

Written by
**KAORU
SHINOZAKI**

Illustrated by
KWKM



FAILURE FRAME

I BECAME THE STRONGEST AND **ANNIHILATED EVERYTHING**

WITH LOW-LEVEL SPELLS

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A young girl with long, flowing white hair and blue eyes. She is wearing a white, high-collared dress with blue accents and a large blue rose on her left shoulder. She is holding a large, ornate sword with a blue blade and a gold hilt. The background is a soft, hazy blue with some faint, stylized floral patterns.

CATTLEA STRAUMMS

“In the name of
Cattlea Straumms—
I appoint you,
Seras Ashrain,
Captain of the Holy
Knights of Neah.”

A close-up of a character with long, flowing blonde hair and a black visor covering their eyes. They are wearing a white, high-collared uniform with a blue sash. Their right hand is raised, showing a black glove with a blue stripe. The background is a soft, hazy blue with some faint, stylized floral patterns.

SERAS ASHRAIN

“YES.
IT APPEARS
WE ARE
SURROUNDED.”

MAKIA RENAUFIA

Makia tightened her grip on the handle of her sword. Seras stood back to back with Makia and raised her own blade.

“LADY SERAS”



They were now merely
distant memories.
And yet, inside her
they remained.



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Seven Seas Entertainment

HAZURE WAKU NO [JOUTAI IJOU SUKIRU] DE SAIKYOU NI NATTA ORE
GA SUBETE WO JUURIN SURU MADE VOL. 11.5

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Illustrations by KWKM

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TRANSLATION: Ben Trethewey
ADAPTATION: Adam Lee
LOGO DESIGN: George Panella
COVER DESIGN: Mariel Dágá
INTERIOR DESIGN: Clay Gardner
INTERIOR LAYOUT: M. A. Lewife
COPY EDITOR: Meg van Huygen
PROOFREADER: Amanda Eyer
SENIOR EDITOR: Nibedita Sen
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Salvador Chan Jr., April Malig, Jules Valera
MANAGING EDITOR: Alyssa Scavetta
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis
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EPILOGUE

AFTERWORD



LONG AGO—there was a nation on the continent known as Hylings. High elves and humans lived side by side there for a time, until the humans began to prey upon the high elves. They did not kill them, but instead made them slaves—beloved pets, meant to amuse. The remaining high elves were driven out of the nation.

At some point the high elves—contracted with the spirits as they were—sought help from the Great Spirit, said to be the most powerful of all the spirits. Their prayers were answered.


The Great Spirit moved the high elves to a place separated from the rest of the continent and known as the “World of the In-between.” It concealed the corridor that connected their new world to the continent with a powerful barrier known as the Great Spell.

Upon their arrival in the new land and the reformation of their nation, the Great Spirit mandated a set of strict laws for its inhabitants to obey. Respect of these laws was the price the Great Spirit demanded of the high elves as a condition of its assistance.

“The order that comes from absolute law will ensure an everlasting peace,” spoke the Great Spirit.

The high elves of New Hylings revered the Great Spirit that had saved their lives, and the spirit continued to protect their people.

It is said that the high elves continue to follow the laws to this very day...



Prologue

HYLINGS—A NATION sealed away by the Great Spell. No army could breach it, no matter their numbers. No one could enter the nation of Hylings without the permission of the Great Spirit, who still oversaw its protection. Not even the divines were capable of breaking through the barrier.

The inhabitants of Hylings were long in years and ears. They were the elves—specifically, high elves. Elion was the Capital of Hylings. Orio Ashrain—the King of Hylings—paced his personal chambers in the Palace of Quinrail, impatient for the time to come. He gazed out of the large window that overlooked the lush green town below.

“ ... ”

No matter how many times Orio experienced this, he knew he would never get used to it.

I can become accustomed to almost anything else. It truly is strange.

He laughed at himself in self-reproach. He wished he could be by her side, but tradition dictated the king could not be in the room when it happened. All he could do was wait.

Hands clasped behind his back, he looked out at the clear, crisp sky beyond the window pane.

“...Great Spirit. Please keep her safe this time too...”

Then, the news finally came.

“Your majesty.”

Just what he had been waiting for.

“A healthy baby has been born.”

The queen, Shireen Ashrain, lay in bed with a look of pure adoration in her eyes. Cradled in her lithe arms was an infant. Shireen smiled at the king as he entered the room and her eyes grew softer as Orio gave his thanks.

“It’s a girl,” she said.

“A girl.” The king approached his wife’s side, careful not to make a sound. He looked down at his child.

It might sound trite to put it this way, but...

...She’s the most beautiful thing that I have ever seen.

Has it been that long since a girl has been born to our house? Is it simply having my wish fulfilled that is making me feel this way, or is this child more special than I can even imagine?

Orio put his hands together and offered a prayer of thanks to the Great Spirit.

“—Thank you. Thank you for watching over us.”

He turned to his wife.

“Her name...?” Orio looked down at the babe’s face once more.

“We already chose a name for if she was a girl, remember?”

“Then it’s settled.”

