of men are the same way. It's often down to trauma they carry because of family problems during childhood. Often, it's because they felt horribly isolated because of serious bullying, and they've been waiting for someone to support them for a long time. It's not unusual for someone to have a past like that. Many of the male students at Blue Cat Dormitory, in particular, come from such backgrounds.

But when it comes to Yuri's history...maybe Sham would know more than me, but as far as I know, he was blessed. His parents gave him nothing but affection. People raised in households like that normally take affection for granted. When they receive affection or show it to others, they don't get overly emotional about it. That's because they've never hungered for it. It's as natural to them as the air they breathe.

So it's a mystery to me why Yuri—someone who grew up in such a loving environment—can be the way he is. It's a contradiction that I'm still grappling with. I can't reconcile the behavior he demonstrates with the behavior I'd expect from someone with his childhood.

It's like he has some lingering trauma from a past life... At least, that's one backstory I came up with for him.

Anyway, that's the character in my mind named Yuri.



With that, Pina's torrent of analysis ended.

Wow. It had taken me by surprise. I felt like everything she'd said had been right on target.

I looked over to Lilly and noticed that she'd started hastily writing down everything Pina had just said so that she wouldn't forget anything later. She reminded me of people who were fooled by psychics.

Once she was done taking notes, she asked, "So...what's his type of woman? Who'd be an ideal wife?"

"Oh, that's easy. Whoever's first."

"First?"

"Someone he loves, who accepts him for who he is and showers him with affection... Though that's not to say he'll be happy with just anyone."

"That ain't what I meant. The point is that I wanna be that person he loves."

She was being a little too open, but it was a logical response. Getting Yuri to love her was her current objective.

"Yuri already loves lots of people. Sham, Myalo, Carol, and you, Lilly. I'm sure he loves you all."

"Huh...?" Lilly looked shocked.

What? Me too?

"That's not to say he'd be unfaithful. He has a lot of self-control and abides by ordinary morals. He'll only have a sexual relationship with one person."

"Huh? And it doesn't matter who the first person is?"

"Sham's like a little sister to him, so that puts her at a disadvantage, but basically, yes."

"So it's first come, first served?" Lilly asked.

"If you want to put it that way..."

Oh. Okay... Somehow, she was so convincing that I couldn't find anything to disagree with. First come, first served. She might be right.

If Yuri did dirty stuff with whoever asked, everyone would end up unhappy. That was why he'd limit himself to whoever was first. That was logical—it was how Yuri's mind worked.

But would choosing just one person be the best way to minimize unhappiness while maximizing happiness? Wouldn't limiting himself to one person to do dirty stuff with upset everyone else when they had to accept the reality?

Maybe not if everyone else went off and found themselves another man instead, but some probably loved him too much for that. I suspected as much, anyway.

Just recently, Yuri had hugged me. It'd made me happier than if he'd only hugged Lilly and ignored me. If Yuri were in a relationship with Lilly, I'd be happiest if he sometimes messed around with me too, rather than only having eyes for her. In my opinion, if he were to have affairs with anyone and everyone, that would result in the most happiness.

"First come, first served..." Lilly said, her gaze becoming distant.

Her face scared me a little. I didn't want to doubt Lilly, but she had to be thinking something bad.

"Please don't take me too seriously. I was just sharing my thoughts..." Pina added.

"All right. Thanks. I'll remember this."

"I'm probably way off. I've never actually dated a man, after all."

"I know, I know."

Please let her remember that last part. All I could do was pray.



Chapter 5 — A Run of Good Luck

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About a year and a half passed, and the end of January was approaching. I'd reached the age of nineteen.

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"I think I'm pregnant."
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"Huh...? Are you serious?!" I replied.

"Yes... I'm fairly sure."

I was in the Ho family residence in the royal capital with Rook and Suzuya sitting in front of me. Since it wasn't Suzuya's first pregnancy, she knew the signs.

"Um... Since when?" I asked.

"When...? It's hard to be sure," Rook said with a little embarrassment.

So these two are still doing it?

My gaze fell to Suzuya's stomach. It didn't look much bigger, so she must've noticed her periods had stopped and other such signs.

"I can tell because it's my second time. It was like this when I was pregnant with you."

"Ah... I guess so."

So that's how it is. Kind of like when someone gets a craving for sour food.

"You'll finally have a little brother or sister, Yuri," Rook said.

"I can't wait." I was genuinely looking forward to it. A happy feeling came bubbling up from inside me.

I don't know whether it'll be a brother or sister, but I'm gonna have a sibling. Someone's gonna call me big bro. Awesome. I win. "Mom, please make sure you're taking care of yourself. You shouldn't ride in carriages too much."

"Don't worry, don't worry. I'm still fit and healthy." Suzuya flexed her bicep. She really did look well.

I was already nineteen, and my twentieth birthday wasn't far off. Given how much time had passed since Suzuya had given birth to me, it was quite late in life for her to have another child.

"But why'd you come all the way to the royal capital? I would've come to you in Kalakumo if you'd just called for me."

"We wanted to get all the maternity gear and clothes together. Didn't we?" Suzuya said.

"Heh heh. That's right. When I said she could wear the clothes she wore while pregnant with you, she got mad at me." Rook sounded unusually cheerful. And, well, he had a good reason.

"And we wanted to surprise you too," Suzuya added. "Though we weren't sure if you'd be happy about it."

"Of course I'm happy. I can't wait to have a sibling."

"I'm glad to hear it." Suzuya was so glad, in fact, that she had to wipe a tear from her eye.

Why wouldn't I be happy? I'll have a little brother or sister. That's awesome. It's not going to be like last time when my sixty-year-old dad knocked up a seventeen-year-old foreign girl. I never even met my little brother. This is going to be Rook and Suzuya's child.

"Why wouldn't I be happy? What made you worry?"

"Well, your mom's a farmer's daughter. She worried it might be too many children."

Why worry about that? I wondered. Even in farming families, everyone's going to celebrate a second child.

"You were worrying over nothing. I'd be overjoyed, even if it were three or four new siblings."

Honestly, they probably had the resources to raise another twenty.

"Thanks, Yuri," Suzuya said. "You've made your mom really happy."

"I'm the one who should thank you. But please look after yourself until the baby's born."

"I'll make sure it's born safely. I promise."

"Okay. Don't forget your promise."

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"Soim's here too. I think he wants to spar with you," Rook told me once the happy moment between parents and child had passed.

"He does?"

"I heard it's his greatest wish."

Greatest wish? Well, I can't put off the greatest wish of an old man like him. It would be the first time I'd had such a request from him.

"Okay, I'll go to him."

"See you, Yuri. And I hope you're studying well." Suzuya waved goodbye to me.

Rook, who'd been through the Knight Academy academy courses himself, looked at Suzuya with a knowing smile. He was well aware that my days of studying were long finished.

The barrier that made sure no one graduated the Knight Academy before the age of twenty was a course known as Advanced Hand-to-Hand Techniques IV. However, I'd already been given a document saying I'd fulfilled the course requirements, so I didn't even have to attend that course.

It essentially said, "You haven't officially cleared the course...but just between you and me, all our instructors know your skills are more than good enough." It meant that I could be awarded a pass unconditionally the moment I finished my last academic year at the age of twenty. I was set to automatically graduate from the Knight Academy, even if I didn't do anything else.

"It's good to take a beating once in a while. You'll be getting weak."

"I'm not...getting weak. Anyway, I'll see you later."

I left the room feeling like Rook had just struck a nerve.

When I reached the entryway, I found Soim standing there. He was wearing a well-tailored outfit that allowed for ease of movement. It was like something a hunter might wear. They weren't the sort of clothes I'd expect to see a man with white hair and a heavily wrinkled face wearing, but they suited him somehow. That was down to the condition of his body. I could've examined any part of the flesh that supported him and I'd find it robust and healthy, with no signs of his age.

Someone like him would be popular here in the city. There was demand for men like him. If Komimi Culotte was to be believed, as a mature man, he would be a common favorite.

Soim was holding a slender spear that rested on his shoulder. For someone fulfilling his greatest wish, I felt a strange lack of excitement from him. He was simply standing by a pillar like he was deep in contemplation.

"Soim," I called out to him.

He blinked as he came to his senses. "Oh, Young Master. How long it's been." Did he fall asleep...? I wondered.

"Yeah, it has."

Due to some bad luck, we hadn't gotten the chance to meet for about nine months now. And during our last meeting, we'd just talked a little—it had been much longer since we'd crossed spears.

"What brings you here?"

"I'd like to assist in your training." Soim lowered his head as he spoke.

"Oh, sure."

Training? We haven't done that in a while.

Our training sessions would begin casually when we bumped into one another, and Soim would remark, "It's been some time since we crossed spears, hasn't it?" Since entering the Knight Academy, he'd never summoned me

specifically for the sake of a training session like this. There had to be something special about his request.

"Then let us head for the dojo," he said.

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I wasn't dressed for a fight, so I had to change into a gi once we reached the dojo. Soim, however, remained in the same clothes. Training sessions normally involved working up a sweat by running and jumping around, but he might've had something more laid-back in mind.

"Young Master, today will be your final training session with your unworthy teacher, Soim."

"Final?" Why's that?

"I turned 105 this year. I believe I've reached my peak as a warrior and can no longer improve further."

Wait, what? I knew he was old, but 105? And he's only just hit his limit...? He was getting stronger the whole time?

"You were still improving?"

"Yes, I was."

"You mean you're stronger now than you were during your thirties or forties?"

"Yes. I believe strength comes in many forms. I, Soim, have bolstered my spirit to counteract my body's deterioration, and it's my firm belief I'm now at my peak."

Really...? I don't get it, but if a man like him says it, it has to be true.

"And that means there's no point in training anymore?" I asked.

"If you wish to be frank, then yes. I can feel that both my body and spirit will decline from now on."

Well, yeah, I'd expect so...

A warrior couldn't always improve. They had to decline at some point. The weird part was that the decline hadn't started until he was 105.

If a man like Soim declares he's in a state of decline, should I expect him to suddenly turn senile tomorrow? That was a frightening thought.

"All right. And you want to spar with me again before the decline happens?"

"Insightful as always. Yes, you're quite right."

"Then let's do it."

"I'd like us to use true spears."

Huh? He can't mean that. Real spears? Seriously?

"Are you serious? I won't fight you to the death."

"We'll stop at the last moment. You'll learn more that way."

"I'm not sure I'll be able to stop."

"You needn't hold back at all, Young Master. In fact, it's my wish that you attack with an intent to kill."

Uhh... What's he talking about? I hope we're not here because he decided he wants to die a certain way... Though I don't think Soim would do that.

"Worry not—if you think you can even graze my skin, your concern is misplaced."

"Well...if you say so."

"Now, pick whichever spear suits you best."

There were all kinds of spears with damaged points on the dojo wall. They were here for training purposes. If I wasn't even going to graze him, then the condition of the point didn't matter. In fact, they'd be better than a good spear because there was less risk of causing a serious injury.

I picked out one of the narrow spears and carried it to the center of the dojo.

"The same way we always do it...right?"

"Precisely." Soim silently readied his spear.

He barely appeared to be gripping his weapon—it was more like it rested in his hands. His stance left his entire body completely relaxed.

I readied my spear and faced him. I waited for him to come at me, but he

didn't, so I charged at him myself.

"Yah."

Just as I stepped forward to thrust at Soim, I felt the point of his spear stab my stomach. He'd stopped just as the sharp blade pierced the top layer of my skin. It left a stinging pain, like pricking my fingertip with a knife.

Soim looked at me with reproachful eyes. "Young Master...that was careless of you. Please do not disappoint me."

I felt close to breaking into a cold sweat as I stepped back and reconsidered my approach.

Careless? In what way?

Soim had thrust his spear out before I'd even finished taking a single step toward him. His movements weren't faster than mine, but he'd started moving before I did. He must've thrust his spear after reading my intentions.

To say he was reading me made it sound more complicated than it was—all it meant was that he'd picked up on the small movements I'd made before my charge. A typical example was the way an opponent would tense up their muscles before they threw a punch. Other common tells were eye movement, changes in someone's grip on a weapon, and subtle noises. When all these things were considered as a whole, it was possible to read the opponent.

But I didn't think I'd done anything like that before my charge. I couldn't understand it. Still, I must've revealed my intentions somehow without realizing it, which proved I'd been careless.

I wasn't taking this lightly, but I struggled to remember everything I'd done. Clearly, I wasn't entirely focused. Perhaps I hadn't fully understood the weight of what Soim called our final training session.

"Sorry," I said.

"A master shouldn't apologize so readily to those who serve him."

I readied my spear once more. "I'm apologizing. I underestimated how much this visit meant to you."

This time, I tried using the heavy point of my spear to knock Soim's aside

before immediately drawing back. A little force was enough to push his weapon out of the way effortlessly. As expected, he was completely relaxed.

Meathead students tended to stand their ground, thinking that they'd lose if someone could push their spear aside, but Soim was different. He'd given way like water. I'd felt nothing but the weight of the spear itself.

After trying the same thing a few more times, I thrust my spear upward as I lunged in. I aimed for his face first, then for his stomach. Soim's body swayed to avoid the thrust for his face, leaving him unable to move his lower body out of my spear's path... Or so I thought.

As if he'd predicted this all along, Soim held his weapon close and caught mine on his spearhead.

After my spear hit Soim's, it felt like some force drew it in and made it slide along the length of his. When it reached the points where he held his weapon, he shifted his grip to allow me to pass, and my spear continued to be pulled along until it had slid all the way to the butt of his.

Soim abruptly pulled his spear away from mine as he placed it behind his back, then spun around and pricked my abdomen with a one-handed grip near his weapon's point.

What just happened? Was that a sleight of hand?

I couldn't understand how my spear had been drawn to his. The whole thing was a mystery to me. He must've triggered some reflex of mine, but it was like nothing I'd experienced. It felt like some sort of aikido technique.

"This is pointless," I said as I backed away. "Your skills are far beyond mine."

"You did well just now."

"I don't get what happened."

I couldn't see any hope of winning.

"It seems that when you thrust your spear, you hold a mental image of yourself thrusting it downward from above. An instant before you start moving, your body rises slightly. It was obvious to me at first, but you concealed it splendidly just now."

Huh...? Is that true? No one ever told me anything like that before...

"That movement disappeared because you firmed your resolve, which is ideal for actual combat."

"Umm..."

"Should we go again?"

"Well, um, I guess. Since it's our last time."

"I, Soim, am honored to the bottom of my aged soul."

That's so over the top.

We fought five times in total, but I couldn't beat Soim even once.

"You have come so far, Young Master, but you mustn't aspire to be like me," Soim said.

"Huh?" Then what are we doing all this training for?

"I attained such skill by thinking of nothing but the spear every waking minute. You, however, have another path to follow."

Yeah, I guess the lord-supreme who heads the Ho family has a lot to think about besides fighting.

"You're probably right."

"It's my selfishness that brings us together today. It was my wish to fall in battle, but that looks unlikely now."

A year earlier, the Hao family had been taken over by Soim's great-grandson, so even if there was a war now, Soim's great-grandson would be the one to lead the family's soldiers into battle. That said, even if Soim had been in charge, a family head older than one hundred would normally send someone else in their place.

"Before these old bones give out, I wish to at least pass on this technique to you, Young Master."

"You should teach it to your great-grandson."

He had a ton of students besides me.

"Oh, but of course I taught it to him too. But it's you, Young Master, who most reminds me of my younger self."

"I do?"

He'd never told me that before.

"I mean your spear. Perhaps it's a given that yours should resemble mine since I taught you the very basics."

"Oh, yeah... I guess so."

I vaguely remembered Rook once telling me he couldn't teach his own child to wield a spear. Soim must've followed the same practice and left it to others to teach his descendants.

"Although I like to boast of having achieved greater skill now than at any other time in my life, I do wonder whether it's possible to compare myself as I am now to my younger half."

"Well, you're winning against me, aren't you?"

"Heh heh. Yes, it's thanks to you that I can truly confirm that the past fifty years of refinement weren't for naught."

That's good to know, though that timescale sounds a little excessive.

"It's useful for me too," I said. "You're showing me how much I've got to learn."

"It pleases me to hear it."

"If nothing else, I've got some long-term goals to aim for."

"If you would, then I, Soim, will carry this pride with me for seven lifetimes."

That's so over-the-top.

"When you said you can feel your decline coming on, did you mean you might turn senile soon?"

It made me sad to imagine that when I next saw Soim, I might find him a feeble old man confined to his bed.

"No, that won't happen. It's just that my body has already weakened, and I feel my alertness and concentration will decline next."

"I see. That's a relief. Even if you're not fit for battle, I want you to live long."

"I'm far from tired of life. I plan to stay here in the royal capital for a time, where I might discover new things the world has yet to offer me."

So Soim's going to live nearby?

I wondered whether his current clothes were what he chose to wear for a carefree life of leisure. As long as his health didn't fade, the royal capital was so awash with suspense and violence that a walk through the city streets would also help to keep his mind sharp.

II

"Yuri, I need to tell you something."

I was visiting Ho Company's office near the end of February when Caph approached me, looking deadly serious. That said, Caph always looked serious, so it wasn't necessarily anything important.

"All right."

"Can we go to a meeting room?"

"Sure."

I followed Caph as he walked in the direction of a meeting room.

After climbing some wooden stairs, we reached a room.

The windows were open to let the air in, making it easy for me to lean out and check if the outside walls were clear. If I found a listening device, it wouldn't be the first time. Although there weren't any wireless transmitters, it was possible to stick something like a stethoscope to the wall and listen through it like a tin can telephone.

Last time that had happened, I'd tried following the wire to find out who was listening. There always had to be someone at the other end to hear the conversation in real time, after all. Unfortunately, the once-taut wire had been

severed by the eavesdropper, causing it to drop to the ground.

I closed the window firmly to soundproof the room. The glass would still let the sunlight in, but it was cheap, warped glass that distorted the view of the outside.

I took a seat. "What'd you want to talk about?"

"Last night, a ship docked in Suomi after trading with the Albio Republic. I got word of it by eagle mail." Caph placed a sealed envelope down on the table. "I think you should be the first to read it. It's a message from Lyrica."

After she'd graduated from the Cultural Academy the year before, I'd asked Lyrica Kuklillison to take up residence in Albio. As the scale of our trading increased, I had to rapidly find more Terolish speakers.

Harol couldn't help anymore because I'd needed him to embark for the new continent, which meant that sailors arriving in the Albio Republic would need someone else to be their Terolish speaker. Besides, we'd ordered a new ship, so someone needed to be there to periodically check it was being built according to our specifications.

Having someone living in Albio permanently also meant we could make bids for seized ships being sold at auction.

When a ship was attacked by a privateering pirate ship, there was often a fierce battle that resulted in the ship being damaged, set on fire, and ultimately sunk. However, sometimes they'd surrender on the spot because they knew victory was impossible, resulting in it being captured unharmed. Those vessels were taken to Albio's main island to be sold at auction.

"Can I read it now?" I asked.

"Yeah, I'll wait."

He's going to hang around?

"You can get on with work if you want. This could take me several minutes."

"No, I'll wait."

So he is waiting. I'm surprised he's not busy.

"Okay then..."

I began to read.



I: General Matters

An order was placed for the same amount of printed holy books as previously.

As initially planned, sales are primarily being made to nations on the continent farthest from the Papal State. However, a Carulgi archbishop complained to parliament demanding the content be modified to align with the Carulgi Sect's scripture.

Parliament has not pressured us or made demands. If anything, they sympathize and consider the church unreasonable. As such, no action was taken. We await your instructions.

The complaint was triggered because demand for cheap holy books also exists in the Albio Republic, so some of the holy books circulate back here after being sold. We received a list of the desired changes upon request, which I have enclosed with this letter.

(Note: Despite having read the holy book and the requested changes myself, I'm completely unable to understand their objections. Is there context I'm lacking?)

II: Information

An order has been issued to assemble a new crusade force. However, there's confusion and conflict within the Papal State between those demanding more war and those wishing for peace.

The situation was equally confusing to their allies. They were issued an order to assemble their forces, but no

specifics were given.

Here in the republic, there's fear that invaders may come here next, rather than Shiyalta.

III: Goods

Spices from the Korlan Dragon Empire were entering the marketplace in high quantities, so we purchased some. However, it will be difficult to ensure a steady supply.

(Note: I expect they can be marketed to women. The smell is very pleasing.)

Although the holy book is selling well, many retailers have informed us that there is demand for a version with more attractive binding, even if the price is higher.

Since I didn't know what specific changes they wanted, I requested a design proposal. I wasn't pleased with it, but it is enclosed with this letter.

We also had a request from other merchants to sell a plain version with no cover. They said the price may stay the same.

(Note: Although the current design was Ms. Ether's preference, I agree that it's rather dull.)

IV: Ships

We have received the Meerte XIV.

It will be sent back once loaded with goods.



I see.