The two of them looked down at their daughter’s face, the child they brought into this world. The king smiled at the queen.

“Seras,” she said, naming her for the first time in her life. “Seras Ashrain.”

Chapter 1:

The High Elf Princess

THE PEOPLE OF ELION rejoiced at the birth of their new princess—the first daughter born to the Ashrain royal family in ages.

In the nation of Hylings, males of the royal line would leave the city once they reached the age of 15, to undertake the “King’s Training” and prepare for their ascent to the throne. At the time of Seras’s birth, all the princes were away from the capital. This was by design: High elves lived for centuries and allowing several successors to the throne to remain in the capital would likely spark conflict.

The princes sent from Elion were given lands and learned how to lead others and rule as lords. Those that never ascended to the throne were usually allowed to continue ruling over the lands that they had been granted (though there were...exceptions). The “King’s Training” took years to complete.

Still, the princes were permitted to visit the capital temporarily, at staggered intervals. The king decided when a prince could come home—his sons were not allowed to return of their own volition. And yet, there were no particular restrictions on the king and queen visiting their children. The two of them paid regular visits to their sons’ domains with the subtle intention of ascertaining their progress.

But what of the daughters, you might ask?

Daughters of the royal family were cherished and raised in the city. The daughters of Hylings had no right to ascend to the throne and were thus less likely to cause conflict. Besides, the Royal House of Ashrain was rarely blessed with a daughter—it had been 500 years since one had been born in the family. Elves were much less fertile than humans, and they required a long period of rest after a birth to bring their next child into the world.

It was under these circumstances that the House of Ashrain welcomed a daughter—Seras Ashrain.

“...And *you* are very much the long-awaited daughter that the king and queen have been praying for, Lady Seras,” said her wet nurse, Crecheto.

Little Seras, who enjoyed learning new words, repeated it back to her. “Long aw-awaited.”

Crecheto Rieden gazed softly at the young princess. Seras’s wet nurse was a warm, simple woman. She was a bit *too* nice, perhaps, but she was grounded and strong-minded. She did not just serve as Seras’s wet nurse, but also as the princess’s general caretaker and tutor. She was dependable, hardworking, and well respected. The Rieden family had served the royals for many generations. They were well trusted by the Ashrains, and most of the wet nurses to princesses of ages past had come from the Rieden line.

Seras was growing fast and strong.

She had only just reached the age of six. Since around her third birthday, those around the royal house had been stunned at her promising beauty. They were all astounded as she developed into the next stage of her life.

Her cuteness was still dominant, of course, but her beauty was starting to shine through in her face. She had the light, honey-colored hair of her mother, silkier to the touch than the finest of hand-spun silk. One might be pardoned for thinking such comparisons were made with the intent of flattering the royal family—but anyone who laid hands on Seras’s hair would marvel at its texture, whether the royals were present or not. Rumors spread that every word of praise heaped on the young princess was well-earned...and soon, all who heard the rumors were incredibly eager to touch her hair and determine their veracity for themselves.



Her sky-blue eyes were completely cloudless.

“Not even the clearest waters of the most beautiful lake in Hylings can compare to the beauty of the eyes of our princess,” said some.

Others, when asked to name the most beautiful jewels in all of Hylings, would claim that the eyes of the princess had obviously claimed that title. Such praise became a trend among the nobles of the nation.

Her skin was as milky white as fresh, untrodden snow to some...

...As smooth as a freshly peeled boiled egg to others (such as the king).

Most astonishing of all was the delicate clarity of the princess's features. All who saw her declared that Seras Ashrain was completely perfect. Her pretty little nose was symmetrical, her little head formed of smooth, beautiful curves. Her pointed ears—typical of her elven race—were cast from the same mold, so finely shaped that one could spend hours just gazing at them. There was nothing inharmonious about any aspect of her face. The people of Hylings whispered that it was as if everything about her had been blessed—a favorite of the Great Spirit, miraculously perfect in every detail.

It was only natural that the people thought she was beautiful—but Seras was confused by it. She understood that those who saw her were happy...but sometimes she felt strange.

Everyone was looking at her, but they were never really seeing *her* at all.

Who are they really looking at, I wonder?

Sometimes Seras truly felt that way.

She wanted to confess her feelings to someone. To get a reaction. But to most people, Seras was their perfect princess. Even as a young child, she understood that much. She did not want to ask them strange questions and have them give her strange looks in return.

Seras didn't like getting strange looks.

“Baaya.”

“What is it, princess?”

And so she resolved to ask *Baaya*—Crecheto—for advice.

It had been Crecheto herself who had asked Seras to call her “Baaya”—it was tradition that the wet nurses of the Rieden family were called by that name, regardless of their age or outward appearance.

“Is it good to be pretty?” Seras asked.

Crecheto didn’t give her strange looks when Seras asked such questions—the ones that weren’t very *princess-like*.

“Yes, it is a good thing, princess,” her wet nurse replied, smiling warmly as ever. She was the only one whom Seras could be open and honest with, never hiding her doubts. That was why Seras loved her.