Judging by my previous run-in with him, Epitaph Palazzo of the crusader forces was a little crazy. Crusades were generally spaced five years or so apart, but it seemed Epitaph wanted a new one every year. I could guess that he was leading the pro-war faction while everyone else in the pro-peace faction was

saying, "Oh, come on, we need a break."

The two sides were directly at odds, but probably not aggressive toward each other, and any bewilderment was probably exclusive to the pro-peace side.

Epitaph Palazzo had attempted to organize a crusade the previous year too, but it had been too much to ask. The demand had probably been unreasonable this year too, but he must've pushed ahead and ordered a crusade force to assemble regardless.

As hard as it was to imagine, he'd ordered a new crusade himself the previous year—four months ago—without getting the pope's approval. When his demand couldn't be met, a new order had been issued. That time, it had been in the pope's name, canceling Epitaph's previous orders.

Lyrica's report suggested that the same circumstances were playing out for a second time.

It paid to be cautious, but I wasn't sure what to make of it. Going over the pope's head to create a crusade force was such an absurd thing to do. I doubted the other nations were taking him too seriously.

Then there was the dispute with the Carulgi Sect. Ms. Ether would be most capable of responding to their objections.

The Carulgi Sect was a school of religion founded by a warrior monk known as Carulginion Pestoparsley, but a careful look at its teachings revealed many irregularities.

Like many people with radical ideas, he tended to unconsciously disregard or reject anything that didn't fit with his own opinions. Specifically, he completely ignored everything written in the Book of Egin and the Book of Nuom while establishing his new religious creeds.

This inconsistent approach was adopted as a reaction to the Xurxes Holy Empire's insistence on following the teachings of Yeesus to the letter, which had resulted in extreme political policies and much suffering among the populace. When Carulginion had started a new sect, it had been to oppose those policies. In his mind, religion was a tool for bringing happiness to the masses, rather than a rigid set of rules to be enforced.

The early Catholica Sect was a product of a type of thinking known as Straism. According to Straism, scripture could only be interpreted correctly if the time period in which it had been written was studied first, along with other literature from that same period. Those studies would establish proper context for the events being described. The faithful were therefore expected to adopt this mindset as they made earnest attempts to understand the true meanings being the teachings of Yeesus. This deepened the understanding of the religion, and prevented individual theologians from attempting to distort the teachings to suit their own biases. In that sense, Catholica was born from ideas radically opposed to the thinking behind Carulgi.

When Catholica appeared some time after Carulgi's creation, yet another type of thinking was applied. Ms. Ether's Me Sect was an attempt at continuing the early ideas of Catholica.

The creeds of the Carulgi Sect were appealing because people found them inspirational, but it was undeniable that they didn't hold up to scrutiny. We couldn't distribute text that would spread those teachings across the continent.

"There's nothing unusual in here, but let's keep it between us. The important sales stuff is in section III," I said as I handed Caph the letter.

"Hmm."

I waited for Caph to finish reading. Eventually, he made it clear he was done by putting the paper back down on the desk.

"I know a designer who does good work binding the culture books. We could talk to her," I suggested.

We were still selling erotic fiction to the Cultural Academy. We'd also expanded to ordinary literature too, now that Pina Colata had decided she'd rather write clean—albeit bizarre—fiction for a more general audience.

"If she won't help, we could just let them solve the problem over there. Our letter designs proved popular, but aesthetic sense is shaped by the environment people grow up in. Whatever we come up with, there's always a chance it won't be quite what people there want. We've got to remember we're selling to Kulati."

In handwritten copies of the scripture, it was common for each chapter to start on a new page with the first letter being large, stylized, and decorated with colors. Rather than making use of calligraphy, they'd turn the letter into artwork by extending the outer strokes to create floral patterns, applying gold leaf to make the letter flashy, or adding a checkered pattern to the body of the letter.

Although our holy books printed with movable type couldn't include gold leaf like written copies on parchment did, we could print large, hollow letters and paint inside those sections with bright colors. It allowed us to add a little color to a book that was otherwise monochrome throughout, making the whole work more appealing. Though it wasn't strictly necessary, the readers would get some additional enjoyment, and I personally like that kind of extra flair.

"For now, let's have a hundred or so of the copies in production sent over unbound. We'll sell them at the same price," I said.

In other words, our binding process was unnecessary. I felt involved in the holy scripture's creation because I was like a director overseeing the process of publishing it with movable type, but I'd have to put my conflicted feelings aside. As much as I preferred a neat cover that aligned with Ms. Ether's preferences, I knew that many customers were looking for something more intellectual, artistic, or upmarket, and we were doing a poor job of meeting those demands.

"And then there's the Korlan spices... Sounds interesting, but I'm not sure they'd actually sell," Caph said.

I couldn't see why they wouldn't. "You think there's a problem?"

"The witches are tightening up their purse strings. You know the sales of paper are growing in the royal capital lately."

"Yeah, that's right."

"Even the people who insisted on sticking with high-quality parchment are switching to Ho paper now to save cash. We know the witches aren't struggling, but they can't be as wealthy as they used to be."

Hmm... I wonder why. I'd know if the royal castle had drastically changed how various rights were distributed, so it couldn't be that. I couldn't think of any

reason the witches would be seeing a drop in revenues. "Why's that? Did their earnings fall for some reason?"

"I think it's because the future's uncertain. Apparently it's making it difficult for stores and merchants to afford protection money. That has a ripple effect on the witches."

"Hmm... But what about the spice?"

"Oh. Well, we're not going to be selling it forever. Whatever we get in stock, we'll sell it eventually."

"Think there'll be demand for it at the high-class brothels?" I could easily imagine some of the sensual rooms in the high-end brothels making use of foreign spices.

"Oh..." It was rare to see Caph surprised. "Not a bad idea. I think they'll buy it."

"Then we're done with this discussion?"

I'd have to take Lyrica's report and present it to the royal castle. I didn't know whether it made any difference, but I didn't want anyone to think I was keeping secrets.

"No, there's something else to talk about."

"What? Paper?"

"Um, well..."

Huh? What?

It was rare that Caph would find it hard to say something. He knew I wouldn't get mad over little mistakes or failures, so he normally just told me. A mistake big enough to make him hesitate would have to be something major. Now I was worried.

"The thing is..." Caph began.

"Whatever it is, just say it. You're scaring me," I said.

Caph suddenly rose from his chair and bowed. He dipped so low that his forehead smacked against the desk, rattling violently.

"Whoa. What's wrong?"

What's going on?

"I want to marry Beaule! I'd like your approval!" Caph cried loudly.

It was so sudden.

Huh? Beaule? Beaule Emanon? The girl who's always sliding beads around on her abacus? My cousin from my mom's side of the family? "Are you for real?"

Caph lifted his head while keeping his hands flat on the desk. "I'm serious. I want to marry her."

"That's...fine. Why wouldn't it be?" Why's he so worked up? Go ask her parents, not me. She's my uncle's daughter. Save some of that intensity for when you go talk to him.

"Then you approve?"

"It doesn't bother me." Why would he need permission from me? Well, this is assuming Beaule agrees—I hope he's not abusing his power as her boss. "Just to be sure, Beaule wants to marry you, doesn't she?"

"Of course."

Hmm... Beaule's birthday wasn't long ago, so she only just turned eighteen. I can't remember exactly how old Caph is, but he's definitely over thirty. That set off a few alarm bells for me. I wonder whether Suzuya'll be okay with the idea...

"Have you two already done, uh, you know...husband and wife stuff?" I couldn't say it straight.

"We haven't."

"Be honest. I won't be angry."

"I'd never be so bold. She's the cousin of my boss, who's also heir to the Ho family."

That sounded convincing, so I accepted that they hadn't. Caph was proving himself a man of integrity. Meanwhile, I was doing it with a princess. Whether or not they'd done certain things could have a big effect on her parents' reaction—especially given the age gap.

"Okay, fine... Given that it's you, Caph, I'll put in a good word to her parents."

"Y-You mean it?!" Caph's face was full of hope. I'd never seen him look so happy.

"But first, call Beaule in here so you two can explain how you fell for each other."

"Um..." The joy disappeared from his face.

"I've got to know. Otherwise, what'll I say to her parents?"

Caph still looked reluctant. "Oh, yeah... I'll fetch her."

With that, he left the room.

This should be good. I'm going to make sure Caph never hears the end of it. You know, it's just one cause for celebration after another lately.

Interlude II — Felling a White Birch

Today would be the start of an unforgettable two months.

I, Komimi Culotte, was in the head office opposite the Ho family residence.

I'd been summoned there by Yuri Ho. We knew each other well enough that I could sit at the small table without waiting to be offered a seat. He'd been looking out the window as he waited for me, and he remained standing even after I'd settled myself.

Yuri Ho looked at me and suddenly asked, "Komimi, isn't it about time you joined Ho Company?"

I remained perfectly calm. I'd been expecting this conversation for some time. I didn't have to think about my response because I'd already decided to turn the offer down. "I appreciate the invitation, but that's not possible."

"Ah... I see." Yuri Ho sighed softly. He pulled out a chair and sat down. "But why not?"

"I'm sure you're already aware, but my family isn't like the Kuklillisons."

I knew all about Lyrica Kuklillison. Although I'd been the first one to cooperate with Yuri Ho and work for him, Kuklillison had officially joined Ho Company after she'd graduated. She was now stationed in the Albio Republic, where she had a management role.

The Kuklillison family had ceased to be witches as part of the arrangement. Once her family members had made preparations to move, they'd handed in letters of resignation and left the royal capital. It wasn't quite a vanishing act, but it wasn't too far off. Since the Kuklillison family had produced few children for the last two generations, there were only five family members who'd relocated—Lyrica, her parents, and her grandparents. Other than Lyrica herself, the rest of them were being looked after by the company in Ho Province.

"I guess not. The Culottes are more than mid-tier—they're too powerful. It wouldn't work out like it did for Lyrica."

"Indeed, it wouldn't."

It was fine for the Kuklillisons because they'd only ever handled the most trifling of responsibilities. That definitely wasn't the case for my family. Many of them had important roles at the royal castle, and they certainly couldn't all quit at once. No matter how much the Ho Company paid management staff, it would be far too little to sustain all of us.

"If that's your concern, then I won't make them quit."

"Huh?" I failed to hide my shock. "Why? You didn't trust Lyrica, but I'm fine?"

"I was drawn to Lyrica because she speaks Terolish. Due to the secrecy that surrounds trade negotiations, she regularly handles information that's valuable to witches. You, on the other hand, will be publishing literary works, like those written by Pina. I don't care who finds out about any of that. As has been the case so far, you won't be given any information about the operation of the company that you don't need. I don't even leave any traces of important information in the royal capital's offices anyway. Even if you betray me, the harm would be minimal."

"Ah... I suppose so."

I was a little offended by the suggestion that I might betray him someday, but Yuri Ho was making considerable concessions by inviting me to join the company.

Still, I could have done without his generous offer—it only made it harder to stick to my plan to turn him down.

"But obviously, any witch in a management role can't work for both sides," Yuri Ho added.

"I know that, but... I can't exactly cut ties with my family while I'm still living in the royal capital. And I'm generally biased toward witches. I might work to further their aims."

"I wouldn't mind," Yuri Ho replied.

"What? Wouldn't it cause all kinds of trouble?"

Yuri Ho was the witches' enemy. Of course he'd mind.

"People should be able to express themselves however they like. That's one thing I don't expect to control. We're publishing artistic works, not how-to guides. The buyers are going to be largely witches, so it'd be ideal if we put out books aligned with their opinions. It's what we've been doing this whole time anyway. I don't remember ever prohibiting a certain book because it presented the witches' view of an issue, nor have I ever encouraged more books that criticize witches."

"But..."

That much was true. We'd published a few books where Knight Academy students were villains who committed evil acts, but Yuri Ho had never complained. Though his dislike for scenes of a certain nature tended to show on his face.

"I just want you to print books that will sell. Interesting books, I should say. We're close to having a printing system set up for Shanish. Rent a building somewhere and train authors. Pina isn't much of a lineup by herself."

"What's wrong with Pina?"

"Her recent book about a Cultural Academy student falling in love with a caterpillar obviously isn't going to appeal to many people. I'm all for new ideas, but we can't let every book be like that."

He's got a point...

There'd been alarmingly few orders for copies of that particular book. A few avid fans were studying it, but the majority of Cultural Academy students wanted something they could giggle about with their friends.

It wasn't my job to worry about profits, so low sales just meant less work for me. Still, it was disappointing to see it sell less than a tenth of what our more successful books did. I felt sad knowing Pina had gone to the trouble of writing it.

"You don't have to answer right away. How about...you give me your response within a month. Use that time to really think about whether you want to join your family's business—it'll be one of the most important decisions you ever make in life."

"I don't need you to tell me that."

It was taken for granted that any witch would work for their family's business. Doing otherwise was always a monumental decision.

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I'd normally hail a cab to get home, but I decided to walk today while I thought about what Yuri Ho had said.

As I trudged through the streets of Sibiak, I saw a roadside store under attack by thugs.

Three men with clubs wrapped in metal wire were standing outside and grinning. The store's contents were being smashed to pieces by a similar club. The owner—having been badly beaten—looked on in a daze, knowing there was nothing he could do.

Passersby looked upon the scene with disgust, but no one stopped or reported the incident. Here in the heart of the city, there'd be soldiers from the second order of the royal guard posted somewhere nearby. If they hadn't intervened already, then it was clear that this attack had been ordered by witches. There was no point in reporting it.

Scenes like this weren't a common sight for any one person walking through the Sibiak, but such attacks occurred daily throughout the city as a whole.

Some part of me still felt that such onslaughts were a wicked act that should be stopped, but I knew they were part of the system that ensured my livelihood. As inconvenient as that system might've been for the city dwellers, witches depended on it. Maybe I should've recognized the violent events as an act of justice.

I'd probably been born lucky.

The most intelligent of the Cultural Academy students would refine their ideas during their time at the academy, as it was a requirement for anyone wishing to join the intellectual classes.

Knights thought of us as unhinged individuals who'd never known right and

wrong to begin with, but that wasn't true. Well, it applied to some of us, certainly, but most girls had ordinary moral values.

The problem was that after graduating and beginning our careers as witches, we'd never speak with people like Lilly, or girls born to knight families—like Sham—again. We'd be surrounded by adults with their own warped sense of justice. We'd gradually let ourselves be influenced as we were caught between a desire for self-justification and the financial realities faced by our families. Eventually, we'd think like the adults.

I knew how it worked, yet I wanted to be a witch all the same. The reason was simple: I didn't want to give up on being an intellectual when the alternative was filthy menial labor. I was proud of my wit, and I wanted to use it in my work. I also wanted a life surrounded by culture. Remaining a witch was the only way to guarantee these things.

Except now I'd been offered another means of securing an income without becoming a witch. It could be the one thing that many Cultural Academy students wished for, but never found—an alternative.

As I turned these thoughts over in my head, I realized I'd come to a stop. I was staring at the thugs attacking the store.

I've got things to do. I can't just stand around here.

As I began walking hurriedly toward the Cultural Academy, I noticed an elderly man walking on the other side of the street.

There was something very unusual about him. Despite his advanced age, he wasn't using a cane. In fact, he walked with his back straight, the way a young Knight Academy student might. He passed over the cobbles in a way I found captivating. His outfit—something that resembled hunting gear and a gentleman's hat—was something that younger, middle-aged men often wore, but it somehow suited him exceptionally well.

Once I'd seen him, I couldn't take my eyes off him. What did he do to age so gracefully? I wondered.

The old man didn't seem to realize that everyone else was deliberately ignoring the attack on the store. He headed straight toward it, coming close to

passing the man who was standing on lookout in front of the store. The thug put his foot forward in front of the old man. He obviously wanted to trip him up. They were here to send a message—to restore the public's respect for the witches. Someone who failed to show that had to be punished for it.

It made me feel ill. I started to wonder whether I could step in, tell them I was a Culotte, and save the old man.

The old man's shin hit the thug's outstretched foot, but he must've been ready, because he didn't trip. In fact, he didn't so much as stumble.

"Hey! Do you know who we are, you old fart?!" the thug yelled a clichéd line as he grabbed the old man near his collar.

The old man reacted with only a slight movement of his body. The thug dropped to knees, but he hadn't been struck.

"Huh?"

The man grabbed the assailant's shoulder, causing his entire arm to twitch and release his grip on the old man's clothes.

Now the two other lookouts had noticed something was up and were approaching. The man on the left raised his club high, ready to strike.

He's about to get hit across the head!

The old man didn't move. Rather than dodge, he adjusted his grip on the first ruffian's shoulder. His thumb sank into the man's body like a knife.

"Arrgh!"

The thug screeched like he was in incredible pain. Then, somehow, his legs straightened like they were spring-loaded. As he leaped to his feet, he formed a barrier between the old man and his comrade, who was rapidly approaching with a club. Unfortunately, it was too late for the second man to stop his swing, so he ended up smacking the first one hard on the shoulder.

"Urgh!"

Meanwhile, another assailant approached from the right, aiming his weapon at the old man. The old man drew his hand away in the same instant. The assaults came at virtually the same time. As the thug-turned-barrier got hit

from the left, the older gentleman looked like he'd be vulnerable to the attack from the right. However, he casually stepped aside, like he was taking a relaxing stroll, and smoothly placed his hand at the base of the club.

"Uhwhoa?!" With this strange cry, the third hoodlum seemed to somersault about the old man's hand before crashing to the ground on his back.

It was like the old man had used magic.

After hitting his comrade-turned-makeshift-human-shield with his club and seeing his other accomplice dealt with so effortlessly, the remaining man lost his will to fight. Perhaps he was so used to relying on superior numbers that he didn't know how to react when facing a strong opponent alone. He simply stood there, holding his weapon.

The old man grabbed the tip of the club and pulled it from his grasp like he was taking something from a child. Even as someone with no combat experience, I knew it shouldn't have been possible to take someone's weapon from them so easily. Yet, the thug released his grip on it completely when just a slight twist had been applied.

The old man cast the club aside, then grabbed the ruffian's empty right hand. With a light pull, he sent him tumbling forward. Once the thug was on the ground, the old man applied a little force and bent the other man's arm into a position that looked very unnatural, then released him.

The thug on the ground was clutching his shoulder and groaning in pain. I couldn't tell whether he had a broken bone, a torn tendon, or a dislocation, but it was clear he couldn't use his arm anymore.

Then the old man turned his attention to the store. Just as he was about to step inside, however, another hooligan rushed out of the building, his club held high. He swung it downward, but the old man caught his wrist and performed some odd movements with his whole body that swept the thug off his feet. The would-be assailant's body seemed to defy the laws of physics as it flew vertically upward, reaching as high as the building's second floor. The fall alone was enough to cause serious injury. As the thug hit the ground shoulder first, he cried out in pain, then lost consciousness.

After the old man entered the store, another body came flying out. This one

wasn't running—he'd been thrown, and he flew head over heels. There was a commotion inside the building, as if things were being broken, and then the old man walked out of the store.

He wasn't even out of breath as he used his wrinkled hand to brush the dust from his clothes where he'd been grabbed. Then he straightened his hat, which was just slightly askew after the scuffle. His movements looked well-refined and perfectly harmonious, like there was nothing to add to or remove from them.

Despite all that had just happened, the old man didn't appear worked up at all. He simply continued on his way as the crowd parted to let him through. The entire fight (if you could call it that) had only taken a few moments. He'd used one brief action per thug, each lasting less than ten seconds, and it had all been over within about a minute.

Like a moth drawn to a flame, I felt compelled to follow him. Whatever I'd had to do before I'd encountered him wasn't important anyhow.

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The old man had been walking the way I'd originally come from. In other words, I ended up back outside Ho Company's office. The old man continued until he'd entered the Ho family residence across the street.

Unable to follow him into the residence, I instead went looking for Yuri Ho in the office. Luckily, he was still there, looking over some accounting paperwork or something behind the reception desk.

"Oh? What's up?" Yuri Ho asked when he realized I'd returned.

"I wanted to ask you about something."

Since there was no need to keep it secret, I recounted the entirety of the strange incident I'd just seen on the street.

"Oh, that's Soim. He's my spear teacher."

"What sort of person is he?"

"He's one of my family's retainers. He's retired and enjoying his old age in the royal capital. I think what you saw were his attempts at starting a grassroots revolution."

If he was a Ho family warrior, then it was no wonder he was so strong.

"Isn't he getting himself into trouble?"

"Not really. One of the old men from your family tried picking a fight with him, but Soim beat him up barehanded. You're not here to lecture me for that, are you? Your people were the ones who showed up with weapons and started the fight."

That does sound a little pathetic...

Yuri Ho continued, "They need revenge of some sort, so they're trying to bother him with regular little ambushes, but Soim probably enjoys it. Heh. I bet he's overjoyed when he finds himself in the middle of a big fight."

He laughed happily, like he was talking fondly of his friend's adventures.