“Is it a good thing for *me*, though?” asked Seras.

Crecheto thought for a moment.

“Well—I wonder. That’s a rather difficult question, princess.” Her wet nurse gave her a wry smile, looking a little troubled by the inquiry—as if she truly found it hard to say. “Neither, I think.”

Seras felt relieved to hear that answer. Perhaps it was the one she had been hoping for, most of all.

She decided not to give her own beauty that much more thought. Those sorts of thoughts were never productive.

Seras began spending much of her time in the palace’s library. There was a public library in the surrounding town, but the palace had a much larger collection. The private shelves of the underground library went on for rows and rows—and Seras loved them.

There were a number of texts from the older eras down there, and only select

individuals within the palace were allowed to enter the closed stacks. There were even books on the shelves from back when the high elves had been in contact with the outside world.

As the daughter of the king, Seras had unlimited access to the closed stacks. She loved to read, opening a new book to find some unknown world awaiting her inside.

When she was reading, Seras no longer had to be a princess. She found herself transformed into the characters in her stories, and she could spend hours and hours engrossed in them.

Books were equality, he pointed out to her years later.

It was the whole reason that she enjoyed reading in the first place.

Books do not discriminate against their readers. They exist equally for everyone, their contents identical no matter who picks them up. One may be a king or a commoner... Rich or poor, good or evil, beautiful or ugly... Of any age or gender. Of course, there are times at which the contents of a book might be subject to different interpretations depending on one's position in life, or their gender...but the book itself does not change its contents or attitudes to suit its reader.

No matter how many books Seras opened, none of them called her beautiful.

The words scrawled within were equal, freely offering her their soft serenity. That was what books meant to Seras Ashrain.

"You don't think that in the back of your mind, all these people calling you beautiful and pretty were just noise? Maybe the time you spent reading, just you and a book, was what made all the noise disappear. Maybe that's why you got so absorbed by reading."

Seras remembered his words. *I see.*

"I am beautiful."

It wasn't that I didn't comprehend that, exactly—perhaps I simply didn't want to understand.

Although the young princess was becoming very passionate about reading, she did not spend all her days among the bookshelves. As a royal, she also learned manners, dancing, and swordsmanship.

She learned to handle a sword so that she might be able to protect herself if needed—but for the royalty of Hylings, swordsmanship carried a much deeper meaning. The sword was one of the symbols of the Royal House of Ashrain. The swordsmanship they studied was more focused on ceremonial choreography than practical combat. Passed down through generations, the technique was mainly displayed during ceremonies and other celebrations.

Members of the House of Ashrain had a duty to learn the techniques, and the same went for both sons and daughters of the palace. Seras's training began when she was five years old.

Her swordsmanship instructor praised her aptitude for the discipline. He was an older man and had also trained Seras's father when he was young. Rumor had it that he was one of a very small number of individuals whom the king was truly indebted to. The man respected Hylings royalty, but he would never deceive or flatter them—at least that's what Crecheto told her.

"If he speaks about you so, you truly must have a talent for the sword, princess."

Seras was happy to be complimented on her skill. She liked exercising, liked moving around, working up a sweat and taking a bath afterward. Still, at that point in her life, her true love remained reading. When she was absorbed in a book, it made her feel like her world was expanding as she made her way through its pages.

She never left the palace or its surrounding area, but reading felt like being taken far, far away on a journey through the stories that her books told. She

saw things on the pages that she'd never seen or heard of before, and she filled in any gaps with her own imagination. She *loved* imagining.

Seras spent her days learning the manners that she would need at court while also studying the arts of swordsmanship and literature. Then one day, a child was born to Crecheto's daughter. Seras's wet nurse took time off to go see her new granddaughter. She called her grandchild the apple of her eye and seemed to treasure her more than anyone else in the Rieden family.

When Crecheto talked about her granddaughter, she seemed truly happy. Seras loved to listen to her talk of the baby as well. The happiness that flowed from Crecheto was infectious. So, at Seras's request, Crecheto went to visit her grandchild. Seras looked forward to meeting the baby for herself someday.

Time passed. Then one day, Crecheto came to visit Seras in the library.

"Princess, they have returned home."

Seras closed her book and quietly placed it on a nearby table. She was positively beaming as she took Crecheto by the hand. They walked out to the palace gates together, her little heart skipping beats as she went. The moment she saw the two of them standing by the carriage, she broke out into a run. All those who had assembled outside were completely captivated by their cute, tiny princess dashing across the yard and they smiled at her as she approached.

"Father! Mother!"

"Ah, Seras!" Shireen crouched down to embrace her beloved daughter, and Seras launched herself into her mother's chest.

"Welcome home!"

Seras's mother's eyes softened as she stroked her daughter's flushed cheek, reddened from her rushing across the yard toward them.

"Have you been a good girl?"

"Yes! Haven't I, Baaya?!"

“Of course, my princess,” said Crecheto, giving her seal of approval.

“I see, very good. That’s my girl,” said Seras’s father. Orio placed his hand upon his daughter’s head.

“Yes, Father!”