The idea of being attacked on the street after making an enemy of the witches was enough to send a chill down my spine, but this old man took it in stride. It was as if he thought no matter what assassin they might send after him, they'd be like a mere child to someone as strong as him. Well, maybe he was right.

"Wow, okay."

"If you're interested, I could introduce you to him."

"Huh?"

"You're into old men like him, aren't you? I remember Pina saying something about it long ago."

"What?!" What has Pina been telling people?! I just happen to like some older characters, and a lot of the characters I like just happen to be old. That's all.

"I like them in b-books, that's all. Don't get fiction confused with reality!"

Yuri Ho flinched a little. "You're turning red and tripping over your words... It doesn't have to be a big deal. You could just go on a short date with him."

"A date?! Listen here, what kind of woman do you think I am? I'm a dignified lady. How can you suggest that so easily?!"

Even when I protested, Yuri Ho's approach didn't change at all. "No, you've

got it all wrong. Soim's every bit as old as he looks. It's not like going out with a horny young man. I don't know why you think there's anything improper about enjoying a pleasant trip out with an aged gentleman like him."

Now he'd left me speechless. My head rapidly cooled like a boiling pot being topped up with cold water.

"Soim lost his wife so long ago. He never gets any opportunities to talk with young women, so I bet he'd love talking to you. You wouldn't have to see him again if he bores you. But if you never meet him, you'll never know."

That made sense. Just because I enjoyed some tea or a meal with him, didn't mean anything more would come of it. When I saw other people do similar things, I simply assumed they were spending the day with their grandfather or great-grandfather.

"If you really weren't interested in him, I wouldn't argue, but you must have some interest if you came back here to ask his name. And take it from me, you won't find another man like him. If you turn down this offer out of embarrassment, you'll never get another chance. This should be an easy choice."

"I'll meet him. Introduce me."

The sound of my own words took me by surprise as they left my mouth. It was in my nature to be cautious and argumentative, but it was like my true feelings had come to the fore, pushing all those tendencies aside and taking over.

"All right. I'll talk to him," Yuri Ho said simply.

As he went back to looking at the documents, he broke into an amused smile.



It was nighttime a week later, and I was in a beautiful dress as my carriage pulled up outside the Ho residence.

My family's circumstances meant that I was well-accustomed to wearing dresses and attending parties of various sorts, but I was such a nervous wreck that I struggled to climb down from the carriage. A date with a man was a new experience.

"Please take my hand, young lady."

The old man was already waiting for me outside the carriage. He held out his wrinkled hand in an unusual position that made it easy for me to grasp.

"Th-Thank...you."

I nervously took his hand, then let him support my weight as I descended the two steps from the carriage to the ground.

When the old man closed the carriage door behind me, the cab driver took that as a signal to leave in search of a new passenger. The Culotte family had its own carriages, but I'd decided it was better not to use them for a meeting like this.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. My name is Soim."

Unlike before, the old man was dressed in a chic, semiformal black suit and a black hat, which he removed as he greeted me gracefully.

"Um, I'm Komimi Culotte. I'm...honored to meet you today."

"Heh. That makes two of us. There's no greater honor than to receive an invitation from a young lady such as yourself. May I call you Komimi?"

"Yes, of course... Then may I also call you Soim?"

"Yes, that's quite all right," Soim replied with a warm smile.

I was worried he might not be capable of conversation, but he was proving to have a way with words.

I'd heard he was from a long line of fighters, but he didn't fit the stereotype of a man from a warrior family. His speech wasn't brief and boorish, nor was he impolite toward women. What I actually felt from him was the patience of a competent and confident adult man.

"Young Master—oh, I mean Lord Yuri—made a reservation for us at a restaurant that he recommended. The service there won't compare to some of the more stylish places here in the capital, so I hope that it won't offend you."

"No, not at all. I'm looking forward to it."

"Then I suggest we head there at once. I have a carriage prepared for us.

Please come this way."

Soim took my gloved hand, and we began to slowly walk. I'd been barely able to keep up with his brisk pace when I'd followed him a week earlier, but this time his steps matched mine. We were headed for a carriage emblazoned with the Ho family crest.

Soim boarded first, took the lamp that was inside the carriage, brought it out to light the area beneath my feet, and extended a hand to assist me. "May I offer you my hand?"

On his palm, I felt a scar that wasn't like the wrinkles. An old wound that felt like the result of gripping a blade had been carved into it, serving as proof of his bravery in battle. I took his hand without hesitation, and he pulled me upward a little. Before I knew it, he'd guided me up the steps and into the carriage.

When we reached the restaurant, we were immediately shown straight to a private room.

I was familiar with this place. It was one of the royal capital's better-thanaverage restaurants. Since it wasn't quite high-class, the atmosphere was relaxed and the prices reasonable.

It was the sort of place someone as smart as Yuri Ho might choose. Rather than just looking at the quality of the restaurant, he'd made some careful political considerations too. Through complicated circumstances, the building that housed the restaurant had fallen into the Enfillet family's territory. That particular family was involved in politics and filled many influential posts within the royal castle, but they had little involvement in trading in the city. There was a fairly high chance that the family hadn't been a victim of Soim's grassroots revolution that Yuri Ho had mentioned.

After we'd exchanged two or three pieces of basic information to introduce ourselves to each other, the starter arrived.

"Hmm, I see," Soim said, sounding very interested in his salad with its somewhat pretentiously applied dressing.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

"No, it's just that it's my first time entering a restaurant of this sort in the royal capital. I'm quite impressed by this dainty dish."

"Is that so? Didn't you live in this city during your Knight Academy days?"

Anyone with a knighthood had to have studied at the academy, with no exceptions.

"Yes, of course. But I spent all my time crossing spears with male friends back then, so even when I had gone out, it had always been to some rough place known for its large portion sizes and cheap alcohol. I never went near anywhere like this."

As he spoke, Soim lifted a bite of his dish to his mouth with his fork. It wasn't exactly textbook manners, but it was a precise gesture that wasn't at all boorish regardless.

"But as my appetite declines with age, this sort of food suits me better. This is a new experience for me."

"Oh, really? I'm glad to hear it."

It seemed to me that Soim was enjoying this new discovery, rather than just saying it to be polite. Yuri Ho said he'd researched the tastes of older people, and he'd clearly done his job well.

Soim seemed to enjoy the taste of the vegetables. After sharing some more of his thoughts on the food, he quickly cleared his plate.

A meat dish was brought to us not long after—roasted and bite-size cuts from a deer's thigh, with a thick green sauce drizzled over it. Beside the meat rested three glazed carrots.

Soim ate one morsel of the meat, then said, "By the way, Komimi, I heard you publish books."

"Yes, I work for Yuri. But I don't write the books myself—I just work on assembling them."

"Young Master told me so. In fact, he let me borrow a copy so I could read it."

For a moment, my brain stopped working. What? Hold on. That can't be right. He read one of them? No, no. No, no, no, no, no. They're kept secret from

everyone outside White Birch Dormitory. Has Yuri Ho lost his mind?!

"I'd never read such a book before," Soim continued. "The author had some interesting ideas. I'd heard of stories about girls and creatures falling in love with each other, but never one about a girl falling for an insect."

Oh, phew. It was the clean one—I should've guessed. Thank goodness. That scared me.

"Oh, ah, I see. You read the book? You didn't have to..." I was so flustered that my response sounded a little odd.

I was genuinely surprised that he'd read it. It sounded like he'd read the whole book just for the sake of today so he'd know more about my job. It was a simple thing to do, but reading an entire book was still several hours of work—especially if it wasn't the sort of book that he'd have any interest in. It was a huge amount of effort, and far beyond what any normal person would do.

"Thank you," I added. This felt like the natural thing to say.

"It was nothing. I'm retired, after all. I have plenty of free time."

"No, reading an entire book is a lot of work to go through for a young person you've never met. If you read it just for me...that makes me very happy."

"Heh heh." Soim laughed happily. "It pleased me more than I expected to see the face of a young lady such as yourself smile like a blossoming flower."

Smile like a blossoming flower...? Did I really look that happy?

"If I'm honest, it took me three whole days to finish, but it was all worth it."

"What did you like about the book?"

"Well..." Soim spent a short while thinking. "If I had to say, it would be the afterword."

The...afterword? Not the story? What did the afterword even say...? Despite putting the book together myself, I couldn't remember it.

"When I finished reading it, at first, I wasn't sure why the girl had become a pupa, turned into a butterfly, and left the dormitory. If she merely wanted to physically leave, then that should've been easy. She was beautiful, exceptionally

talented, and healthy—if it was freedom she desired, there should have been nothing to stop her from leaving for the outside world. I read the afterword while still holding these doubts about the story's conclusion, and it said that a conversation the author had with Young Master was what had motivated her to write the book. When a caterpillar enters a pupa, its body dissolves, and it spends some time in a liquid state within that shell before rebuilding its body in the form of a butterfly. I remember the sense of realization I felt. In short, the girl didn't change her physical form and leave—she killed herself. More to the point, a new life was born from her. The odd conclusion made sense to me once I'd realized that."

I was left speechless, my mouth hanging open. I hadn't even considered that interpretation. In all honesty, I hadn't accepted the conclusion. The concept of a human metamorphosing into a butterfly was so difficult to grasp that I hadn't been sure whether to take it literally or interpret it as a metaphor. I'd simply felt it was deliberately confusing. Really, my final thought on the book had been, *Oh dear*, *Pina's writing is taking another weird turn*.

But Soim had given it some serious thought. He'd been far more earnest and open-minded than I'd been when he tried to understand the story.

"I think that's a wonderful interpretation. I'm sure that Pina, the author, will be happy to hear it." I truly meant it.

"Oh yes, she's the friend you share a dorm room with, isn't she?"

"Yes. I love her books. I suppose you could say I've been chained to her ever since she made me read one."

I'd been the first reader of Pina's maiden work. I could even call myself her first fan.

Pina's handwriting was awful, even back then. I'd been trained to write neatly at a young age, so after I'd finished reading it, I'd taken on the task of writing it up neatly in my enthusiasm. It had all been downhill from there. I gradually began handling all of the tasks related to Pina's works, which became more of a burden as her reputation grew.

Around the time I met Yuri Ho, all of my time outside of lectures had been consumed by book management. I'd make a clean copy whenever Pina finished

writing, and the rest of my time was spent looking for copies that had been borrowed and never returned so I could pass them to whoever was next in line. I must've chased after borrowers like a debt collector hundreds of times.

Looking back, it was hard to see how I hadn't lost my mind. Despite how much I'd hated that job, I'd never considered quitting. It must've been my love for the stories Pina wrote and my desire to see them read by as many people as possible that had kept me motivated. When a student finished reading a new work and returned it with a satisfied look on their face, it felt so fulfilling that all my exhaustion would disappear.

"She must be a true friend. You should cherish such relationships. Even after all these years, I still talk of my student days when I meet up with my old school friends. I'm sure it sounds ridiculous when old men like me gather and get excited reminiscing about youthful days that ended eighty years ago, but...it's such fun. Life soon would be too boring if we didn't pursue enjoyment where we can find it."

"Oh, really? It must be nice to have old friends like that. I'll have to cherish mine, like you say."

I wonder if I'll ever have that sort of relationship with Pina...

I hoped so. The thought of us debating over culture books until we were both old women scared me a little, but at the same time, I hoped it would happen. Like Soim said, it was crucial to find sources of enjoyment in life. However odd that enjoyment might be, it was better than having none at all.

I was still thinking about it as I ate my last cut of meat. A simple taste of venison filled my mouth. This sort of food might have been what suited me best. It was far tastier than the overwrought dishes I usually ate at overpriced restaurants.

Or perhaps I enjoyed it more because I was dining with Soim. I looked at his plate and noticed that it was already empty. All that remained were the three glazed carrots, sitting at the edge of his plate just as they had been when they were first served.

"Don't tell me... Do you not like carrots, Soim?"

Soim winced in response. "You've learned my secret. I actually like carrots, but I've never been able to eat them when they're sweetened like this."

"Heh heh." I couldn't help but laugh at the embarrassed look on Soim's face. So he can't stand glazed carrots. That's an unexpected weakness. It's cute! What a cute old man! "Oh, pardon me. I didn't mean to laugh... I'm sorry."

"No, I quite understand. Now, why don't we ask for the next course?"

Soim raised his hand a little and glanced over at the waiter to signal that we wanted him to clear our table. It was an elegant gesture that suggested he was rapidly learning the customs of restaurants like this one.

"It seems it's time for us to part for tonight."

After we'd gotten off the carriage at a crossroads not far from my home, Soim removed his hat and bid me goodbye.

"Yes... I've enjoyed tonight," I replied. "I hope we can meet again two weeks from now."

"Please take care on the way back."

Soim returned his hat to his head and climbed back into the carriage. He had the driver leave quickly so as not to draw too much attention to me.

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The next day, Pina and I were sitting in the dorm room in our pajamas and facing each other.

After she'd heard my account of the evening, she nodded and shared her impressions in a husky voice. "Wow... He sounds like the exact sort of older gentleman you'd like, Komimi."

"Right?! And he even agreed to meet me again! Two weeks from now!"

"Isn't that nice?"

"Yep, it's really great. I can't believe someone like him exists."

I'd completely fallen for him. What I'd been looking for was a gentleman who grew more self-confident as he aged, and what I'd found had far surpassed

anything my weak imagination had been capable of envisioning. It was the absolute best.

"Hey, Pina. How about coming up with a character based on him? I think he'd make a good character."

"Now I think I know what people mean when they say love is a sickness. It's awful to see it affect someone close to me."

"What did you say?" I'd missed something she'd just said.

"I doubt I could come up with a character that would satisfy you. I'm not even gonna try."

"I guess..."

I wouldn't want her to write about a character like that in case they got killed. Also, if the lines he spoke didn't feel natural, I might've ended up critiquing her. It was probably better that she didn't try.

"So what did he say about The Curious Tale of a White Birch?"

"Oh, that's right..."

I'd been planning to tell her. Over the course of our conversation, I'd mentioned that Soim had read her book, but not what he'd said about it. I figured she'd be curious.

"Soim said that the afterword was interesting."

"The afterword?" Pina's reaction was similar to mine—she was puzzled at first. "That's one more odd thing that your date's said."

"Heh heh. He explained the reason." I repeated everything that Soim had said to me.



Once I'd finished, Pina nodded, looking impressed. "Oho. Okay, I see. It's impressive, I'll give him that. Not many people could read a whole book just for the sake of having a conversation starter. He's a strange old man."

"Right? And he'd given your story more thought than I had."

"Not that it matters. I wrote that book for my own sake, so I didn't expect anyone to understand it."

Pina's words struck me as strange, but that was nothing new.

"Though I didn't expect some old man who's never set foot in White Birch Dormitory to understand so much of it..." Pina gaze became distant as if some strange emotion had overcome her.

"You're saying he was correct?"

"Correct?"

"I mean, was it the interpretation you were aiming for?"

"No, it's not the right answer."

I'd thought his interpretation had been right on the mark, but apparently not.

"Like I said, I wrote it for myself, so I don't expect any reader to understand the true meaning. I knew that when I started writing it."

"What do you mean? Aren't novels supposed to be written in a way that people can understand?" At the very least, I thought that approach would make for a better novel.

"It's just one book. I should be allowed to write a story like that at least once in my life."

A once-in-a-lifetime book? I wondered if it had some special significance for Pina.

Back when she'd been writing it, Pina had said, "Maybe I shouldn't even bother turning this into a book." But, at the same time, she wasn't trying to prevent anyone from reading it. That was the sort of indifferent mindset she'd had while writing, but it turned out that many people had wanted to read it because it was a new work from her. Although we didn't get many orders,

there'd been enough of them to make it worth printing, and so a book was made.

In all honesty, I'd thought the book had been a total failure—a result of Pina not being at her best—until I'd heard Soim talk about it.

"The correct answer is that the girl in the story is based on me."

"What?!" I couldn't help but cry out at this unexpected confession.

I didn't understand how that was possible. Pina was nothing like the good-looking, flawless superhuman in her story. Her hair was always a frizzy mess she tied back, she was short, and she tended to stutter when talking to anyone besides the few people she could call friends. She probably couldn't talk to boys at all, except for Yuri Ho.

"It was my persona as a popular author, rather than who I really am."

"Oh... Okay, I can see that."

In the five hundred years or so of White Birch Dormitory's history of culture books, there were just five authors whose works were considered "must-read," but many believed that Pina would soon become the sixth. While it was too soon to include her in that list—no one knew whether her influence would remain after she graduated—it was practically a done deal. Since she was the sort of literary genius who appeared just once every hundred years, it was reasonable for her to depict herself as a once-in-a-decade beauty.

"That girl... No matter how beautiful and talented she was, she could never leave White Birch. The events of the story never went beyond the dormitory either. Your aged gentleman was right when he said it felt unnatural. But the reason she could never leave is because *I* couldn't leave. Culture books are works that can only exist within White Birch Dormitory. My literary talents are confined to these walls, and they'll cease to exist the moment I graduate. But Yuri has given me a way forward."

Yuri Ho?

"Yuri extended an invitation to me too," Pina continued. "That's what the book was about. I'll never be a witch, even after graduation—I'll be a professional author."

Oh... So that's it. Pina was going to give her life to writing. She'd decided to be an author.

"When I talked about a caterpillar becoming a butterfly in the afterword, I was thinking that I had to be reborn. Novels that circulate within this isolated world known as White Birch are limited to sentence syntax that everyone here can understand. I'll never be a professional author if my writing faces such restrictions. That's why I wrote a story where I killed off a girl based on myself. I can't face the outside world the way I am. I have to die and be born anew. I have to surrender my caterpillar form, dissolve myself within my pupa, and emerge as a butterfly. I can't give your date full marks, but he was mostly right. I'm impressed."

Now it all made sense. I felt like everything had fallen into place. As I'd read her novel, I'd spent the whole time thinking it wasn't like her usual work. That was because her aim had been the act of writing itself, rather than the creation of a book, so maybe it was wrong to even call it a finished work. The book wasn't the product—it was a byproduct created as she fulfilled another goal.

"I see. Then you've accepted his offer?"

Like me, Pina was from a fairly large witch family. This was a huge decision for her to make.

"Yes. I didn't say it in the afterword, but when Yuri invited me, we talked of something else in addition to a caterpillar's metamorphosis. That's what made me decide. Yuri really does know how to change someone's thinking. Now I know what Myalo means when she says he brings people under his thrall."

"What was it he said?"

"He told me there's a saying among warriors. It was a proverb I'd never heard before. 'A tiger dies, but leaves its hide; a warrior dies, but leaves their name. The thing an author leaves might be their soul. Is it really enough for you to produce children for your family without ever showing your talent to the world?' It sounded overblown, but I couldn't argue with him."

Wow... That's quite a line he gave her. He's something else.

"So that's how it is. I'll make sure my next work is something less eccentric

that everyone can enjoy. Why don't you try it too, Komimi?"

"Sorry. I haven't made my mind up. I have to admit, I'm being indecisive."

I liked my current work in the publishing business and the idea of making it my full-time job. But if I talked to my family about it, they'd definitely be against the idea, so taking up the offer would mean betraying them and going against their wishes. I wouldn't be comfortable with that. My mom would never stop talking about how disappointed she was, and my grandmother would yell at me. I could just picture it.

But I felt even worse when I considered the alternative option. Refusing Yuri's offer would doom me to a gloomy future. The path ahead of me would lead straight into a cold mire. I'd probably accept Yuri's invitation before long and start walking down whatever path he'd prepared for me instead. I was still thinking it over, but the longer I pondered, the closer I arrived to that conclusion.

"No, that's not what I'm asking," Pina said.

Isn't it? What does she mean? "What?"

"Your older gentleman friend. If you're enamored with him so much that you want me to make him a character, then why not write about him yourself?"

"Huh...?"

Why would Pina say a thing like that? She knows I'm not an author.

"Where'd you get that idea? I don't know how to write. I don't have the talent."

"It's true that writing a story requires some technical ability, but your idea is nonfiction. You could just write it up like a journal entry. The idea of a depraved girl pairing up with a good-looking old man is interesting enough as it is."

"No way..."

What's Pina talking about...? She isn't making any sense. Me, write? Why would she even suggest it? I often reacted like this to things Pina said, but this time it sounded more ridiculous than usual.

"Everyone seems to think of writing as a difficult chore, but it's not that hard.

And paper's cheap these days."

"But I don't know how. And I don't have time..."

"I guess so. Still, Komimi." Pina left a short pause for effect. "That wonder you feel is yours and yours alone."

It felt like her words pierced my heart. When I couldn't find the words to respond, Pina thought for a while then continued speaking.

"I could listen to what you've told me and write it all down, but the wonder would have been processed and reconstructed by me, so it wouldn't be the same feelings you'd experienced. So if you really want to capture the emotions you hold in your heart right now, you'll have to write them down yourself. I'm sure they'll bring you some comfort after he passes away."