The king and queen had been away from the capital for some time, visiting the domains of their sons. They had been touring various parts of Hylings for a month and had just arrived back at the capital. While the two royals were absent, the trusted chancellor and ministers of state were left in charge of the nation’s affairs. There were, however, several matters that required the king’s personal attention—a mountain of paperwork had built up during the trip. While his ministers suggested a short vacation after their journey, the king informed them that he would be returning immediately to matters of state.

The king also had to greet the Great Spirit, something that took priority over matters of governance. Family time between mother, father, and daughter would have to wait a little longer.

But Seras was happy to see her father again, and even at her age, she understood his position as king—she did not fuss. Instead, she pulled away from her mother and bowed to the king.

“Father. Thank you.”

Her bow was dignified and supremely elegant. As her serene voice caressed the ears of those nearby, they were enthralled by her all over again. Orio gave his daughter a bitter, apologetic smile.

“I am sorry, Seras. I’ll make time for us to be together later. Shireen, look after her for me.”

The queen bowed, her posture immaculate. “Yes, Your Majesty.”

Orio smiled gently, with the composure of a king, then began to walk toward the main hall of the palace with his ministers and knights in attendance.

“Let’s go, Seras.”

“Yes!”

Seras took her mother’s hand and looked up at her.

She loved her mother dearly. Shireen was always warm toward her daughter, but her appearance often caused her to be misunderstood. Like her daughter, Shireen was unquestionably good-looking, with sharp, fox-like eyes. Just like her daughter, her blue eyes were accented by beautiful, fine-lined eyebrows. Her face was slim, and she had the same light honey-colored hair that shimmered in the morning sun. She was noble, dignified...and yet, some perceived her as overly strict. Perhaps it was Seras’s father’s genes that had mellowed the severity of her mother’s expressions.

But it was clear to anyone who spent enough time with the queen that she was a woman of warm disposition. Her personality was more complex than the first impression she tended to leave would suggest, and that contrast was precisely what made the queen so charming.

Shireen was not simply queen in name and appearance only. Her duties in and out of court were numerous. One of her roles was preventing men (besides Seras’s father and her swordsmanship instructor) from getting too close to Seras herself. She poured her heart and soul into this endeavor, also enlisting Crecheto’s help. Seras would only realize the existence of this barrier between herself and the opposite sex much later.

It was possible that Seras’s mother understood the captivating charm that her daughter possessed even at that young age—and the especially intense effect it had on the opposite sex. In that light, Seras would later interpret her actions as an active, loving protection of her daughter from the males at court.

But at the moment, Seras did not know how much her mother was doing for her. She was led by the hand past the full flower vases, Crecheto following in close attendance behind the queen and princess.

“I’m so happy to see you again, Mother.”

“Yes, as am I... Oh, you are so adorable. I feel as if my heart is being cleansed when I am with you...”

“Your heart is being...*cleansed*?” asked Seras.

“Yes. You are washing away all the impurities that have built up in my heart, you see? Like a clear blue stream.”

“Is that good?”

Shireen’s eyes softened, and she stroked Seras’s head. “Of course, it’s a wonderful thing.”

“Then I’m happy!” Seras smiled at her from ear to ear. She’d been looking up at her mother almost the whole time they were on the move.

“You need to look ahead, Seras—you could hurt yourself,” Shireen chided, but she sounded happy.

When Seras’s mother smiled, it made Seras feel euphoric. It made her want to do more for her mother and father...and, of course, for Baaya too. But what could she do for the three of them? Seras wanted more than anything in the world to find out.

Since her mother and father’s return to the city, Seras made a point to spend more time with them. The day they came back to the capital, Seras and her mother had bathed together. While they soaked in the clear water, Shireen told her all about her older brothers living in their faraway domains.

Seras realized she had never met any of them before.

“I want to meet them too someday,” she resolved.

“Let’s go together, once you are ten years old and your contract with the Great Spirit has been signed.”

That was both tradition and law in Hylings.

“Your brothers are very much looking forward to meeting you, you know?”

They have heard rumors from subjects who have visited the capital and are well aware of your reputation. One of them even asked if it was really true that you are more beautiful than I am! His eyes wide open with shock... Quite rude, when I was right there in front of him, don't you think?" She gave Seras a wry smile, as if prompting her agreement. "Ah well... I spend so much time praising you in their presence, I am not surprised they have grown terribly interested in meeting their new little sister."

"You praised me?" asked Seras, drifting over to her mother's shoulder and embracing it lovingly. Shireen closed her eyes and pressed her cheek against her daughter's temple.

"Of course. You are my pride and joy."

Shireen's chest was large and shapely. Seras felt its familiar softness, and her face relaxed into an easy smile.

"Mother—I love you."

"I love you too, Seras."

Seras was used to being complimented. *Lots* of people in the capital complimented her—but when it was her father and mother, it felt special.

Seras talked about all kinds of things, and her mother nodded along and engaged with her, smiling all the while. All the excitement at seeing her mother again had caused Seras to stay in the hot bath a little too long—and when she began to feel faint, her mother rushed over to help her.

"Oh dear! Baaya, we're coming out. Get ready for us, won't you?"

"Understood!" came Crecheto's reply from the other side of the thin bathroom door.

Seras made her way out of the bath with her mother's support and into the changing room where Crecheto took her. Baaya asked her a few questions while looking her over, and Seras's mother watched on in worry as her maid dried her off.

“Hah... It seems she’ll be all right. Heh heh... I imagine she must have gotten a little overexcited while taking a bath with you, Lady Shireen. It has been so long.”

Her mother sighed in relief.

“Well then, princess, allow me to dry you,” said Baaya

As Crecheto wiped the drops of water from her skin, Seras remembered something. She thought back to the way her mother had smiled at her in the bath as they’d talked together. She loved her mother the most when she was smiling. Her father and Crecheto, too...

She never wanted to see them sad.

No, it’s not just my parents and my wet nurse. I want everyone to smile, not just those who are nice to me.

Everyone.

At night, Seras slept with her mother and father. She was so happy to be squeezed in between the two of them. She was delighted to eat breakfast with them too.

And she had Crecheto. There were other kind maids and dependable knights in the palace as well.

One day she plucked up the courage to display her swordsmanship skills to everybody. Another day, she talked about the things she’d read in her books.

Seras’s father and mother were both so happy to watch her grow—and Seras Ashrain was happy too.

The Great Temple was built in the woods that spread out behind the royal palace. It was the place where the Great Spirit resided—the home of the protector of Hylings, also known as the Spirit Lord.

There were no ostentatious or elegant decorations in the temple. The place was old, as if frozen in time. The pillars on the outside were covered in ivy, with flowers blossoming in places. Seras and her parents rode in the royal horse and carriage, and their personal guard came with them all the way to the entrance of the temple. Temple knights were stationed in front of the pillars, permanent residents of the sacred place.

Their numbers were not great, as the Great Spirit refused any grand shows of security. Besides, the Great Spirit was not threatened by the elves of Hylings.

The Great Spirit was a transcendental being, even more so than the other spirits. It was respected and special among the others to such an extent that it was given the title “Lord of the Countless Spirits.”

The royal couple walked the hard, familiar floor of the temple with an even stride. The floor looked old, yet polished at the same time. Seras found that juxtaposition very strange. The inside of the temple had been overrun by plants and flowers. It looked less like the place had been abandoned, and more like the vegetation and the building were coexisting.

“Careful not to offend the Spirit Lord, Seras.”

“Y-yes father!” replied Seras as they walked.

She had been completely swallowed up by the solemn atmosphere of the temple. Shireen placed a hand on her trembling shoulder.

“It’s okay. The Spirit Lord isn’t scary. You don’t need to be so nervous.”

“O-okay.”

There were rows of pillars on both sides of them as they walked through a space so wide that Seras didn’t even realize it was a hallway at first. Finally, the three members of the royal family came to a grand set of double doors. They appeared to be made of glass, but clouded so that Seras couldn’t see what was on the other side.

“Spirit Lord, we have arrived.”

Suddenly, the cloudiness vanished and the doors were completely transparent. Beyond the doors was a dark space, but Seras could see little lights inside.

Spirits of light, she realized.

Spirits were beings that floated in an ocean of spirit energy. Spirits could use that energy to affect all kinds of different things. Each spirit had an element that it was most adept at affecting. The spirits grew in harmony with their attuned elements and reflected the nature of those elements in their personalities. The element could be fire, water, wind—or even light.

Elves had the ability to sense spirit energy and channel certain elements, just as the spirits did. The compatibility of this energy allowed elves to perceive spirits and form contracts with them. Only the elves had this special sense—it was not known to be present in any of the other races. There was another source of power in the world known as mana, and it was different from spirit energy. Mana was used for casting spells, and while elves could also interact with mana, they could only manipulate small amounts of it at a time.

It was possible that their internal capacity for magic was mostly taken up by their ability to manipulate spirit energy...or so Seras once read in an ancient research text she found in the library, written by some ancient scholar.

The space beyond the door grew brighter as the firefly-like lights glowed in the air. When Seras looked up for the first time, she realized just how high the ceiling was. There were ancient letters carved into the walls. Seras sometimes studied ancient writing during her reading sessions, and there were some symbols that she could read. Vines and flowers crawled up the old walls, adorning them in green but obscuring some of the ancient letters so that they were no longer legible. Far beyond the doors was a giant, low altar in the depths of the dark room. It was circular, like a large table set out for a feast, and beyond it there were patterns carved into the far wall.

There was also a woman—semi-transparent and glowing with orange light, floating just above the altar.

The figure made Seras think of the faint flame of the morning sun, the first moment it peeks out over the horizon on a clear day. Its ears were long, clearly mimicking the appearance of an elf. Through the elf's body—8 or 9 meters tall—Seras could see the wall on the far side of the room.

This is the Great Spirit—the Spirit Lord...

The three of them formed a line before the Great Spirit and knelt in unison.