Ah... Now I understood why Pina was making this absurd suggestion. Given how old Soim was, he'd get sick and die someday. I was only a little over twenty, so Soim surely had far less time ahead of him than I did. I'd go on living for a long time after he was gone. It felt wrong to think such a thing after meeting him just once, but the reality was undeniable.

The wonder I felt was solely mine. I realized now that whatever I got Pina to write, it wouldn't really be him. She'd no doubt do a good job of creating a dramatic story, but the character would be someone else who merely resembled him. My Soim existed within me alone.

"One day I'll write about the wonder I felt toward Yuri," Pina added. "It stirs my heart even now to remember it. I want to write a story that can stop someone's heart in the same way."

"I get it now..."

I thought Pina had already made hearts stop...but only in the realm of culture books where she had a talent for perverting the sexual interests of innocent girls. Though maybe it was wrong to call those interests sexual. It might have been more accurate to say she struck the reader's heart in a way that changed their views.

"Thank you. A journal...? I suppose it won't be a story that I'd want to show to other people anyway. I should write without worrying how it turns out."

"I am going to read it though."

"Why?"

Pina came back with a hypothetical question. "Did I ever write a single sentence that I didn't let you read? I don't think so. So you should let me read your work. I always let you be the first to read anything I write."

"What kind of reasoning is that? I've never insisted you let me read any of it." If anything, *she'd* always asked me to read her work.

"This isn't a debate; I'm putting my foot down. It's my right to read your sickly sweet, lovey-dovey story, even if it's without your permission. Don't be mad."

"I *am* mad!"

"Oh, there you go. Anyway, it's time to sleep."

Pina pushed me off her bed and lay down. She sure could be a cunning tyrant at times. I knew I couldn't change her mind now, and she'd already pulled the covers up to her head. I checked the clock and saw it was 2 a.m. already.

Okay, fine. It's not like I've got anything to hide from her. I'd already told her every detail of my romantic encounter, so showing her my writing wouldn't change anything.

I climbed up into the top bunk without any further argument and extinguished the lamp.

Chapter 6 — A Meeting over Dinner

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I'd taken a day off that day to visit a certain hot spring.

I'd been too busy to come here for quite some time, so the impression I got when I looked outside was quite different from before. The winter's bitter cold could chill to the bone here in the mountains, but the onset of spring had brought some warmth, and new shoots of growth were beginning to cautiously show themselves.

Though it was wonderful to see spring arrive, it did lessen the pleasure of bathing in a hot spring. There was nothing better than warming up my limbs after they'd been practically frozen by a kingeagle flight.

"What's wrong, Yuri?" Carol asked.

She was wearing the same bathrobe-like loungewear as me, her hair up, relaxing on a chaise lounge that resembled a couch. Her bare feet were resting side by side on its long footrest.

"I'm thinking over a complex problem," I told her.

"What sort of problem?"

"I'm thinking about how you can't enjoy that great feeling of plunging into a hot spring in the middle of winter when it's summer."

Carol chuckled in response. "That's not complex at all."

"Okay, maybe not."

In a sense, it was just a matter of aesthetics.

"It's like your brain slows down every time you come here," Carol said.

"Maybe it does. Because I'm always grappling with problems."

What had started with me making paper scraps in a small room had turned

into a massive company involved in so many fields that it was best described as a conglomerate. Caph did his best, but there were many times when he relied on my judgment. If I could get through the whole trip without thinking about work, it really would be relaxing.

"It's nice here. We can take a break," Carol said.

"Yeah. I like it when no one can contact us."

"It makes me feel like you belong to only me—I like that."

Now what's she saying?

When I stopped looking outside and shifted my gaze toward Carol, I saw a mischievous look on her face, like she was enjoying my reactions. There was a sort of regal air about her.

"I'm always yours," I replied.

"Your heart, maybe, but never your time."

"True..."

"I want all of your time too."

Carol took her feet off the lounge and slowly stood up. She came over and hugged me. As her legs became entwined with mine, a sense of softness pressed against my whole body. She didn't have anything on under her robe.

"You can have my time and my body too. How about it?"

"Sounds nice. Let's move to the bed."

I'd once thought Carol would be put off by anything that wasn't vanilla, but it turned out I'd been under the completely wrong impression back then. You couldn't judge a book by its cover.

She had a thing for the scar I'd gotten during our trip to Kilhina. It was like she fell into a trance whenever she licked it. It stirred strange feelings deep within me that made me shiver, and—although I enjoyed the situation itself—the sensation itself wasn't particularly pleasant. There were other places she could've licked that would've felt much better.

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"Pwah... Haah, haah."

"I think that's enough for now," I said.

"What? You wanna stop?"

"It's still early in the day."
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It wasn't quite dark out yet. The sun was low in the sky, but a little of its red glow still indirectly entered through our window. The bedroom had been made to be bathed in the morning sunlight, so while it was currently dim, there was still enough light coming in that I could make out Carol's face.

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"All right... We can get back to it later tonight."

Is she some kind of sex addict? We did it once already...

"How about taking a bath and resting a little?" I suggested.

"Okay, sure."
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I left Carol and headed for a bath that was partially exposed to the outdoors. There, I poured a little hot water over myself to wash away the dirt. After I'd wiped myself dry with a towel, I dressed myself in loungewear again and returned to the living room.

"Haah." With a sigh, I sat back down on the chaise lounge and let myself relax. It felt like I was sinking into a thick swamp.

Thoughts of work slowly began to spring up in the back of my mind. I made sure to dismiss each one as it appeared. Ruminating over those things now would ruin the fun of my vacation. Unfortunately, they were the only things that came to me.

When I opened my eyes, the sky had gradually darkened. While the evening sun still peeked out, the slightly waning moon was also visible.

The moon looked aimless somehow as it moved through a sky where the light of day hadn't fully faded. Soon the sun would disappear, and its light would be gone from the sky. The moon would become the primary source of the light above us, with an accompaniment of shining stars.

"C-Can I sit here?" Carol asked after a delay.

She can't get enough, can she?

"Go ahead," I replied.

Carol reclined on top of me, folding up her legs and resting her head on my chest.

Whoever had made this lounger had done such a good job that it didn't so much as creak while supporting the weight of two people.

"Phew..." Carol gave a relieved sigh.

"You're really coming on strong today."

"I might've been a little...lonely."

It had been about a month and a half since the last time we'd been here together.

"Been bored?" I asked teasingly.

Carol balled her fist and hit my waist. Much like me, she had an empty schedule because she didn't have any classes left to take.

"Well...I have more free time than I used to," she replied after a pause.

Then why'd you hit me?

"Most days are kinda dull," she continued. "I've moved out of White Birch, and I never see you or Myalo in our dorm."

"Ah. I guess so."

So find something to do. Can't she read or help out at the royal castle?

She might have been getting lessons in leadership.

"I rarely go back to the dorm these days," I told her. "I'm too busy."

That was a consequence of Ho Company's office being across the street from the Ho residence. Unless I had a lecture at the academy the following day, there wasn't really a good reason to head to the dorm.

"Maybe you've forgotten, but you always were a busy man. One minute you'd be picking a fight with witches, and the next you'd be making friends with refugees."

I wasn't like that, was I? "Is that right?"

"Yeah. You were always busier than anyone else even though you had the least classes to take."

Is that right? I know I had a lot of free time before starting the company, but I guess I've been busy ever since.

"What are you going to do when you graduate from the academy? Are you going to continue running your company while leading the Ho family?"

Hm... This was a problem I hadn't figured out yet. If I took over the Ho family, I wouldn't have time to manage the company the way I'd been doing. "You're right. I need to think about what I'm going to do."

"You'll choose the Ho family, right?"

"Well, I don't really have a choice. It's a real problem."

Am I going to get along with all the local rulers? Just thinking about it gives me a headache. I'm really bad at remembering people's names.

"If that's the case...why not marry me?" Carol suggested.

Marry...?

"It doesn't matter too much whether you're with the Ho family or the royal family, does it? It'll make life easier."

"Hmmm..."

She wants me to be her prince consort? Well, it's a little hard to refuse when I keep doing this stuff with her.

"If I were the prince consort, I think we'd argue a lot. I'd really want to shake things up."

Even if that weren't the case, my view of the world was too different from Carol's. The whole aristocratic system didn't feel right to me. It didn't seem fair that authority awarded to one person would later be inherited by others. It was completely different from simply allowing rich families to pass on their wealth to future generations. If I were placed at the top of this sort of warped society where everyone else was left to suffer, I'd want to fix it somehow. I knew it

would lead to arguments.

"So let's have arguments," Carol replied. "We'll call them lovers' quarrels." "Why?"

"They wouldn't be huge arguments. It's not like you ever do anything totally illogical."

I wasn't so sure—everyone had different ideas about what was logical, and Carol's views could be very different from mine.

"But we wouldn't argue in the first place if we weren't each sure our own ideas were right," I said.

"Hmm... Then I guess I'll be the one to crack."

I couldn't imagine her doing that.

"Even if you do, Her Majesty still won't be happy."

"Mother's a little—um, maybe I shouldn't say it—weird lately."

Is she? I know she's under pressure, but what does she mean, 'weird'?

"She keeps summoning Sir Kien. It's like she can't stop thinking about our border defenses."

"Kien Rube? What does she ask him?"

"'Is your army prepared? Have you built forts?' Stuff like that."

Oh. Is there even a point to asking things like that?

Kien Rube would do those things without needing any prompting from the royal family. He was a specialist in that field, and he'd been giving more thought to the problem than anyone else. The same might not have been true for other provinces, but his territory would bear the brunt of the next invasion—it was obvious he'd want to defend it. Any worries about him slacking off were entirely misplaced.

"Since mother didn't study at the Knight Academy, she has trouble understanding anything Sir Kien tells her. That's why she always calls a high-ranking member of the royal guard to attend the meetings with her, but even that doesn't help..."

Frankly, it seemed like she was just getting in Kien's way. She sounded like a little kid who wouldn't stop pestering their mother about lunch being ready instead of letting her get on with the cooking.

"It'd be better if she cuts that out. Unless there's some once-in-a-generation strategic genius in the royal guard giving Kien advice, she'll only make the Rube family angry."

"I know, but... Well, she can't help feeling nervous."

I can't say I don't understand how she feels...

The whole purpose of the royal family was to maintain the balance between the worlds of witches and knights. The family's authority came from the respect the nation as a whole showed toward the royal bloodline, but they weren't relied on for leadership, nor were they expected to exhibit charisma like a nation's president. The queen's primary role was to set up meetings and act as the chairperson.

However, the highly unusual circumstances we were currently dealing with had required her to take a more active role lately. Her job now came with a lot more pressure, and she clearly wasn't used to it.

"Would having me around make any difference?" I asked.

"I'm sure my mother will step aside as soon as I'm old enough to be crowned. Then you can exercise your power as prince consort."

"What? Is Her Majesty eager to step down?"

"Yeah. How do I put it...? She's burned out. If she could take breaks like we are right now, she'd be fine, but she never gets the chance. Even if she does take a break, she spends it thinking about work."

It sounded like she had an excessive sense of responsibility. At my company, we kept watch on employees like that to make sure they didn't break down, but there was no manager to keep watch over the queen. If her responsibilities were far beyond what she could bear, then she'd never be able to stop obsessing over them. I wouldn't envy anyone in her shoes.

"Has Her Majesty said she wants to abdicate for you even if we don't get

married?"

"Heh heh. Nope. Mother isn't someone who'd dump their responsibilities on just anyone. She thinks you're the right person for the job, so she's hoping that you're the one to take over for her. My mother doesn't have quite the same amount of faith in me."

I considered Carol fairly capable, but maybe the success I'd had in starting up my company had left a bigger impression on the queen. The question was whether I *wanted* to be part of the royal family.

Whatever I did, I still only had fourteen ships. Even if I commandeered some more of them from other trading firms, they'd still be small. We'd have to flee the kingdom eventually, but it looked like we'd be forced to fight in the meantime. I was in a tight spot.

"There's also something else... Something I need to tell you..." Carol said, speaking into my chest.

"What?"

"I'm not saying it just so you'll marry me. You can still say no..." Carol repositioned herself so that she was straddling me. "A certain something didn't happen."

I had a bad feeling. "A certain something?"

"A certain monthly event..."

Whoa... "Oh. For how long?"

"Since the month before last."

That didn't leave much doubt. "All right..."

I thought I'd be a little more shocked if this happened, but I was surprised to find myself grinning. What is this? Am I happy? Me? I'm not freaking out, screaming, or blaming Carol. I'm...actually happy. I always thought I'd be negative about it.

"Sounds like we've got something to celebrate," I said.

Carol used her arms to lift herself from the lounge and looked down on me

with a worried look on her face. "You mean it?"

The scarlet sun was almost hidden by now, and the sky was dark.

"From the bottom of my heart. I feel happy."

"You...do? You do?!"

Carol must've been really worried about it, because a look of joy appeared on her face as she embraced me.

Carol wrapped her arms around my neck. "Thank you. That's a relief—a huge relief!"

She didn't think I'd tell her to terminate it, did she? I'm not that cruel.

I'd always done my best to pull out, but we *had* been doing it often. I'd known this would happen eventually.

"I'm gonna be a dad... I can't even imagine."

"And I'll be a mom...! It really is hard to imagine!" Some strange mood came over Carol, and she began to cry.

"Haaah... I guess we'll get married then?" I asked.

"Huh?"

"It's about time I started getting serious. It'll make everything easier if we're married."

Carol responded by releasing me and sitting up to look at my face. "You mean it? You're not joking...are you?"

"I'm serious."

Carol pinched her own cheek. "Ouch."

She thought she was dreaming? Well, if I've made her that happy, then I've got something to be proud of.

"Let's get married. No, I mean—Carol, will you marry me?" It was the man's job to propose at times like this.

"Of course I will! I've never been this happy in my life!"

Carol and I embraced once more on the lounge.



Two days after I'd proposed to Carol, I met with Myalo.

I entered one of Ho Company's meeting rooms, where I found her sitting at a table covered in documents.

"Oh, it's you, Yuri."

I put out my hand to stop her when she was about to stand up. "It's fine. What brings you here?"

"We received a report from the new continent. And Caph's away on business..."

"Oh, I see."

When a report arrived from Harol on the new continent, only certain people at the head office could read it.

The envelope was simply labeled with the word "report" along with the date, and there was a note written on it stating that anyone other than upper management was forbidden to open it. Before it was sent out, the whole thing had been glued shut and marked with an intricate pattern created by a stamp possessed by Harol alone.

The message inside would be coded. For example, the new continent was referred to as "Erte Village," which was the name of a real village that had been established recently. Ships were referred to as "wagons" and settlers as "prospective residents." We could've used a more complex means to make it completely indecipherable, but the harder it was to decode, the more work it created. Harol didn't have enough patience or the time to painstakingly write out complex text character by character. Since we'd been slow to train new personnel, the best we could afford to do right now was to have a trustworthy person carefully guard the letters as they transported them to us.

"Let me see," I said while taking a seat.

Myalo handed me the report. "Here."

"Two hundred houses..." I read out while flicking through the pages. "That's all? Hmm..."

"Unsurprisingly, it's difficult to get things started."

I'd never expected us to make much progress in the first year since we were building everything from scratch. That said, when the need arose, we'd always been able to ship over timber that was ready to be assembled into houses.

"The population is one thousand, right? That's five people per house."

"That's correct, but the houses are all varying sizes. Married couples have houses of their own, while singles live in large share houses."

"Hmm... It's not scaling up well, is it?" It was proving tricky.

"Well...there hasn't been enough time, and we don't have maps yet."

Mapmaking was an urgent task, so we'd convinced a curious expert to travel to the new continent. However, they hadn't gotten beyond mapping the eastern coast. Unlike Shiyalta, there was no infrastructure there, so only a small portion of the land could be mapped within a year.

"If an invasion happened now, we'd be in trouble," Myalo noted. "Even if we can requisition a good number of ships, we won't find much hospitality on the new continent. Anyone seeking refuge there would own nothing but the clothes on their back, and it would be a long time before they'd have a roof to sleep under... I'm not sure we could even feed people."

Without enough food, people might be left to starve.

"Instead of worrying about the details, we should've put it under Ho family management and developed it more quickly," I said.

Having my family support every aspect of development would've kick-started industry on the new continent. We could've had the ships and timber needed to build homes in much greater quantities.

"You don't mean that. Nobles would be sailing over there to divide the land among themselves as we speak. And once they know they can escape, they'll lose all appetite for war."

That was true. Whether they wanted the land or not, they wouldn't want to

stay here and fight.

"Have the witches or the royal family learned of the new continent yet?" I asked.

"Yes, it leaked to them already. But we're safe now."

"How so?"

"I think it's partly down to my efforts to deceive them, but...mostly it's because witch families have a lot of history."

History? "What does that have to do with it?"

"A lot. Much like farmers, they feel a strong connection to the land. It's the deep roots they've put down here in the royal capital that make their lives so comfortable. They won't tear those roots up and leave it all behind for another continent so readily. That makes it hard for them to consider the possibilities."

"Ah, you're right."

"It would, of course, be another story if the royal family decided to get ahead of us and begin a relocation plan of their own. However, the members of the family lack any means of crossing the ocean without our help."

Celestial navigation was currently only known to us. Even if the technology was stolen, putting the method into practice required more than just a sextant. Not only did the person in charge of it need knowledge of astronomy, they wouldn't be able to navigate at all without a precise chronometer. Since those were produced by the Amian family, the royals were unable to purchase them or make their own. No matter how hard the royals and the witches tried, they'd struggle to assemble everything they needed from within the royal capital.

"So, what about the royal family?" I asked.

"I don't believe they're fully aware yet, but rumors are spreading. They're bound to have heard something."

"Rumors from the sailors..."

Sailors who visited the new continent had to sign a special contract that demanded absolute secrecy. One of those conditions prohibited them from entering the royal territory, but some of them were fools who couldn't resist

heading there for some fun anyway. So far, we'd caught two sailors doing just that after they'd made landfall and received their cash. They'd since been sent to live on the new continent. They'd probably taken up work as fishermen or something.

"There are leaks from the sailors, but the rumors really started spreading when we began recruiting people as settlers."

"But we didn't bring back any of the settlers after they were sent out."

That was the ultimate way to keep them quiet. Once on the new continent, they couldn't tell anyone about it unless they got on a ship heading back here. They were essentially given a comfortable exile.

"Rumors are developing as people come up with ways to explain the combination of evidence. For some, the idea of a new continent is too ridiculous, so they claim the people are permanently moving to friendly nations in the south, or that they're set off on long voyages hoping to reach the opposite side of our own continent."

"Is the idea of a new continent really that ridiculous?" Well, I guess it's something unheard of.

"People are claiming more incredible things than that. Some say there's a world hidden deep underground and that Ho Company has dug a hole into it. Others think you've made a drug that lets you breathe underwater. They think people are living in the sea."

"People come up with some funny ideas."

I'd heard similar ideas before on Earth. They must've come up with the same thing due to their brains working in similar ways.

"Well, that's how it is. It's hard to be sure how much the royal family is aware of unless they approach us," Myalo concluded.

"All right. Well, there's a slight change to the situation now."

"There is? In what way?" Myalo asked with a smile.

This was hard to say to her. "I've decided to join the royal family."

"You have...?"

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"I've decided to marry Carol."

Myalo's smile disappeared. "Um... Oh. That's what you meant."

"Yeah."
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"Marriage. Ah. It's like that." She was struggling to find the words. "Might I ask what made you change your mind?"

"She's going to have a baby..." I felt awful giving that as my reason.

"Ah, I see." Myalo furrowed her brow a little and thought for a while.

"You're against it?" I asked.

"No. Our progress on the new continent is too slow considering what time we have, and I would enjoy seeing the kingdom reformed..."

I was relieved when she didn't appear as shocked as I'd expected.

"I've already chosen my path. This changes nothing for me. But what about Lilly and Sham? What'll you tell them?" Myalo asked.

I hadn't thought about it. "Ah, hmm... I'm not sure."

"They might even quit the company."

Huh? "You think they'd go that far?"

"I think so."

"So what do you think I should do?"

I felt terrible. This issue didn't seem like something I should ask Myalo, but there was no one else to turn to. I certainly couldn't talk about this with my parents.

"You should just have affairs with the two of them," Myalo suggested.

"I'm trying to be serious here."

"I'm not saying it as a joke. It's the most effective solution to your dilemma."

The serious look on her face was scaring me.

There were certain lines I wouldn't cross. I certainly wouldn't cheat on Carol the day after I'd asked her to marry me. That would make me lowlife trash. I'd

have to at least wait two or three years for our passion to fade...well, not that I'd do that either.

"Hmm... I guess I'll have to talk to them," I said.

"Talk to the two of them? Directly?"

"That's right."

Our engagement would be announced before long. I had to say something to them before then.

"Are you out of your mind?" Myalo asked.

"No."

"That's the absolute worst option I can think of."

Myalo looked like she was seriously doubting my sanity. The message I got was, *That's out of the question. I won't allow it.*

I couldn't understand her reaction. I saw no reason not to tell them directly.