“Thank you always for your blessing and protection, Great Spirit,” said Orio. Shireen repeated the line, as did Seras.

Then, as instructed, she closed her eyes and silently prayed.

“I pray for your health this day also, my friends...”

The spirit's voice flowed into Seras's mind—into her *thoughts*. Spirits did not use language but made use of spirit energy to communicate their intention through thought alone—elves were capable of understanding those thoughts as though they were speech. Since thoughts could be understood in an instant, this method of communication was much faster than speaking. If one's spirit energy channel was shut off, however, one could refuse the flow of thoughts—meaning that those who did not wish to hear the spirit's “voice” could deafen themselves at will. But if that channel was closed, one could not borrow the power of the spirits.

Orio stood, and Seras and Shireen did the same. Seras gazed up dreamily at the Great Spirit. The spirit's naked form appeared to be covered only by a piece of sheer fabric.

Seras had read in a book that spirits had no gender, and that each spirit manifested their appearance in the way they wished to be seen. Seras thought that the Great Spirit's chosen appearance must be female in gender. She also

knew that only powerful spirits were capable of manifesting themselves in this manner...or at least that was written in one of her books.

Seras was completely overwhelmed by her first meeting with the Great Spirit. She could scarcely believe that they were a being of this world. She felt excited—as if some fantasy creature from one of the legends had come to life. A being she had idolized for so long finally appeared in front of her.

Seras had seen spirits take on shapes countless times before, but never one that was capable of creating such a perfect elven shape—nor anything so tall that she'd had to crane her neck to gaze up at it.

“This is my daughter, Seras Ashrain,” said Orio.

It was the first time in her life that Seras had ever met the Great Spirit in person. Children were not often allowed to enter the presence of the great being. If a child met the Great Spirit while their telepathic abilities were still undeveloped, their ability to control their thoughts could be thrown into disarray—in the worst case scenario, they might even go berserk. So it was forbidden for children to meet with the Great Spirit until they had reached a certain degree of telepathic development.

Seras had finally reached the age at which she was developed enough to have an audience with the spirit, and that was the sole reason she'd been allowed to attend this meeting today.

“Now then, Seras,” said Shireen, “your father has to have an important talk with the Great Spirit. All that you and I have come for today is your introduction. We'll be leaving now.”

Seras and Shireen departed, leaving Orio with the Great Spirit. Before she left the room, Seras turned to look back—the Great Spirit noticed her and waved.

Something changed about the way Seras saw the Spirit Lord in that moment. She smiled and waved back too.

Shireen Ashrain

ONE DAY JUST past noon, the three royal Ashrains went to the palace gardens. The plants were in full bloom, carefully nurtured by the palace gardeners every day. The flowers were vibrant as ever, set out in elegant lines. The turfed grass underfoot was soft as carpet, and one could not imagine a safer place in the world. And yet...

“Now Seras, do not run. You’ll hurt yourself.”

Seras stopped in her tracks at Orio’s cheerful warning. Her shining hair was the color of faint lemon mixed with tones of honey. With her slim white fingers holding it back, Seras spun around, and the hem of her dress floated as she turned.

“It’s okay, Father! Even if I do fall, the ground is so soft!”

A freestanding wall ran through the center of the garden. Known as the flower wall of the royal house, it was overgrown with ivy and completely covered in flowers. Their numbers seemed to increase year by year. Most were white, with the remainder blue and yellow in equal number—the colors of the House of Ashrain’s royal coat of arms.

Seras loved the big wall of flowers. She ran over to it with an affectionate smile, then began to stroke the flowers as softly and gently as if she were touching a newborn baby. Shireen was entranced by the sight of her daughter.

Orio spread out a blanket on the grass and Shireen elegantly sat down upon it, careful to neatly fold her clothes beneath her as she did so.

“Thank you, your majesty.”

“You are quite welcome, my queen.”

Under normal circumstances laying one’s own blanket out on the grass would be behavior unfitting of a king—but that day in the garden it was only the three

of them. They wanted to spend time together as a family—and so that day the king spread out a blanket on the grass for his wife and daughter.

“I’m sure those flowers are very happy to be stroked by such a beautiful princess,” said Orio.

“Indeed,” replied Shireen, placing a hand to her cheek as she gazed at her daughter. A gasp of admiration and wonder escaped the queen’s full lips.

“She truly does make a lovely picture.”

Seras was now leaning forward a little, her hands clasped behind her back as she gazed lovingly at the flowers. Her father looked on protectively, gazing at his daughter with loving eyes.

“She’s growing up beautiful and strong...healthy in body and mind. We must be grateful to Crecheto for that.”

“She has been with the royal family for such a long time. Baaya knows ever so much. I feel completely safe leaving Seras in her hands.”

Crecheto had also raised Seras’s older brothers to be big and strong. Orio gently brushed a flower petal from his wife’s shoulder.

“We elves live long lives. It is said that the high elves of Hylings live even longer than the other elven races. The blessings of knowledge and experience are many, given our long lives. All people have different talents and dispositions, of course. The children of the talented do not always reach the same heights as their parents—no matter how intense their education, there is no guarantee that schooling will bear fruit. But the experience an individual gains over a long life... The ability to pass on our wisdom as a message to the next generation offers our offspring a different kind of strength than traditional education.”

“And yet...” began Shireen. “We elves were never able to gain control of the outside world.”

There was a flash of danger in the queen’s eyes—a challenge, even. Orio

opened the basket that contained their lunch.

“There are others in the outside world with long lifespans, after all... And well...”

“This world is blessed,” the queen said, finishing her husband’s sentence. She didn’t wait for him to finish, and it seemed that she wished to put an end to the topic. With one hand, she deftly untied a cloth satchel lying beside her. Inside was a wreath of white flowers, and she brushed it with her fingertips. The wreath was finely crafted, made of precious minerals from the earth—the flowers were artificial. It had been a present from one of Seras’s brothers, gifted to the queen when she and the king had toured their lands. She had yet to tell Seras of the present.

“She still likes to read... Even the books in the restricted library, I hear.”

“The ones about the outside world, you suppose?” asked the king.

“Most likely.”

From what Shireen had heard from Crecheto, Seras read more and more with each passing day. She was nearly certain that some of the volumes had mentioned the outside world.

“Those books about the outside world...” said Shireen, looking around a little uncomfortably as she spoke. “We have kept them to retain our knowledge, should those foreign crises arrive at our doorstep once again. But does the Spirit Lord agree with our keeping them?”

“Yes,” said Orio, noticing something in Shireen’s expression. He raised his eyebrows at her a little and smiled. “Are you worried about her becoming interested in the world beyond?”

“It’s just...” She handed the flower wreath over to Orio and clenched her fists. “Imagining Seras encountering the outside world... I don’t even want to think about that. I just know that it will be too cruel for her out there.”

She gazed over at her beloved daughter and fought back a wave of anxiety.

Shireen had interrupted her husband because he had been about to speak of the *humans*, she was sure.

The humans of the outside world—I scarcely even want to think of them.

She jumped back to reality.

I wish I had never brought up this terrible subject in the first place.

“Mother, come here!”

At the sound of her daughter’s call, Shireen shook herself free of the slump. She took back the flower wreath and got to her feet, an elegant hand on her dress as she rose.

“Yes, I’ll be right there.”

She ran to Seras, seeing her waiting in front of the wall of flowers, pure and innocent. Shireen felt more affection for her daughter than she could bear. She suddenly realized just how taken she was with her—enchanted by that same beauty that had captured everyone else.

My daughter... My miracle...

Seras’s expression softened with joy, as she led her mother around the flower wall. She seemed to have a new favorite every day.

“Today this little flower, and this one, and that one look lovely!”

Shireen couldn’t really tell the difference.

“Yes... Oh, but... Heh heh, you look just as lovely as the flowers do, you know, Seras? Ah, I almost forgot...”

She gave her daughter the gift.

A real wreath of flowers might have served as well, but Seras might not like to pick them. That is why this one was made for her.

“It’s so pretty...” she said, taking the wreath in her hands and turning it over curiously. “Thank you so much, Mother—I love it!”

“Here... Give it to me. I’ll place it on your head.”

Suddenly there was a gust of strong wind, and the flower petals on the grass below them were blown up into the air. Amid the falling snow of petals, Shireen placed the wreath of flowers onto Seras’s head.

“ ...”

The sight of her daughter with the wreath of flowers on her head brought forth such feelings of affection within her, that Shireen nearly writhed with intense joy. She wanted to call the court painter, and have them create a portrait that would capture the moment for eternity.

Seras put her hands to the wreath and called out to her father.

“Look, Father!”

“Ah, yes. It’s very pretty, Seras.”

Shireen couldn’t help but chuckle at her husband’s reaction.

Even Orio is taken in by her beauty, it seems. Well...of course.

She is our beloved child, after all.

Shireen stooped to embrace her daughter from behind.

“Seras.”

“Ah—yes, Mother?”

“I am so very happy we have you.”

“Yes.”

Seras gently shook off her mother’s arms, then turned around to face her. She jumped to wrap her arms around Shireen’s neck, putting her weight into the hug.

“I’m happy too... So happy to be your daughter!”



Still in a firm embrace, Shireen pressed her cheek to her daughter's forehead. Seras's hair felt like the finest of silks—enough to make Shireen feel like she was dreaming. Seras smelled sweeter than the most fragrant flower.

Simply the fact that she exists—this girl... She is a miracle.

"Stay by my side forever, won't you, Seras?"

I can't even bear to think of losing her...

Shireen pressed her lips to her daughter's forehead.

I cannot imagine this child ever leaving us for the outside world.

Seras Ashrain

WHAT IS HAPPINESS?

"I'm happy."

What does that mean?

If someone else is happy, does that make me happy?

If someone else is unhappy, does that make me unhappy?

Just what is happiness, anyway?

Seras Ashrain reached seven years of age. She was still young enough to be considered a child—but with each passing year her beauty increased and her manners became befitting of her station as princess. When she attended ceremonies and acted in her role as a member of the royal family, there were times at which she appeared almost adult. Her charm was always a delight to the people of Hylings, and her behavior stole their hearts at every opportunity.