"I can do it," Myalo said. "Please give me some time."

Ш

After a letter was delivered to us at White Birch Dorm, I headed to Ginkgo Leaf with my dorm mate, Lilly. We found Myalo already waiting for us there, seated in one of the innermost private rooms.

"Lilly, Sham, I'm sorry for calling you here so abruptly." Myalo got to her feet and lowered her head, even though she didn't need to.

"Oh, it ain't such a big deal," Lilly replied.

Lilly and I walked into the room and sat down.

Three black bottles rested on the table. This was one of Ho Company's products, created by blowing glass into a mold to ensure a consistent shape. I'd never blown glass before, but apparently it took considerable skill, even when using a mold. The benefits came from how standardized bottles were handled. When several of them were placed in a box made to just the right size, they

wouldn't clatter around so much, meaning they'd rarely break during shipping. They were even more convenient when sealed with corks that were perfectly fitted. Cork had to be imported, of course, but it was a surprisingly cheap way to seal liquid inside a container.

Neither Lilly nor I had any involvement in this particular product. Everything, from research to production, had been carried out in Ho Province by people I'd never met. That raised the question—why were these bottles here? Under such circumstances, it usually meant they contained alcohol. I began to wonder whether Myalo had gotten permission to bring her own drinks into the restaurant.

"So, what did you call us here for?" Lilly asked.

It was unusual for Myalo to summon us. Lilly and I were researchers, while Myalo's role was in information management. The two fields had very little overlap. The last time we'd met without Yuri present, it had been to give her a detailed explanation of how celestial navigation worked.

"This is a new product." Myalo said as she picked up one of the bottles and began sinking the corkscrew into it. "Why don't you sample a little?"

Corks were a little troublesome since a special tool was needed to remove them. Myalo's corkscrew had a part that rested against the bottle to provide some leverage while it was in use, meaning it required minimal strength.

"Hm? Okay, sure..." Lilly said, sounding a little suspicious.

Myalo smiled as she poured drinks into glasses that had already been set on the table. I hadn't realized until now, since the bottles were black, but the liquid inside was a pale pink.

Did she really call us here to drink alcohol? I don't mind, but there has to be more to it than this...

"You too, Sham," Myalo said.

"No, I..."

"It's a drink that we'll be marketing toward women and selling for a high price. It'd be a shame if you didn't get to try it." "Well, just a little... Please pour less for mine."

Myalo filled my glass just a third of the way. It was still a lot.

"Wow... This is good stuff." Beside me, Lilly was expressing appreciation for the drink after she'd taken a sip. Apparently, it tasted good.

I'd been copying Yuri by staying away from alcohol up to now, but a little bit wouldn't hurt. I picked up the glass I'd been given and took a small sip.

This is...fruity. It had a rich, aromatic sweetness like nothing I'd ever tasted. There wasn't even a trace of bitterness to it. And unlike wild strawberries, it had no sourness to it at all. I could smell the alcohol, but it was overpowered by a thick scent like concentrated fruit juice.

"This is really good... What is it?" I asked before I could stop myself. I was surprised at how good it tasted.

"It's made using a fruit known as a peach. It's delicious, isn't it?"

"It is. Wow..."

The smell of alcohol was getting to me a little because I wasn't used to drinking, but the cloying scent of fruit was strong enough to overpower it.

I've got to try an actual peach sometime. It must be like something grown in paradise.

"It's incredibly good, isn't it?"

I'd drained my glass before I knew it, and it was going to my head.

"How about another?" Myalo offered.

"No, that was enough."

Drinking too much might affect my brain, but I want more... Is this what Yuri meant by alcohol dependence?

"It tastes really good. I bet it'll sell for a high price," Lilly said.

"Yes, indeed. Though it also costs a lot to procure in the first place. It's brought here from the Papal State."

"From the Papal State?" I repeated.

I didn't know much about that place, but I'd heard bad things.

"There are priests of Yeesusism who brew this drink. They choose to live their entire lives in poverty, waking up at the same time each day and toiling tirelessly. It's what their faith teaches."

That made no sense to me, but there were many different types of people in the world. In any case, it was amazing to imagine the drink was made in some foreign country by people so unlike anyone I'd ever known. I wondered how they'd feel knowing their drink was being sent far across the sea to be drunk by a different race of humans, who were astounded by its amazing taste. I was confident they'd be happy to know we were enjoying it.

"Um, could I get a touch more, maybe?" Lilly asked.

I looked at Lilly's glass and saw it was already empty. Her cheeks were a little red. She looked drunk.

It was easy to underestimate how much alcohol this had in it because it was hidden by the fruity taste.

I guessed the distilled liquor was made first, then given its taste—either by mixing in some fruit, or leaving the fruit in it to infuse it with the flavor. If the fruit was added during the fermentation process like in wine-making, then all of the sugar would disappear as it was converted to alcohol. I didn't know whether it was a squeezing or pickling process that extracted the fruit's flavor, but at any rate, it was definitely added to the strong alcohol after fermentation.

"Yes, of course. Please don't hold back." Myalo poured more into Lilly's glass.

Uh... I want more too. There are three bottles here. I wonder if they all taste different.

"Thanks. Much appreciated." Lilly raised the glass, brimming with alcohol, to her lips. It was definitely too much for her.

"Um... It's a very nice drink, but will there be more work for us to do today?" I asked.

It was possible that we really *were* just here to try this new product, but if Myalo had some other assignment for us, I figured we needed to know before

Lilly got dead drunk.

"No, there isn't, but I do have something I'd like to discuss with you both."

"Then shouldn't we talk about that first?"

"Yes... It's a matter concerning Yuri."

Yuri?

"He's recently decided to get married."

Uh... Is that a joke? She must be lying. Or maybe I misheard.

I looked to my left and noticed Lilly's mouth and surrounding areas were now stained the color of the drink. Although I hadn't heard her do it, she must've been taking a sip and spat it out to make such a mess of herself.

I offered her a handkerchief. "Here, Lilly."

"Huh? To who? Sham? Myalo? Huh?"

Lilly didn't accept the handkerchief, so I put it on the table in front of her.

"To Princess Carol. She's with child," Myalo answered.

"What? 'With child'...? She's havin' a baby?" Lilly asked.

"Yes, that's correct."

Lilly was clearly struggling to process the information.

A baby... Wow, a baby. A baby? That can't be right. Does that mean those two were doing stuff together in secret? He didn't need to keep it all from me... But I can't believe Yuri's having a baby, and not with me...

"Oh," Lilly said softly. She sounded utterly defeated, like all the emotions within her had died.

Though she was sitting in a chair, she'd slumped down. I could tell that all the strength had left her. Maybe I looked the same.

"You were in love with Yuri, weren't you?" Myalo asked Lilly.

It appeared Lilly lacked the energy to reply, but the answer was obvious. I knew just how deep her love for him was. It was more than anyone could put into words.

Oh, now I see.

I finally realized why Yuri had been avoiding being alone with Lilly lately. I'd been wondering why he was always turning her down so bluntly. It was because he was already with Carol.

I guess Lilly never had any chance, no matter what she tried. Wow...

"And you're okay with that, Myalo?" I asked.

Given how much time Myalo had spent with Yuri, she'd likely developed feelings for him too.

"Yuri and I are bound by our faith in one another... We're kindred spirits. Even after he marries Princess Carol, it won't mean the end of our relationship. But yes, it hurts, if that's what you're asking."

That confirmed it: Myalo liked Yuri too.

In my case, it was our academic interests that bound us. *Is it wrong to want more?* I wondered. I didn't think so. But if Yuri didn't feel the same, I'd just cause trouble for him if I pined and chased after him. It would be ridiculous and emotionally tiring. I knew perfectly well that my affection would be a burden to him and nothing else.

By keeping those feelings suppressed, I'd saved myself from false hope and despair so far. But even while I'd given Lilly my full support, part of me had wondered how I'd cope if she and Yuri *had* gotten together.

"My situation's similar," I said. "But Lilly..."

I was a scholar, and I'd continue to be a scholar with or without him. But could Lilly continue the work she was doing without any hope of it attracting Yuri's attention? She'd have a reason to keep going since the pay she received —a manager's salary—was good. Meeting with him regularly could be too much for her, though. She had other options. Even without getting work from him, an engineer as skilled as her would have no trouble making a living elsewhere.

"Indeed... But no one knows what the future holds," Myalo whispered in a mischievous tone. "There's always the possibility they'll argue and fall out of love."

What a horrible thing for her to say. It was the first time I'd ever thought anything like that about Myalo. "You can't expect us to wish that on them."

"It's a fact that they argue regularly. Their marriage would, of course, make Yuri a member of the royal family, but the two of them have very different ideas about what this kingdom should be. Yuri is currently imagining how he might revolutionize the very structure of the kingdom, and I'm sure his first act will be to overthrow our aging system of aristocracy. That might be enough to cause conflict between the two. It's too soon to say whether their marriage will go well."

I didn't know much about politics, but I sensed some truth in what Myalo was saying.

I looked at Lilly and saw that life had returned to her eyes.

"Yuri would be very sad if their relationship doesn't work out," I said.

Why's she talking about all this when they're only just about to get married? We should be...celebrating. I know that's hard, but we can't wish misfortune on him. And I'm sure Yuri expects us to be happy for him.

"Sham, I'm always on Yuri's side," Myalo reassured me. "I'm only saying all this because I know he needs Lilly."

"Even if Lilly's going to be wounded in the process?"

"I'm being entirely open and honest with her. I'm telling the truth when I say these things are possible." Myalo sounded so perfectly natural that I couldn't imagine she was lying.



If she's here for Yuri, what does that mean? I wondered. It sounded as though she wanted Lilly to continue working as she had because that would benefit Yuri. It wasn't Lilly's happiness she was concerned about. Myalo might not have wished any misfortune on her, but she didn't necessarily want the best for her either. But perhaps that should've been obvious, given that Myalo and Lilly weren't close friends.

"I will have to leave you now. You can keep the bottles. Please feel free to finish them. The teahouse has been reserved for you all day."

"Myalo..." Lilly had been silent for some time. "Thanks for thinkin' about us. This'll help keep my mind off it all."

"This is the very least that I can do for Yuri."

"Guess so..."

Myalo bowed her head, then left us.

Once she was gone, Lilly picked up a bottle and began refilling her glass.

I guess alcohol's what people need at times like this...

IV

"But you're getting married so young..." Rook muttered as our carriage rattled and swayed.

"I know. Sorry. I didn't follow the guidance you taught me."

"Oh, that..."

"Guidance?" Suzuya asked.

"Father warned me not to do anything improper with girls that might disgrace me during my time as a student."

"He did...?"

What he'd actually told me was, "Never mess around with Cultural Academy girls. If you want sex, find a girl in the city or visit a brothel." In either case, I hadn't followed his advice.

Even though Suzuya's stomach was noticeably bigger, she'd come to the royal capital with Rook when she should've been resting at home. Apparently, she'd said she was feeling well enough and insisted on coming along regardless. Hopefully, her pregnancy was beyond the high-risk period at this point.

"But you know he can't help it," Suzuya told Rook. "She's the girl he loves."

"But, she's royalty..." It seemed Rook hadn't fully accepted it yet. "What'll happen to the Ho family now?"

"I'm afraid I'll have to rely on you a little longer, father. I might cause quite a bit of trouble for you too."

"Well...I can handle it. I'm sure you've got plans in mind."

I suppose I do... "Yes, I have several ideas. The question is whether there's time for them before the next crusade."

"We just have to assume we'll figure something out. In the meantime, we'll do what we can. We won't achieve anything if we don't try."

It occurred to me that it must've been a constant source of pressure for Rook. Unlike me, he couldn't consider running away. For him, there were countless things for him to worry over.

"I don't know what'll happen, but I'm sure we'll figure something out as a family. After all, I've got two dependable men right here with me."

"Not in front of our son. You'll embarrass me."

What's with this old man...? Well, she's right. Whatever happens, we'll figure it out together.

"What I'm worried about now is our clothes. Shouldn't I be better dressed?" Suzuya asked for the umpteenth time.

"It's fine. It's not a big event," I replied.

"But we're meeting Our Lady the Queen, aren't we?"

"Please don't call her that. It's 'Her Majesty.'"

"That doesn't sound rude?"

If anything sounds rude, it's calling her "Our Lady." At least, I think... Maybe

it's not too rude, but it definitely sounds wrong. It's hard to explain why.

"Everyone calls her 'Her Majesty,' so it won't be an issue."

"But our clothes—are we presentable enough?"

"I told you they're fine. It's a gathering of family and friends. It won't look right if we're dressed overly formally."

"Well, if you're sure..."

Yes, I'm sure.

I wished Sham could've come along so I could introduce her to everyone too, but she'd refused outright. Satsuki couldn't come either because she had to fulfill Rook's duties while he was absent.

The rattling sound of the carriage changed a little, moving from bumpy cobbles to creaking wood. It was a clear sign that the royal castle was near.

"We must be close," Rook said.

Naturally, there was a bridge to cross to get onto Royal Castle Island, but its stone arches didn't continue all the way. The final six meters were spanned by a drawbridge that could be raised in the event of an enemy attack. Since a stone bridge would be too heavy to raise, this part was made of wood.

There was constant traffic to and from Royal Castle Island, even at night, so the bridge was only raised twice per year to check it was functioning. Even then, it had to be lowered immediately to minimize disruption to the traffic.

"I really hope I don't embarrass us..." Suzuya fretted again.

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"Hello, and welcome."

As we entered the castle, a line of four women dressed as maids lowered their heads to our newly arrived group. One of them was a familiar face—the royal sword named Tillet who'd helped us out in Kilhina. I briefly considered greeting her with "Long time no see," but decided against it since she was clearly trying to blend in with the maids.

"Please allow us to guide you. This way, please."

They began to lead us through the castle's corridors.

After climbing two flights of stairs, we reached a magnificent room with a lovely view of the night skyline. It looked like a place designed to host noble visitors.

Much of the ceiling was covered in carvings with gold leaf, though it was somewhat dulled. The gold thread used in the wallpaper, however, looked new. That must've been regularly replaced.

There was a chandelier that appeared far too big for the room, but ensured the space was brightly illuminated. It wasn't as intense as daylight, but it was surprising how much light its flames could provide.

A carpet cushioned the floor and supported a grand table. The table itself was, of course, a weighty, high-class piece of furniture, but large vases with carefully arranged flowers made it all the more impressive. That alone must've cost a lot to prepare.

"Thank you for accepting my invitation. You're most welcome here." Queen Shimoné rose from her chair and greeted us with a slight bow and curtsy. That was unusual—the royals wouldn't normally lower their heads to anyone.

"Ah... No. It's a great honor to have been invited." Rook was a little flustered as he bowed in response. Since he'd only ever attended formal meetings with her, this was a side of her he'd never seen.

"It's a pleasure to meet my new mother and father. My name is Carol Flue Shaltl." Carol stood up and bowed to them. She was wearing a loose-fitting dress to hide the swelling of her stomach.

Hmm... It's not like Carol to be so polite, but I guess she means what she says. I shouldn't judge. I'd be doing my best to sound polite too if I were in her shoes.

"Ah, um, my name is Suzuya Ho." Owing to her nervousness, Suzuya's gestures were awkward, and she almost got herself tongue-tied as she responded to Carol.

A princess must've been like a celestial being to Suzuya, but there shouldn't have been any need to worry about formalities—Carol was about to be her daughter-in-law.

Well, everyone else said their greetings while introducing themselves. Suppose I'd better say something too.

"I'm truly grateful to have been offered the opportunity to be here today, Your Majesty."

Okay, that really didn't sound like me. I can't criticize Carol at all.

"Thank you," the queen said. "It would please me if you can relax and enjoy yourself today. Now, please take a seat."

The queen was, of course, at the top of the table. To her right was an empty seat, then Carol, then Carla.

Carla... I didn't think she'd be here. She looks really mad too. Is she giving me a death stare?

Suzuya was frozen to the spot, so Rook had to guide her to her place. The two sat next to each other on the queen's left.

I took the remaining seat on the queen's immediate right. Once we'd all settled, the queen looked over at a woman dressed as a servant to give a signal. The woman—I guessed she was actually a royal sword rather than a servant—opened the door and stepped out of the room. I assumed she'd gone to bring us some drinks.

"We're quite close to the kitchen, so the food should reach us while it's still hot," the queen said.

Wow. Okay.

Since there were so many witches who worked at the royal castle, it was natural to assume that there'd be a large cafeteria here, but that wasn't the case. The witches would get food delivered from restaurants, or if they had time, they'd go out for their lunch. I'd also heard that caterers brought food here when it was needed for large events.

It seemed there was also a kitchen here that prepared food for the royal family. Well, that should've been obvious.

"Oh really? I'll look forward to it," Rook replied tactfully.

"I h-hope the food's to your liking," Carol said, in an awkward attempt to

appear charming. It was so unusual to see Carol act that way. She was like a fish out of water, despite being in her own home.

The door opened, and a maid appeared carrying a tray. She gave each of us a tall, narrow cup. They contained ice and a clear, bubbly liquid inside. It had to be sparkling water.

I'd heard that there was a region behind the mountains where all the water people drank was carbonated, but in most places, it was a rare occurrence. Only a few springs produced it, and the water couldn't easily be transported either—sealed containers that prevented the gas from escaping were expensive. I doubted many were willing to pay for that expense. I'd rarely had it myself. That said, it made a great mixer for alcoholic drinks, so it might've been more familiar to heavy drinkers.

"Go ahead. Please try it," the queen urged me.

I raised the glass to my lips. *Ah, it's lemon soda,* I realized before I'd even tasted it. The bubbles rising to the surface carried the distinct citrus scent up toward my nose. Someone must've been making soda using the lemons Ho Company imported.

I took a sip and confirmed that it was exactly as I thought. It wasn't particularly sweet, but it was enough to bring back memories. As I considered the taste more carefully, I detected a hint of mint too. Ho Company hadn't done anything in particular with these ingredients after we'd imported them, but it seemed others were using them in all kinds of experiments.

"How is it?" the queen asked with a smile. "I'm quite fond of it lately." She appeared to be in high spirits today.

Suzuya mustered up some courage and responded. "It's...very good. I thought lemons were best squeezed over meat, but it seems this is a good way to enjoy it too."

"It's actually a very old recipe," the queen told her. "Now that Yuri has brought them here for the first time in nine hundred years, we've been able to make it once more."

Wow. She must be talking about the days of the empire. Were people really

drinking this, even back then?

The recipe must've been found in an old book. It shouldn't have been too surprising, since it had been possible to trade with the rest of the world across the Mediterranean Sea in those days. It was a long time ago, though, so they might have gotten lemons confused with limes at some point.

"They're another thing that Yuri brought here...? It really is amazing," Suzuya replied.

Uh, stop. It's embarrassing.

"No, it's not true," I said. "It was the sailors who brought them, not me."

"You don't need to be so humble," the queen said, teasing me.

"I'm not just saying it to be humble."

"I think it's a great achievement," Rook said. "Six percent of the Ho family's annual revenue is now linked to Yuri's business. If we take the increased cash flow into account, Yuri caused an increase of ten percent."

Hey, is it okay to say that in front of the queen?

That extra money wasn't just raining down from the sky. About half of it was coming from the royal capital. In other words, Ho Province had a sizable trade surplus with respect to the royal territory, creating a likely source of trade friction.

But, as expected, the queen wasn't bothered about all that. She merely continued making me squirm. "Yes, indeed. Your son is quite incredible. You must tell me the secret of how you raised him."

Haven't they said enough? Did I really come here just so people could embarrass me? Well, maybe that's what weddings are all about.

"We honestly didn't do anything," Rook said. "In fact, it was as though he just learned everything by himself ever since he was a young child."

Stop. You can't say these things when I'm here in the room.

"Hmmm... Maybe that's the best way for a child to learn. What do you think, Carol, darling?"

What? She's calling her "darling"? And right in front of my parents too. She's acting so out of character that it's making Rook confused.

"I agree," Carol replied. "I think it's best to encourage children to develop their strengths... It seems to have worked for both Yuri and Sham."

Sounds like she's giving it serious thought. Don't tell me she's already deciding how we're going to raise our child?

We were interrupted by the sound of a chair clattering.

"What's wrong, Carla?" the queen asked.

"I'd like to step outside for a moment."

It was the first time I'd heard Carla speak that day. Her anger was clear from the way she stomped out of the room and violently slammed the door behind her.

"Um... Did I do something wrong?" Suzuya asked nervously as she struggled to understand the situation.

"No, not at all. My daughter has...a lot of struggles."

"Oh, I see..."

Suzuya looked worried. She must've sensed that this might be a source of trouble at future family gatherings.

"It must be difficult dealing with girls of that age. Is she going through a rebellious phase?" Rook asked, sounding like an old man.

"Raising children can be challenging. Carol was my first child. It felt natural to raise her to be the next queen, so I was always quite strict. But..." The queen put down the cup she was holding before she continued. There was nostalgic loneliness in her eyes. "From the moment Carol was old enough to speak, I had her study from morning until night. Whenever she had a free moment, I had her learn music and penmanship. It's a harsh way for a child to spend their days. I knew it was her responsibility as someone destined to be queen, but it still weighed heavily on my heart as her mother. Then, when it came to Carla... Carol had already shown more than enough talent, so I decided Carla's childhood didn't need to be so difficult."

As a father-to-be, I was very interested to hear about her past experiences. I didn't know whether we'd have a son or a daughter, but either way, I didn't want my child turning out like Carla.

"Carol also said it was a little unfair. She'd make complaints, such as, 'How come Carla gets away with everything?' But she always was hardworking, so she accepted the heavy responsibilities she'd been given and grew up to be the fine young woman she is today."

I could just picture it. Carol had probably protested a lot as she was made to study for long hours, like a kid whose parents demanded they get into the best elementary school. When I'd met her at the academy's admission ceremony, she'd been the product of that harsh regime.

But I understood how the queen felt. Only one person could sit on the throne, so if both daughters were subjected to the same difficult upbringing, it would turn out to be a waste of effort for one of them in the end.

Then again, maybe it wouldn't have been all bad—pitting the two of them against each other might've increased their ability to govern. But even so, the child who wasn't chosen to be queen would still have lost their childhood for nothing.

When the eldest showed potential, her younger sister was told to simply live a happy life. To me, it sounded like an entirely reasonable approach to raising her children. It was true, after all, that Carol had grown into a fine woman possessing all the qualities a queen needed.

"But, of course, that made things very uneven for the two of them. It was always Carol who received praise. It was Carol who was expected to be the next queen. Carla never expected praise of any sort. Over time, she gradually began to look unhappy. It was only then that I'd realized my mistake, but it was already too late. I tried to be stricter with her for a time after that, but after she'd had such a pampered upbringing that she couldn't bear to be disciplined or show restraint. All it did was make her bitter at the world."

She might be our queen, but she's a mother too.

I'd always thought that Carla had been left to her own devices after showing so little potential, but apparently not. As a mother, the queen must've wanted

what was best for her child the whole time.

However, it was hard to say that Carla had turned out the way she did just because of her upbringing. If the queen gave things to Carol but withheld them from Carla, that would certainly make the two sisters unequal, but that was little more than a simplistic explanation given in hindsight. And besides, Carla hadn't been denied *everything*—she'd simply been given different things. For one, she was given the freedom that Carol hadn't. Carla could've used it to better herself by focusing on strengths that Carol lacked. Or perhaps she could've simply cherished that freedom and lived a carefree life. But instead, Carla had envied her sister.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I've been talking too much."

Yeah, you have. I know we're about to be family, but let's not be too open around each other... Actually, no. If we're going to be family, then this is fine. I'm overthinking it.

Suzuya, being a mother herself, must've felt some sympathy for the queen. She was so moved that tears were welling up in her eyes. "I'm sure your daughter is aware of the affection you feel for her, Your Majesty. Someday... Someday she'll look back on it all and laugh."

Suzuya seemed to have the wrong idea. She probably thought Carla had stormed out because of a disagreement between her and the queen. The more likely explanation was that Carla was irritated at the idea of losing me to Carol, and being in this room with us was more than she could take.

"Thank you, Suzuya... Oh, there are still dinner preparations to make. I think it's time for the table to be arranged."

Oh good, dinner's almost ready. I've been looking forward to this.

Curious about Carol, I shot a glance at her beside me. There was a complicated look on her face, like everything the queen had just said weighed heavily on her. She didn't appear ready to enjoy dinner or the conversation.

"What's wrong?" I whispered.

"Nothing... I thought we'd use this chance to talk things over with Carla, but it looks like it'll just turn into another argument."



After an appetizer, soup, and a light fish dish, we were now enjoying a meat dish that consisted of roasted wild bird arranged on a plate with dark green sauce drizzled over the top. It looked like duck—I guessed it was a mallard. Although wild birds were considered the highest quality meat, they were rarely eaten in this region because they were hard to catch.

We were also given glasses filled with wine to enjoy with our meal. I didn't like the idea of pregnant women drinking alcohol, but I didn't complain. Carol and Suzuya generally didn't drink, and a single glass with a meal wouldn't do any harm.

"The meat is delicious," Suzuya said.

"Do you think so? It's a mallard that was caught yesterday. The chef is very proud of this dish," the queen replied.

As they relished the food, the two relaxed enough to enjoy some lighthearted chat.

I couldn't deny that the food was good, but something felt lacking—it seemed to prioritize healthiness over taste. The slightly gamey meat had very little fat, and the sauce was fruity.

Since the royal household only had women, dishes designed for them were bound to be the focus. In a chieftain household, I would've expected mallard to be roasted and served as whole hindquarters. Although a heavily seasoned dish dripping with fat from the bird's skin would've been nice, it wouldn't exactly be the sort of dainty dish that women in dresses were expected to enjoy.

It seemed the wine had been used in sauce too. Since it never came up in conversation, I figured that the wine hadn't been included just because I was here. More likely, the head chef had decided to experiment with this ingredient I'd brought into the kingdom now that it had become commonplace in the markets. Although such ingredients would only reach people who shopped at high-end markets, it still moved me to think that my business was changing the nature of the dinner table.

"So this wine..." Rook remarked. "At first I thought wine was just a bitter drink, but it's surprisingly enjoyable at times like this."

Rook clearly enjoyed the alcohol with his meat. He was gulping it down and was on his third glass already.

"You're not drinking, Yuri?" Her Majesty asked when she realized I hadn't touched mine at all.

I didn't like having to explain this. At banquets with a lot of people around, I could usually get away with pretending to drink.

"I'm sorry. I'm trying to wait until I reach twenty before I start drinking, and I'm so close now."

"Oh, is that right? But why?"

"I've read several books that said drinking in one's youth can damage the brain. I was convinced, so I've been avoiding alcohol ever since."

I didn't need to have been so strict about it, but it felt wrong to give up now when I was so close to turning twenty. I just had to keep going for a few more months.

"Oh, my. In that case, I'll have another drink brought out for you."

"The lemon drink we had earlier was—" I was interrupted when the door opened.

Carla had returned.

The dishes from earlier had been put out for Carla and taken away, but her meat dish was still there on the table. She took a look around the room, then strode back to her spot. But she didn't sit down—she stood in front of the chair and glared at Carol.

"Dear sister." Carla's face was humorless.

Oh boy, here goes. The battle's beginning.

Carol shifted her chair slightly so she was almost facing toward Carla. "What? Do you need to talk about something?"

The tone of Carol's response suggested she was ready for a fight. I doubted

this was anything new. These two had been sisters for eighteen years now, after all. They'd known each other even longer than I'd known Myalo.

"Why did you start dating Yuri? You knew I liked him."

They're going to have that talk here? This is so awkward for me.

"Now's not— Actually, now might be the right time to tell you, though there's not much to say. It was because I fell in love with him too."

"So you stole him from me? Why do you enjoy taking away everything I want?"

S-Stole? No, I wasn't your boyfriend in the first place.

"No one stole him from you. His heart was never yours. That's why I never supported you. If Yuri had had feelings for you, then I wouldn't have...probably wouldn't have taken him from you."

She can't even say it confidently?

"But you're my big sister. Couldn't you let your little sister have one thing, just one thing, that she wanted? You've got everything. Why won't you leave anything for me?"

"Whew..." Carol rubbed her brow with her fingers like she was getting a headache. "Fine. What do you want?"

What? She's willing to give something up? But I think we all know Carla's about to ask for me.

"Give me Yuri. I've loved him ever since I enrolled at the academy, so please..."

"Fine."

Fine? How's that fine?

"Really?! Then you won't marry him?"

"If Yuri *does* have feelings for you, then I don't want to marry him." Carol turned to face me. "Well, Yuri? Do you have feelings for her?"

Me? Whoa, whoa, whoa. You can't dump this on me. How'd it come to this? Does she expect me to come up with some line that's going to make Carla feel

better and turn this into a peaceful get-together? What am I supposed to say that won't make her hysterical? It's too much to ask. Even the war wasn't this hard.

"Now you mention it, we have known each other for a long time," I began. "I think we first met in the eagle landing area."

"Yes... That's right. That brings back memories." Carla looked a little bashful. If only she always looked like this, I'd consider her beautiful.

"I knew that you'd taken a liking to me. You wouldn't have asked me to date you during our first meeting if you hadn't." But I didn't think you'd be hung up on me for this long.

"You certainly played hard to get."

"But I can't marry you."

"What?" Carla's smile froze.

I knew she'd react badly. What I couldn't understand was why she thought that problems in her love life could all be resolved through this sort of bargaining. She should've put herself in my shoes and realized that if someone else tried this same tactic with her, she certainly wouldn't fall for them. I couldn't understand how her mind worked—it was like dealing with another species.

"I've never once felt affection for you. That's not Carol's fault—I've been close with other women besides her. But I've never once wished I could spend time with you, get to know you, or marry you."

"But...why? Why would you be interested in everyone else except me?"

"Carla, you're very charming. Don't obsess over me. There are so many people out there who'd be better for you. Find someone."

Carla's face was stiff with rage.

Uh, that didn't work, did it?

Carla turned back toward Carol. "All right... Then let me be queen. You can give me that at least."

This time her request was even more ridiculous.

"Why would you want to be queen?" Carol asked in surprise. "I'll always make sure you have enough money to live a carefree life. Being queen's hard work. It's nothing but suffering."

I had to agree with her. It was clear to see when looking at her mother. The signs of exhaustion were all there.

Perhaps Carla thought the throne was some sort of magical chair that allowed her to be as selfish as she wanted, spend her money however she liked, and make any kind of demand from the kingdom's citizens. If times had been better, then perhaps she wouldn't have been far off, but she'd have a war to deal with now.

"I've got nothing else. You can at least let me be the next queen."

Her Majesty had done an impressive job of remaining quiet through all this, as though she wanted her daughters to settle this matter between themselves, but now she finally spoke. "Carla. Carol has gained the throne—and Yuri—through her own efforts. Do you think I ordered Yuri to marry her? I don't have that authority. The same goes for the throne. If I thought you'd make a suitable queen, I'd have declared you my heir. Don't be angry at Carol, and don't talk to her as though good fortune simply fell into her lap."

It was hard to see why Carla was so unhappy. But I supposed that was human nature. No matter how high someone's salary was, they'd never be content to live a simple life of luxury. Everyone wanted fame and renown to go with it. Maybe that explained Carla's behavior.

But just because everyone showed respect toward whoever was queen, it didn't mean they'd be revered or even liked. Those things weren't granted along with money or authority—they were gained through one's ability or personality.

For someone like Carla, being queen could create an unbearable imbalance. Those around her would make every effort to show her respect since she'd be at the top of the internal government, but privately, they'd have no admiration for her and plenty of scorn.

"Mother, you don't understand anything. You don't know how patient I've been."

The queen's tone changed dramatically and turned gentle. "Carla, darling, I'm sorry. Can we discuss this later? I'm sure there's a way we can all be happy."

"Yes, you're right," Carla said, though it wasn't clear what she was agreeing with. "I won't ask for anything more."

Rook then spoke. "Um, I'm...sorry." He didn't sound like his usual self. His voice was trembling slightly.

"F-Father, what's wrong?" I said as I noticed how pale his face was.

"I'm n-not feeling well... I need to visit...the bathroom." Rook rose from his chair, but he only took one step before losing his balance and falling to his knees.

What happened? Is it food poisoning?

There was a moment's delay before the queen noticed something was wrong. "Sir Rook?"

"Oh?" Suzuya attempted to get up too, but failed. Instead, she crashed to the ground along with her chair.

What?! That's both of them... Is she suffering the same symptoms as Rook? What's happening? Is it poison? Some sort of neurotoxin that causes paralysis?

I tried spreading my fingers, then clenching my fist. My hands were working just fine.

I looked at the queen. She was doing the same thing as me as she struggled to understand the situation. But unlike me, her hands were shaking, and she struggled to make a fist at all.

Am I the only one unaffected? That makes no sense. I don't have any superpowers. There's nothing they all ate that I didn't. Then it dawned on me: The wine...

"Royal swords! Make my mother and father vomit everything back up, and quickly!" I yelled as I rose to my feet.

But they didn't take orders from me. Instead, the women dressed as maids remained where they stood, staring at me blankly.

"Don't just stand there! The meal was poisoned! Unless you did it yourselves, help them! Stick your fingers down their throats and make them vomit!"

As I yelled at them, I was looking at Carol sitting beside me. A third of the wine in her glass was gone. It wasn't much, but she'd drunk it too.

"Sorry, Carol." I thrust my fingers into Carol's mouth and touched the mucous membrane at the back of her throat.

"Ugh."

"Whoever's free, bring us water—as much as possible!" I yelled.

"Uegh." Carol gagged, but didn't vomit at all. She clutched at my wrist like I was hurting her.

"You'll have to bear it."

I felt Carol's teeth against my hand as she bit down in half panic. I continued to irritate the back of her throat regardless.

"Oegh... Oeeegh!" The contents of her stomach spilled onto the floor.

Great.

I left Carol for a moment and looked around the room. I didn't know how many of the maids were royal swords, but three of them were making the queen, Rook, and Suzuya regurgitate.

To my surprise, I realized that Carla hadn't run away. She was cowering in the corner at the sight of what she'd done. She was the only suspect in this situation.

"Hey." I walked over to her, grabbed her narrow neck, and slammed her against the wall. "Did you poison them?"

I briefly considered that the queen might have done it, but no. When I'd seen her face, I knew it hadn't been an act. *Besides, what would she gain by poisoning the Ho family?* I wondered. *The new continent?* But that made no sense—I was still unharmed. She might not have known that I didn't drink

alcohol, but the royal swords wouldn't have listened to my instructions then.

"It w-wasn't...me..." Carla stammered.

Playing dumb, are we?

With my hand still clasped around her throat, I picked up the wine glass near Carol's chair. I loosened my grip on her as I raised it to her lips.

"Drink."

Her lips were perfectly sealed, and her expression changed, like I held a knife to her throat.

There's no mistake. It's her doing.

"I said drink. Either that, or give me the antidote."

"I don't...have it."

"Then die."

I tightened my grip around her throat as I pressed her against the wall.

"Guh."

I knew she must have an antidote. My guess was that she'd planned to hand it over if Carol had agreed to Carla's demands. Maybe she'd been about to offer it in exchange right before I'd grabbed her. Either way, it was a stupid idea that never would've worked, regardless of what her naive imagination would have her believe.

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"Ngh... Ngaah..."
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Carla began to thrash around. She pulled something from her pocket as the urge to breathe became too much for her to bear. A small glass bottle filled with red liquid fell from her pocket. That, along with a steel can shaped like a hip flask, landed on the carpet.

That was too easy.

I threw Carla aside as I let go of her neck.

"Ghh!" She collapsed to the ground, coughing violently.

"Royal swords! One of you must know about poisons!"

One of them stepped forward. It was Tillet.

I quickly scooped up the fallen items and put them on the table. One had to be the poison and the other the antidote.

"This is the poison that was in the wine?!" Tillet said.

"Do you know what it is?"

Tillet took a look at the substance in the glass bottle, then slammed her fist on the table in frustration. "Damn!"

"What's wrong? What poison is it?"

"That's red canolia... Of all the poisons they could've used..."

I'd never heard of it.

"Tell me everything you can," I said.

"It's a potent mixture of poisonous shellfish and mushrooms. There's no antidote."

"What?" But there has to be. "Then tell me what this is." I pointed to the tin hip flask. If the glass bottle was the poison, this should've been the antidote.

"Princess Carla was carrying it?"

"That's right. She dropped it when I demanded the antidote."

The situation wouldn't make sense unless she had one. She'd have nothing to gain without it.

"I don't have a choice, do I?" Tillet uncapped the flask, took a swig of the liquid inside, and instantly spat it back out. "Wolfsbane."

What...?

Tillet spat out some of the residual poison in her mouth, along with some saliva.

"That can't be right!" Carla yelled at us.

She's surprised too? She thought it was an antidote? She must have. Why else would she carry two poisons?

"My tongue's going numb," Tillet said. "There's no doubt in my mind."

"Then maybe the other one's not red canolia?"

There was still a chance that the red liquid was the antidote for wolfsbane.

Tillet looked irritated. "It's a small amount of a mushroom known as death's umbrella pickled in the red poison of the miht shellfish. The combination of these two deadly substances is known as red canolia. I know it because I've used it myself. There's no doubt."

I looked closer and noticed solid residue lying at the bottom of the bottle. Despite being shaken around, the liquid wasn't clouded with sediment. Given the way it quickly sank back to the bottom, I could see how it resembled small pieces of mushroom.

Then it's not just a neurotoxin? There's some sort of cytotoxin or something that'll cause organ damage in here too?

"Make everyone drink water, then throw it back up. It'll wash out their stomachs."

"All right." Tillet turned away and went back to trying to save everyone's lives.

I looked over at Carla and noticed she'd opened the window and was in the middle of throwing something out.

I kicked her as hard as I could. "Wretch, what'd you just do?"

"Aaagh!" She was sent rolling across the ground.

She'd just given someone some sort of signal.

"Who put you up to this?"

I knew there was no way an idiot like her could've planned all this herself. It had to be the witches, that much was obvious. No one else operated this way. Who would fool a half-wit like Carla with a few false promises, then hand her a second poison claiming it was the antidote? There was also no one else who'd know about our gathering because it hadn't been announced publicly. Chieftains didn't have the connections in the royal castle to pull it off. Only the witches would know.

It seemed the goal was to make the assassination look like an accident, then install Carla as queen. Such a plan would only work if both the Ho family and

the queen were dead.

Would they really give Carla the poison, then leave the rest to chance? I wondered.

No one could predict how much of the wine we'd actually drink. Anyone with intellectually challenging tasks to attend to after dinner might not have partaken at all. Even if it had been mixed with the food rather than the alcohol, there could still be someone who didn't eat. It was a matter of fortune that I'd been spared because I didn't drink.

If Carol or the queen survived for just a few days, then Carla would never be recognized as the next queen, and the plan would fall apart. Carla might even be executed. If Rook or I survived, we'd gather the Ho family's army and march north. Carla's reign would be over no sooner than it began.

Would the witches really gamble everything on a method as unreliable as poison? Not a chance. I'd fought with the witches enough times already to know that that wasn't how they operated. That meant that the poison was only part of the plan.

How could they be sure to kill us while we're here, defended by royal swords...? They'd need an army at their disposal. It has to be the royal guard. That would explain the signal Carla had just given. I turned around and yelled, "Tillet! Are you still here?!"

Tillet was giving water to the queen, who was lying on the floor. It looked like her symptoms were getting worse.

"What?"

"Call whoever represents the royal swords."

"No need—speak to me."

"The witches talked Carla into this. They'll have an army in position ready to storm this room."

"What?!"

Royal Castle Island was well-defended, but the second order of the royal guard was already on the island, and the royal castle itself had no surrounding

wall to defend it.

The first order of the royal guard did, of course, have some presence here in the castle near the queen, and they'd present some resistance if they hadn't already turned traitor. They weren't present in large numbers, though—the main body of that force was stationed in a fortress somewhere else.

If the second order's soldiers were already in place, they could storm in quickly without ever clashing with the first order. A few hundred members of the first order might be here, but they'd be overcome quickly, and we'd be executed. Then, as the sole survivor of the royal lineage, Carla would assume the role of queen, leaving the first order unable to oppose her. It was a surefire way to ensure there were no survivors.

"Fortify our position," I told Tillet. "Whatever defense measures you have, use them now. We can't let them reach us."

I looked over at Carol. Her stomach had been washed out with water, and now a maid was giving her more. She appeared to be conscious, but suffering.

I wanted to scream.

Is the second order really coming for us? If so, then there was little point in the royal swords trying to resist them. I didn't know how many royal swords were stationed here in the castle, but they were probably no more than a dozen or so. At the most, I imagined a hundred. They wouldn't hold out long against a force that was thousands—perhaps ten thousand—strong.

We're trapped like rats. How can we break through the siege and escape?

Everyone other than me had ingested neurotoxin, leaving them unable to walk. Suzuya and Carol were pregnant, Suzuya heavily so. The poison made a bad situation even worse.

Can I somehow carry everyone out of here? No... Impossible. Could the Ho family's army save us?

Help from outside the royal capital would take several days to arrive. There were only a hundred or so soldiers at my family's residence.

How do we get out of this?

We put our four victims on stretchers and carried them up three flights of stairs to a room on the sixth floor. There, they were laid down in the same large bedroom.

"Why isn't the first order here by Her Majesty's side?" Tillet said. "They exist to aid her at times like this."

The room had a modestly sized balcony where someone could take a small step outside the room. When I put my head over the railing, I could see down to the ground.

Unfortunately, my suspicions were proven correct. Below us, a large group of soldiers had gathered at the castle's entrance.

"Orders were sent to the first order already," Tillet said. "If they haven't mobilized..."

"They've betrayed you. So much for royal authority," I said bitterly, unable to stop myself.

Carla's attempt to poison us would've failed if the royal swords had done their job properly. Even before that, their spies should've learned of the witches' plan.

"The first order wouldn't betray her! The witches must have given them falsified orders!"

What Tillet said made sense. Written orders could be easily faked since the witches would already have parchment bearing the royal seal. But even if that were the case, they should've rushed to our aid when they saw what was happening. The royal castle itself was under attack. Even with existing orders, real or not, to sow the seeds of confusion, they should've hurried to us. Defending this place from attack was their primary function.

More than likely, they'd been told that bandits had stormed the castle and now the second order was dealing with them. But even so, the first order should have responded, "That's a job for us. Get out of the castle while we handle it." Since they hadn't approached the castle, I was forced to assume that the first order's highest-ranking members had been bribed.

But lambasting the royal family over the sheer incompetence of its soldiers would do no good now. It wouldn't change anything.

"How long can we hold out here?" I asked Tillet.

"I don't know. We collapsed some of the corridors to make it hard to get through... I'd say we've got an hour or two."

"The royal family don't have any secret passageways?"

"None. Any escape route wouldn't get us off Royal Castle Island, so none were ever made."

That was entirely rational. The castle was on a river island. It would've taken advanced waterproofing technology to make an underground tunnel that didn't flood beneath the river. At any rate, a secret passage that led outside, but not off the island, would be useless in the event of an attack on the castle.

We were like rats that had been caught. We hadn't noticed the trap until it had already closed around us, leaving us no escape. Even when I'd carried Carol through the forest, I'd never let the enemy completely surround us like this. And since I'd come here with nothing but the clothes I was wearing, I didn't have a single trick up my sleeve that might help us break free.

"Is there no way out of this?" I asked.

"I don't know."

It took some effort to stop myself from erupting in rage. Don't tell me you "don't know," this is your home! If you don't know, no one does. Our lives—my parents, the queen, Carol, and two unborn children—depend on you. How can it end like this?! Especially after I found a new continent where everyone here could be safe.

"Can we use Carla as a hostage?"

When I tried to think of potential bargaining chips, Carla was all that came to mind. We had her gagged and tied up in the corner of the room, but I wasn't sure she'd be of any use. She was a mere pawn to the witches. If I put my dagger to her throat and held her as a shield, would a thousand soldiers simply let me walk out of the castle? Could we carry out four people on stretchers at

the same time? I couldn't imagine it working.

From the witches' point of view, our escape was the worst possible outcome. Carla's death might create a lot of new problems for them, but as long as they controlled the royal castle, they could issue edicts in Queen Shimoné's name while pretending she was still alive. It would be a desperate measure, but they'd still have hope. If we asked them to let us go in exchange for Carla's life, we'd be offering to stab them in the heart instead of cutting off their arm. They'd have no interest in such an offer.

Tillet had reached the same conclusion. "It won't work. They won't let you go so easily."

"Okay... Then our only chance is to lower a rope where the forces on the ground are weakest. It'll be all or nothing. We'll lower everyone down, then fight our way out."

"If Her Majesty orders it, I'll do so. But..." Tillet appeared to be thinking hard, then she wiped her eye with her hand.

Is she for real? She's crying?

"There's no time for tears. Save them."

"Even if you're saved, Queen Sh-Shimoné and Princess Carol are..."

"I said I'll take them with me."

"They won't survive. Not after drinking red canolia. The most we can do is ease their passing."

That can't be right... The poison can't be that deadly.

"It'll depend how much they drank," I said. "Carla only used half of that little bottle of hers."

"I already know how much they drank... And Queen Shimoné won't..."

But there's still hope for Carol?

"You're saying I should leave her behind?" I asked.

"Y-Yes... Even if you didn't, it's too late."

I grabbed Tillet by both shoulders. "What about Carol? Is there no hope for

her?"

"I d-don't know... But Queen Shimoné had finished most of her glass."

Carol had barely taken a sip. She mustn't have wanted to drink while I hadn't been. But Rook...

"Ugh," I groaned. Not here... Not like this.

"If Queen Shimoné orders it, we'll create an escape route for you all. But fighting soldiers face-to-face was never our specialty."

"I know."

A royal sword wouldn't lose against an armored soldier one-on-one, but there was no way they could each cut down five or six opponents at once.

The enemy commander was no fool. I could see from above that soldiers holding flaming torches were surrounding the castle. Even if we lowered a rope, we'd be defenseless while climbing down. A single jab with a spear would be fatal. Meanwhile, soldiers would surround us.

There's no way I can carry everyone down...

"Is there no way out of this...?" A sense of resignation came over me as I sat on a nearby stool.

"It's the middle of the night. You might make it if you go alone," Tillet suggested.

"You mean leave my wife-to-be when she's carrying my child? And my parents too? That's not even funny."

I'm not leaving without them.

"I'm...going to give orders. I'll see if I can buy us more time."

"Okay. I'm counting on you."

"Sorry," Tillet murmured before leaving the room.



About an hour passed before we began to hear noise on the floors below.

The end was drawing near. I had two choices left—pick up a spear and fight to

the end, or surrender. Both would end in death.

All I had left were regrets. I couldn't believe it was going to end this way.

"Lord Yuri, Queen Shimoné is calling for you," the maid tending to the queen told me.

She can still talk?

As I stood at Queen Shimoné's bedside, her pale face was shivering and she was groaning softly. "Bring your ear close," she muttered in a trembling voice.

I moved my face close to hers.

"I'm sorry...it turned out this way."

"Don't be."

"Please run... You have to escape."

But there was nowhere to go. "I can't... I'm sorry."

"I order you...as your queen. Save...the kingdom..."

I stood up, moving away from Queen Shimoné's pillow.

Run? Leave everyone behind? In a situation like this? That's not even funny. I can't do that. Everyone I would've given my life to protect—Rook, Suzuya, Carol—I'm supposed to abandon them all so I can live?

"Let's escape. I've prepared a rope," the same maid said. "I'm Henrique of the royal swords. I'll lead the way, so follow me."

"I'm not running."

"I'm not the one requesting it—I don't care about you. It's everyone's dying wish that you escape."

Queen Shimoné began to cough, perhaps in shock at our conversation. The handkerchief she'd held to her mouth was covered in bloody phlegm.

"Well? We have no time left," Henrique warned.

That was irritating to me. I finally gave in to my emotions and yelled out, "How can I run?! Haah. Haah..." Somehow, that one scream had been enough to leave me out of breath.

"I hate to say it, but it won't do any good to take anyone who's already drunk red canolia. The only one with mild symptoms is..." Henrique trailed off and looked over at Carol. "But she *does* have symptoms. It's likely she'll pass away. What sense would there be in you dying while trying to protect her?"

It was a straightforward argument and entirely rational. Nothing could've been more infuriating.

"Shut your mouth."

"You have no right to give orders to a royal sword."

"I said shut up! Unless you want me to kill you right now!"

Her rational reasoning annoyed me so much I wanted to murder her. If we'd been alone in another room, I might've done it.

"Very well. I'll be quiet. But let me know if you change your mind."

When Henrique stopped speaking, a heavy silence fell over the entire room. There was only the occasional cough, and the sounds of weapons clashing and screaming from the floors below.

I was trying to think of a way out. To my frustration, no ideas came to me. My mind was so active that it hurt. Like a computer left to infinitely compute pi, I was merely wasting my time, pondering over a problem with no definitive answer. I knew I wouldn't come up with anything, no matter how long I spent thinking.

"Oh...?"

In the distance, we heard a sound like a sheet billowing in the wind. Is that...a kingeagle? So they've finally lost patience. They're sending kingeagles up to us. I was surprised the enemy dared to try it at night.

I stepped out on the balcony. Indeed, I saw an eagle flying toward us. It was approaching slowly but surely.

What? Hold on. Is it going to crash right into us? It's not slowing down.

I took a step back as a gust entered the room.

The kingeagle had grasped the railing with both talons before folding away its

wings. That was no small feat, but wasn't merely a display of the rider's skill—only an intelligent bird with exceptional training could've understood its rider well enough to come to a complete stop on a railing at night.

"Yuri! Is that you, Yuri?!" I heard a familiar voice call out from over the eagle. "Yuri! Are you all right?!"

Myalo released her harness and began to climb down. In her haste, she balanced on one leg on the railing.

"You idiot, you'll hurt yourself." I rushed to support Myalo's leg with both arms. If she'd slipped here, she would've taken a six-story fall to the ground, headfirst.

"Wh-Whoa. I'm sorry!" Myalo grabbed my head to support herself.

I wrapped both arms around her lower body and slowly lowered her to the floor. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm terribly sorry." Myalo bowed her head low. "I was unable to predict the witches' movements."

"Forget about that, tell me why you're here."

"You, at least, have to escape." As Myalo spoke, she scanned the room to gather what information she could. Her face turned pale. "Was it poison?"

"Yes. They had Carla do it. She spiked our drinks."

"Which poison?"

"Red canolia...or so I'm told."

At that, Myalo's face grew even paler. "You're sure? It's not an easy poison to make."

"A royal sword told me with confidence. It's fairly certain."

"But what about you? You look fine."

"It was in the wine."

That was enough information for Myalo to guess the rest. "The witches didn't do their research. I'm glad you're safe."

You call this "safe"?

"I'm not running if it means leaving everyone," I told her.

"But if they drank red canolia...then..."

"They vomited soon after, and they only drank a little. It might not be too late."

I knew I wasn't looking at the situation objectively, and so I didn't have an ounce of confidence in my own words. I might've just been saying what I wanted to believe.

"Yuri, I know it's a difficult decision. But without you...what will happen to everyone else?"

"But..."

"What about Lilly, Sham, the company's employees, and everyone in Ho Province? They won't know what to do without you. And there's the new continent... I can't be its leader."

"You're talking about my parents and Carol! Two of them are pregnant!"

Henrique's voice came from behind us. "Lord Yuri."

"Didn't I tell you to shut up? Keep out of it."

"Your father's calling for you."

Rook?

I hurried to his side. Up close, he looked awful. There was no color to his face at all, and the blood he'd coughed up had stained the floor by the bed. His facial muscles were twitching as the neurotoxin took effect.

"What's wrong...dad?" I moved my ear closer to his pillow.

"Th-That's...my...eagle."

If that were the case, then Myalo must've brought it from the residence. I was surprised they'd let her borrow it.

"Take...White Sunset. Ride...ugh, together. That eagle can..."

Together? Two people on one eagle?

"But I can't leave you and mom..."

Rook made a large movement with his arm, putting it around my shoulders and pulling my head closer. His hand was abnormally hot and kept twitching. "You think we want you to die?! Just think about your wife! It's a man's job to protect his wife and child!"

Given Rook's condition, this was probably the loudest he could shout. I caught the scent of iron as wet droplets hit my face. I knew what it was.

Rook released me, then began coughing violently as he fell against the sheets. In the process, he stained the bed with copious amounts of blood.

"Go..." He muttered before lying back like he'd passed out.

"Yuri, I'm a Gudinveil," Myalo said. "I can talk my way out of this. Take Carol."

"All right. I'll accept the eagle."

I felt strangely certain of my decision. No more hesitating. *Rook taught me so much... He's been an amazing father.*

"The residence hasn't fallen yet," Myalo told me. "You can reach it from here."

It was dangerous for two people to ride one kingeagle, but Rook had judged it was possible, and he was the one who'd taught me everything I knew about eagles. Fortunately, we were on the sixth floor—that was enough height. The bird wouldn't need to climb at all if we were only going as far as the residence. If we could glide the whole distance, then we had a chance.

"I will, but I have to kill someone before I can go." I walked to the corner of the room and drew my dagger in front of Carla.

"Mmmgh mmmgh!" Carla had turned pale and began struggling, but she couldn't escape the ropes that bound her.

"Yes. I think it's best to kill her now," Myalo agreed.

This wasn't just personal. After Carol and I left, the witches would attempt to install Carla on the throne as their puppet. They'd gone too far to back down. There was no sense in leaving her alive—she would only bring us harm.

"Wait," Tillet said.

The dagger in my hand came to a stop. "Don't tell me you're going to get in my way."

"I can't let you kill her." There was fierce determination in Tillet's eyes. It was, after all, a royal sword's duty to protect the royal family.

It was similar to how a city guard wouldn't just stand by and watch while someone was murdered in front of them, but this issue could be fixed by following a simple procedure.

"If you need the queen's permission, go get it," I said.

"Very well."

Tillet walked over to the queen and exchanged a few words with her. A moment later, she returned.

"You can't. I won't let you kill her," Tillet said.

I was dumbfounded. "Don't be stupid. We're in this mess because you didn't do your job, and now you're getting in my way?"

My head was beyond the boiling point. I'd been biting my tongue up until now because I knew there was no use looking for someone to blame, but I considered this whole situation the royal family's blunder. They were the ones who'd invited guests, only for them to be poisoned. I had no idea how an idiot like Carla had found a chance to add the poison, but the royal family was responsible for whatever mismanagement had allowed it.

"Please consider Queen Shimoné's feelings..."

"Her feelings?"

You're talking to me about feelings? What kind of joke is this? Think about how I feel. I'm begging you. I'd want to kill her for this even if it wasn't a strategic necessity.

"Can I talk to Queen Shimoné myself?" I asked.

"Yes, go ahead."

I walked over to the queen and sat at her bedside. "What's the meaning of

this?" I asked her.

"Leave...Carla...to me..."

You'll execute her yourself? When someone disgraces the family, an outsider shouldn't be the one who cleans up? But I need to make sure this gets done right before I can leave.

"Let me have...one last...talk with her."

"There isn't time for that."

"She might...let your parents...be spared."

That made me reconsider.

"Will you...?" Queen Shimoné closed her eyes, and her voice became barely audible. It sounded like a wish more sincere than any she'd ever made before.

"All right, you have a point."

"Take care... I'm so...sorry."

There was nothing for it now. I didn't have time to argue, and taking matters into my own hands was hard while royal swords were here.

"All right. I'll leave Carla to you," I told Tillet.

"I'm in your debt," she replied.

Though Queen Shimoné had said my parents might be spared, that simply meant they wouldn't be killed. It didn't mean there was a way to cure them. An expert in poisons had said so herself. I'd never see Rook or Suzuya again, so I knew I had to say my goodbyes.

I knelt by Suzuya's side. "Mom... I'm sorry. I'm going."

"Yuri, please...hold me before you go."

I carefully lay against Suzuya's chest. She removed both of her arms from beneath the sheets and wrapped them around my shoulders like it was an everyday hug.

"Thank you... I've been so happy just to be your mom. But I know you get lonely, so I'm worried. Will you be okay?"

"Yes... Yes."

Knowing I'd never see her again, memories of the care she'd given me since I was an infant played back in my mind. My mother had shown me kindness beyond comprehension. She'd made our household warm and full of love. Tears spilled from both of my eyes, and I couldn't help but sob.

"You're a kind person, Yuri, so you might feel regrets, but...don't worry about us. It's much more important to me to know that you're happy."

"I'm sorry, mom. I'm sorry..."

Tears poured from my eyes one after another. We were only here to prepare for my marriage. I would've kept my nose out of things if I'd known it would come to this. I wished I hadn't found the new continent, and that I hadn't threatened the witches. If I hadn't, maybe none of this would've happened. I wouldn't have lost anything.



"It's all right. Though I wish I could've seen your wedding ceremony. Oh, and my grandchild too... And I wish I could've brought my own child into the world..."

That should've been her future, but now it was all gone. Suzuya might've enjoyed her old age in happiness, surrounded by her children and grandchildren. It was the life she should've lived. It shouldn't end like this. Not for her.

"But Yuri, what I want more than anything is your joy. We've protected that... So I'm content. Please, if you remember one thing, remember that I was happy."

"Yes... Yes."

"Now you can go. Yuri, I love you."

Suzuya hugged me again, more powerfully than before. When she let go, she seemed reluctant to release me. I didn't want to leave her side either—it was a powerful feeling. But to stay here with her would be to destroy everything she was wishing for.

I released her and stepped back. Suzuya smiled as I did it.

On the neighboring bed, Rook was looking at me. He didn't say anything, but there was power in his gaze.

I gripped his hand, which was resting above the sheet. "Dad, mom. Thank you for raising me."

"Sure." Rook coughed. It seemed to hurt him just to speak. His shouting earlier had left him terribly hoarse. "Now go."

Though still reluctant to leave, I walked away from my parent's beds.

After wiping away my tears and blowing my nose, I turned to Carol's bed.

"Carol. Are you okay?" I sat on the side of the bed and stroked her cheek.

"Sorry. I'm always trouble, aren't I?"

Carol seemed to be in much better shape than everyone else. She didn't look

well, but she could talk normally without her voice trembling. Her vocal cords clearly weren't paralyzed at all. I felt warmth from her cheeks, and she wasn't coughing up blood.

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"Think you're okay?" I asked.

"Yeah, I'm good."

She seemed well enough. I got up from the bed.

"Myalo. You said you'll survive this, but are you sure?"

"Of course."

"Then take this." I handed her my dagger.

"This is...?"
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"Two people on one eagle. I need to reduce our weight however I can."

I took off my shoes and most of my clothes, except for my shirt and my underwear.

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"Okay. Carol, can you stand?"

"I...think so..."
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As she tried to get up from the bed, her legs gave way, sending her falling backward onto the floor. The paralysis was making it hard for her to move.

"Royal swords—someone help her."

I would've done it myself, but I had to get on the eagle.

"Princess Carol, please allow me." Tillet supported Carol with her shoulder as they moved to the railing.

Out on the balcony, I first put one foot on the railing, then climbed up onto White Sunset's back. After fastening the harness straps directly to my body, I took the reins. White Sunset's head had been facing toward the room since Myalo landed, so we needed to turn around to prepare for takeoff.

The thoroughness of Rook's training was clear—White Sunset understood exactly what I wanted. With no effort at all, the eagle rotated around a talon that held the railing, leaving us facing the opposite direction. This was no

ordinary eagle. Most would've been confused by the instruction and might've simply taken off, not knowing what else to do. This simple action required a high level of trust in humans combined with the intellect of the bird itself. It was a feat only possible when the two factors were present in combination.

"Can you lift Carol up to me?"

With the greatest of care, Tillet helped Carol up onto the railing, leaving nothing between her and a fall to the ground. Once Carol had both feet on the railing, she extended a hand toward me. Tillet kept her arm wrapped around Carol's waist to make sure she wouldn't slip.

Carol and I firmly grabbed each other's wrists, then I pulled her up. Somehow, she was able to sit behind me on the saddle.

"Put your arms around me and hold on tight," I told her.

"Okay."

Carol wrapped her arms around my waist. Compared to the many times she'd held me before, there was worryingly little strength in her arms.

"The rope," I called.

The only saddles made for two were joke items, sold by sellers of curios. Needless to say, this saddle was designed for one person. After Tillet passed me the rope, I tied it around us so it formed a cross on her back that was secured at my shoulders, then bound us together again at our waists. Now we were all set.

"Myalo, take every possible precaution. Whatever happens, don't die."

"Understood."

"Carol. We're going to start with a free fall to convert our altitude to speed. Don't be alarmed by the sudden drop."

"A-All right."

"Let's go."

I used the reins to urge White Sunset forward, and then we dropped from the sixth floor, falling directly down toward the ground.

Afterword

It's been some time. Fudeorca here.

We've somehow made it to volume 6. The whole story's too long, isn't it? I'd decided that this was where the plot was heading before serialization had even begun, but I also chose to add some major foreshadowing and a few twists. That's why it's grown to be as lengthy as it is now.

In this volume, the new continent was finally discovered. Since I first began planning the story, I anguished over whether or not to include indigenous people (corresponding to Native Americans). In the end, I decided not to. Maybe that feels a little too convenient, but the main reason was that I thought there'd be no way to handle the subject matter adequately within the story.

I decided that if I were to include indigenous people, it wouldn't make much sense to have a single tribe living in just one specific region. The two continents north and south would be brimming with foreign cultures and unknown languages of the people, forcing me to write a plot involving new diplomatic relationships being gradually formed with the countries that had been created by those populations. I realized that interactions with those indigenous people would mean solving problems that no one has ever found a good answer to. Tackling those particular subjects head-on would force me to make the story far too complicated, and it would also necessitate a lot of lengthy descriptions.

If I were to take the story in that direction, Yuri might've had to leave the Shiyalta Kingdom for a long time to pioneer the land. Not only would that be too much of a digression, but also a plot development where he leaves his wartorn homeland in the middle of conflict wouldn't make any sense.

The only other option would be to have another character head over to deal with the situation, but first they'd have to learn the language. In addition, misunderstandings with the indigenous people would lead to some bloodshed, which would be followed by peace negotiations... Basically, there'd be some complicated reports and constant questions for Yuri in Shiyalta. For any reader

who wants to see the plot on the old continent develop more quickly, that would create a lot of long, irrelevant passages of text to read through, leaving them bored. I could just gloss over all those issues, but if I did that, I might as well not tackle the theme in the first place.

Hence, I ultimately decided not to do it at all. The situation is that no indigenous people exist on the new continent, making it virgin land waiting to be claimed.

Even in the comments on Shosetsuka ni Naro, several individuals said they'd wanted to see descriptions of a new continent and accounts of the troubles encountered there. Though I was grateful to receive these comments, I already have my hands full describing the conflicts and diplomacy happening on the old continent.

Speaking of the state of the world, back in volume 4's afterword, I mentioned a huge meteorite that had fallen on Alaska. Following a shock great enough to move tectonic plates and cause changes in lateral earth pressure, the magma stored under Yellowstone erupted violently, causing North America to cool. That, in turn, wiped out early settlers on the continent, along with the culture they'd developed. That situation won't be discovered by cultural anthropologists until a hundred years or so after Yuri's era, which is why it's not mentioned in this volume and won't be mentioned later. Consider it auxiliary world-building.

Now, once again, I have some remaining afterword space to fill, so I'll go back to writing about the scene from volume 5's afterword.

The airplane cabin was dimly lit, and amid the roar of jet engines, I heard a voice that sounded like it belonged to a middle-aged man.

"Someone passed out! Somebody! Call for help!"

I was sitting some distance away and didn't think I'd be able to help, so I remained where I was and watched the scene play out.

Up ahead, I saw a brown figure who appeared to have fallen forward. A woman was standing beside that person, and beside her was the man making a

lot of noise.

A cabin attendant soon came over.

"What seems to be the problem?" she asked.

"Someone collapsed!" the man cried.

"Please calm down, sir."

"We've got to give him CPR or something!"

"Please calm down first."

This was the odd exchange they had.

What's that flight attendant doing? I wondered to myself.

There were multiple things to do when someone collapsed. She should've checked their pulse and breathing immediately, called for a doctor using the plane's announcement system, and asked other members of the collapsed person's party whether that person had any health conditions. But instead, the flight attendant's main focus was making this man calm down, rather than trying to remedy the actual problem.

"What are you doing? Call a doctor, quickly," he replied.

"All right, but first I'd like you to calm down and return to your seat."

"There's no time for that!"

"All right," the flight attendant said.

The floor was suddenly illuminated by the flight attendant using their flashlight. This resulted in gasps from everyone watching (me included). A miniature suitcase—someone's carry-on baggage—lay on the floor.

I was speechless. I wondered whether the man was drunk.

"Does this luggage belong to you, ma'am?" the flight attendant asked the woman who was standing stock-still beside it.

Now I guessed that she dropped the suitcase while trying to get it out of the overhead compartment.

"Are you looking for something?" the flight attendant asked.

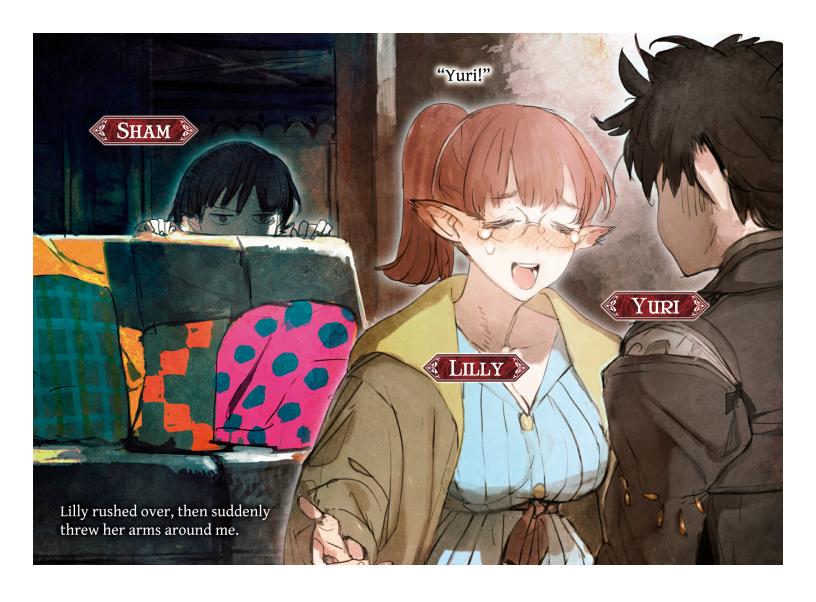
"No, it doesn't matter..." the woman said.

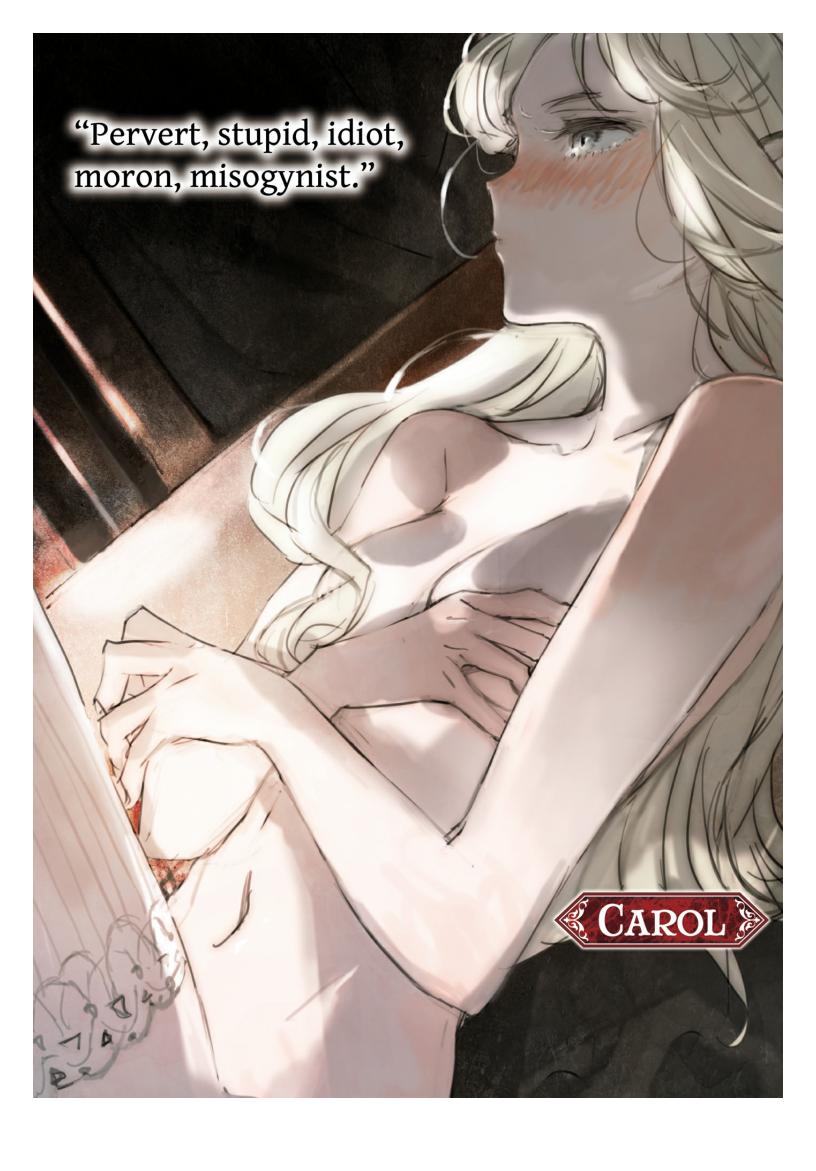
"I'll put it back in that case."

The flight attendant lifted the suitcase back into the overhead compartment before walking off as if nothing had happened.

The End







Bonus Short Stories

A Conference

I, Carol Flue Shaltl, was in a conference room in the royal castle.

In the room with me were my mother, Tillet, who'd been made captain of the royal swords after she'd saved Yuri and me in Kilhina; Kien Rube, who'd been summoned from Rube Province; and Metina Arkhorse, captain of the first order of the royal guard.

"And that means there's no way for you to fortify the hill here?" my mother asked. "Even if I provide funding for the project?"

"That is correct," Kien Rube replied. "I propose the funds are instead used to buy armaments for the Rube family forces. That would be an effective way to use it on national defense."

"Hmm... Metina, your thoughts?"

"I'm inclined to think that it might not be impossible," Metina Arkhorse responded vaguely.

I wasn't fond of this woman. Military strategy never seemed to be at the forefront of her mind—her thinking was always more political.

"And you, Carol?"

"I propose that we follow Sir Kien's advice. Remember that Lady Metina hasn't actually visited the region. Any construction or fortification must begin with an inspection of the area. I don't think we can argue with Sir Kien at all without first visiting the site for ourselves. Otherwise, I can only imagine how difficult it would be for him to refute uninformed proposals from those who've never seen the hill we're discussing," I replied, the words leaving my mouth sounding more scathing than I'd intended.

"I see..." It was clear on mother's face how much distress it caused when I rejected her idea. It was as though I'd sent her anxieties bubbling up to the

surface.

Mother had never studied at the Knight Academy, nor had she ever sat through a lecture on fortification methods. To make matters worse, she had illusions about Verdun Fortress and its former reputation for being impregnable.

Verdun Fortress had towered high on the edge of Kilhina, where it had held back enemy forces for many years. She had a powerful desire to build something similar on the border of our own kingdom.

But Verdun Fortress had been a special case. The rocks of the mountain on which it had sat on had been ideal for quarrying, making the task of carving walls into the mountain a profitable venture. In other words, the construction had paid for itself. The kingdom merely had to oversee the process of cutting away the rock to ensure that a fortress formed from what was left behind.

Very few fortresses could be built in such a convenient manner. In times of peace, their lack of industrial function or profitable application made fortresses look like vanity projects. It was left to the state to fund the construction, but such projects would eat up a substantial percentage of the annual budget. Even when one was completed, there was no guarantee that an enemy would ever approach it.

"As I've stated before, efforts to transform that small mountain into a fortress would take us ten years at the very least," Kien Rube explained. "Furthermore, the location would be within range of cannon fire from ships on the sea. We might pour our efforts into this structure only to find it serves little purpose. It would be far wiser for us to spend those resources strengthening Rube Province's existing fortresses."

"Hm..." Mother gave out a troubled sigh. "If you're quite sure, Sir Kien, then I'll shelve this project."

"Then the construction funds can—"

"I'm afraid not. I can't allow that."

"Very well. Then perhaps we might conclude this discussion here." Kien Rube rose from his chair.

For him, coming here had been a fruitless journey. It was an awful way for us to waste his precious time. But I couldn't apologize to him for my mother's decisions, or I'd be stepping out of line. I was, after all, a member of the royal family.

"I appreciate you coming so far to visit us." That was as much as I could say to him.

"Good bye," Kien Rube said simply before leaving the room.

Ether's Pilgrimage

Ether Wichita—having turned twenty-three that year—was visiting the city of Kelwan, which was close to the Korlan Dragon Empire's imperial capital, Ashleia.

It was a city of moderate size that faced the sea (which corresponded to the Mediterranean Sea on Earth). It served as a gateway to Ashleia, while also being the city closest to the sacred tomb. That made it a common stopover for pilgrims of Yeesusism.

In recent history, strong measures had been taken to prevent those pilgrims from proselytizing there. Such measures were supposedly intended to prevent another conflict like the Xurxes Campaign. As a consequence, adherents of Yeesusism weren't permitted to live in this city. Pilgrims were given a maximum of one week before they had to leave. Ether, however, was there for research purposes and had therefore been given leave to remain for a maximum of one month.

The day after her arrival, she began by visiting the sacred tomb.

The sacred tomb, which had made the Wichita family famous throughout the world after its discovery by Catholica Wichita, was no more than a small, empty hole. Not a single image, nor a single line of text, had been carved into its walls. Researchers who came here could do no more than examine a few scratches on the stone walls made by chisels and speculate about the sort of tools the creators of this hole had possessed. It was, in almost all aspects, rather unremarkable.

But this had been the resting place of their lord, whose sacred body now slept

in Vaticanus.

Ether left the sacred tomb and stood by its entrance, where a wall had once existed. It had been the wall, sculpted from sun-baked bricks and plaster, that the disciples had used to seal Yeesus inside during his long sleep. After Catholica had found the tomb about a thousand years ago, the wall had been pulled down. It was now another holy artifact kept in Vaticanus.

Ether wondered what had gone through Catholica's mind. Behind her were the old remains of a ruined city. Once known as Halo City, it was a detached territory that had once been controlled by the Xurxes Holy Empire. It had been built to defend the sacred tomb, so that their lord's slumber would never be disturbed. But, of course, it had triggered a war that resulted in countless deaths...all for a mere corpse that they'd believed was a sleeping man.

It was core to their belief system that the body of Yeesus still held life, and to awaken him was to disobey his teachings. It was a belief that had resulted in countless deaths.

Those who'd died as religious martyrs had been the lucky ones. The soldiers of the Korlan Dragon Empire had simply perished because they'd gotten caught up in the fighting.

If Yeesus should have been left to sleep, then Catholica Wichita, a great man whose name lived on in historical records and even in the name of the Catholica Papal State, had done more harm than good. If only he hadn't discovered the tomb, the sacred body of Yeesus would still be here in this remote spot by the coast, where no one would ever find it.

Despite all that, the importance of those remains to Yeesusism was undeniable.

His body was kept shrouded in mystery. Most of the religion's adherents believed that some divine power prevented the body of Yeesus from decaying and prevented his skin from dying out—they believed he was still breathing to this day.

As someone responsible for taking care of Yeesus, Ether had of course seen his body for herself, but only on a handful of occasions each year. Absolute silence was maintained around him, so very few were allowed to get close, and

their visits kept as infrequent as possible. Even the pope himself couldn't visit the sacred body whenever he pleased.

Would it be better if Catholica Wichita had never made his discovery? Or had it all been for the best? she wondered. Through the benefit of time and hindsight, Ether should've been well positioned to judge these events of the distant past, and yet she was still searching for an answer. What must've gone through Catholica Wichita's mind when he first saw the sacred body?

Ether's Dragon Hunt

Ether Wichita—having turned twenty-three that year—was visiting the city of Kelwan, which was close to the Korlan Dragon Empire's imperial capital, Ashleia.

It was a city of moderate size that faced the sea (which corresponded to the Mediterranean Sea on Earth). It served as a gateway to Ashleia, while also being the city closest to the sacred tomb. That made it a common stopover for pilgrims of Yeesusism.

With her monthlong research trip almost over, Ether stowed her thick bundle of notes in her travel bag and retired to her dusty bed.

There was nothing left to do. Tomorrow, she would make preparations to set out for Malheim by ship the day after.

Perhaps I'll do some sightseeing tomorrow, Ether thought. She'd already spent a day sightseeing soon after she'd arrived, but she wanted to make the most of her time abroad. The idea of spending another day exploring pleased her.

As she was thinking over her plans, there was a knock at the door.

"Professor Ether, are you in there? It's Kelni."

"Yes, I'm here." Ether rose from her bed, unlocked the door, and invited Kelni inside.

"I'm sorry to bother you, but there's something you simply must hear."

"What is it?"

After arriving in Ashleia, Ether had been assured that Kelni was someone she could trust. She'd employed him as a guide over the past month. But once she'd lodged at this inn, she'd paid him for his services. Because he'd lived up to his reputation and performed his job well, she'd also included a sizable tip. At any rate, it meant that his contract had ended.

"I arrived home a while ago, and found the dragon hunters who operate close to me were preparing to head out. They said they've been given a target. If you're interested, maybe you'd like to witness the hunt."

Dragon hunting was a line of business that had developed recently in the Dragon Empire. These people could slay wild dragons in exchange for a reward, rather than leaving the expensive problem to the ruling classes to handle.

"Are you quite sure?"

"Yes, they're friends of mine."

"Then I'd love to."

It was rare to encounter a dragon hunter, and even rarer to be allowed to accompany one. This was an opportunity she couldn't pass up.

"Oh, but won't I be late for my departure the day after tomorrow?"

"I wouldn't have made the suggestion if that were the case. Fortunately, we won't be going far. We're going to aim to reach the dragon before sunrise, and then we'll be back sometime tomorrow. But we have to head out right away."

"A-All right." Ether quickly packed her belongings into a small bag and hurried out of the room.

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"Professor Ether... Professor Ether."

Someone shook Ether's shoulders vigorously, waking her from a dream.

"I'm sorry. I must've fallen asleep."

The party had set out before sunset that day, and after traveling part of the way by carriage, they'd used a telescope to locate the dragon's nest among the fairly distant rocky mountains.

After they'd left their luggage far behind in the shadow of a rock, they'd taken turns sleeping until the early hours of the morning. Ether had hoped to stay awake through the night so she could write down the anecdotes she'd heard from other party members, but at some point, she must have fallen asleep.

"I'll be ready to leave in just a moment."

"You remember what I told you on the road yesterday?" the head dragon hunter asked in a quiet voice.

"Yes. I'm not to get in the way. That means staying silent, watching from a distance, and fleeing at the sound of cannon fire."

"That's right. Then let's go. Apply the oil and load the cannonballs."

The dragon hunters all began moving at once.

The cannonballs were removed from buckets full of thick oil and loaded into two small cannons that resembled oversized guns. The cannons were then coated with more oil.

The group believed—whether accurately or inaccurately—that dragons were sensitive to the smell of metal. That was why they soaked the cannonballs in oil until they approached the beast. Since they couldn't do the same with whole cannons, those were instead coated with oil immediately before the approach.

Each cannon had handles at three points to allow a group to carry it.

"All right. Let's go," the head dragon hunter said.

Ether put her notebook in her bag, which she left behind to collect later.

Two cannons were carried between the six hunters, three members per cannon. The party walked over dry land with sparse vegetation. Despite the heaviness of their cargo, the six hunters were almost silent, other than the crunch of sandy ground beneath their feet. They'd left their camel behind.

This must be what an army would call a dawn raid, Ether thought.

The party made sure not to light any lamps to keep themselves hidden. The half-moon in the sky was dim, and even the silhouette of the mountain they'd seen in the evening was lost in the darkness now.

Ether had no trouble keeping up with the party because the men moved slowly while carrying the cannons.

After an hour or so of silent walking, the scenery had changed.

Color was starting to appear in the eastern sky as the night came to an end. The sun had begun to rise.

That was bad news for dragon hunters. Judging by the environment around them, it would still be some time before they reached the dragon's nest.

They had planned to fire their cannons just as dawn broke, which—according to their own theory—would be the ideal time to strike. Dragons, similarly to reptiles, grew lethargic as the temperature dropped. In dry regions like this, the nights were significantly colder than the days. Therefore, according to them, dawn would be the perfect time to attack since they'd have enough light to see, while the dragon in question would still be sluggish.

As the party began climbing the slope, the cannon bearers breathed heavily and slowed their pace.

There was considerable light by the time they'd drawn near the dragon. The chances of a mishap seemed high.

The enormous beast before them was no tamed dragon. With no ropes to hold it down, it would lunge at humans the moment it saw them. Fortunately, it was sleeping. With a mixture of admiration and trepidation, Ether watched the dragon hunters at work from a distance, as agreed.

The head dragon hunter used a gesture to give a basic order. Complex instructions were apparently unnecessary. Everyone knew their role as the cannon operators took aim.

"Fire!" the head dragon hunter yelled.

There were two loud clanks that were almost simultaneous, followed by a cannon blast that sounded loud enough to rupture eardrums. However, there was only one explosion.

The commotion and intense pain the dragon must have felt were enough to wake it immediately. The creature threw its wings out wide as it rose up, writhing in pain.

Ether felt rooted to the spot by her own curiosity. But she remembered that she'd agreed to run, and fear soon took control. She turned and fled.

As she made her way down the rocky slope, her curiosity won out once more, and she turned to look back. She could see the dragon rampaging atop the rocky peak. She watched as a man was thrown high into the air, having been whipped by the creature's tail. Before she could witness the man's body hit against the rocks, the fear returned, and she looked away. She began descending at a faster pace.

"Haah, haah," Ether panted.

Her legs had carried her down the mountain too quickly for her lungs to keep up. As she stopped to catch her breath, she finally took another look back. The head dragon hunter, Kelni, and three cannon bearers were running after her. The dragon hadn't given chase.

The head dragon hunter wiped his sweat with his sleeve. "Phew. You sure can run, miss."

"What happened to your other three men, sir?"

"Hm? Oh, the misfire caught them off guard, and they started running too late. But one shot's enough to kill a dragon. We use two cannons in case of misfires like this."

"We have to save them at once," Ether insisted.

"Right. We'll be coming back with the camel. The dragon should be about spent by then. If the men are still alive, they'll be hiding nearby." The head dragon hunter spoke casually. It was as if the deaths of three of his men meant nothing to him.

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The Conqueror from a Dying Kingdom: Volume 6

by Fudeorca

Translated by Shaun Cook Edited by Maral RahmanPour

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