Seras's love of reading had only grown since her sixth birthday, and the maids

joked that she'd soon read every single book in the palace. Crecheto seemed to consider that a genuine worry.

She had spoken to Seras about her precociousness—that she was acting too adult for her age. As a royal, of course, she had plenty of opportunities to interact with adults around the palace, but her ravenous reading sessions had greatly increased her vocabulary. She seemed to be influenced by the way in which the adults spoke in her stories.

Most surprisingly, it was not Seras's knowledge that had developed the most during the past year, but her skill with a sword. Her swordsmanship instructor had been left speechless by her progress.

“There is of course no guarantee that her skill will not plateau, given her age... But I believe that the princess's talent with a sword is unrivaled—even by her older brothers.”

The king smiled a little in amusement when he heard the instructor's words.

“You mean she will one day be the greatest swordswoman in all of Hylings?”

The old instructor was firm in his conviction, nodding his head in silence.

Seras was very happy to hear his words. She was growing more charming by the day, and her name was known across the land as the beautiful royal princess. There were constant, fervent requests from her peers to meet with her—even requests from those over ten years her senior.

Seras was never given a say on whether she would meet with them or not. Her mother disregarded every last one of the passionate entreaties. When the uncle of a related duke made a request, Shireen did once (quite reluctantly) set up an audience—but only because it was a blood relative. Nobles with no kinship to the crown were ignored by the queen. Shireen had even begun giving sour looks to Seras's swordsmanship instructor. Seras's father was the only exception to her policy to seclude the young princess.

Seras sat in her bedroom gazing out of the window. It was morning and the sky was wide and clear. The air felt cool on her skin—perhaps a sign that winter was approaching. The morning dip in temperature was profound and had her shivering at times.

She looked down at the green castle town. The spirits of the royal capital ensured that the plants would never wilt, even when the weather got colder. The city was peaceful, but that day it was dressed up for a festival. There were decorations on every corner for the coming celebration—the Spirit Appreciation Festival.

The people of Hylings lived their lives in peace thanks to the protection of the Great Spirit, but even the spirit needed rest. The Great Spirit slept for a period of ten days each year, and it was tradition during those days for a festival to be held for the slumbering spirit to offer up thanks.

The Great Spirit would spend those days recharging its energy as it slept, storing up enough to last until next year's festival. According to the old texts in the closed stack library, the resting period of the Great Spirit was fixed—the spirit did not choose the dates on which it slept, but fell asleep on those days whether it was ready to or not. Such information was naturally not made public. Seras's father had spoken to her of the Spirit Appreciation Festival before.

“In past ages, during the ten days when we were not under the protection of the Spirit Lord, high elves would gather at the royal capital to strengthen its defenses—this is the origin of our present festival. When those who had not met for quite some time assembled in such numbers, the mood of the city turned to one of welcome and celebration. That is how our present feasts and revels started. We raise our cups to thank the Spirit Lord, and I am sure that is why the Great Spirit overlooks our revelry... Though it is quite regrettable that in their slumber the Great Spirit is never able to enjoy our celebrations.”

“Princess, the king and queen will return in three days' time,” said one of Seras's maids, arriving at her room with the news. The royal couple had been touring their sons' domains again, but their return had been delayed by bad

weather.

“It appears that they will make it back in time for the Spirit Festival...”

The “Spirit Appreciation Festival” was often shortened to the “Spirit Festival” for convenience.

“...”

“Princess?” asked the maid, sounding a little worried for her.

“Ah...I am sorry. Understood. Thank you very much.”

She was seven years old, but Seras had developed quite a calm demeanor over the past year. She was learning how to disguise her cheerfulness. Now she was considered modest and virtuous by others—though in this case the weakness in Seras’s voice was for quite a different reason. It was no reflection of her growing maturity.

“Ahem... How is Baaya?”

The maid averted her eyes at the question. “She is still not well, it seems.”

“...I see. Thank you.”

The girl bowed once, then left. Seras put a hand to the windowpane, looking out at a corner of the city that was home to the mansions of influential nobles.

Baaya...

Crecheto had become sick and was resting in a room inside one of those very mansions. The change had come over her suddenly when her grandchild had been diagnosed with an incurable disease. She had started feeling dizzy at work and more lethargic as the days went on. It was clear for all to see—the small mistakes that Crecheto would never have previously made, beginning to pile up. Finally, there came a point when she was too weak to properly fulfill her duties as Seras’s wet nurse.

She ended up on bed rest in her family’s mansion, unable to rise most days. It was clear why Crecheto felt the way she did—she treasured her grandchild

dearly. It was no wonder that she had become so ill. The child was her first granddaughter, after all.

“I apologize that this is so forward—but I hope that someday you might come to see her as a little sister. Oh, this is so presumptuous of me...” she once said—but in truth, she had looked quite serious about the idea. It seemed to make her very happy.

Unlike the other races, elves had quite low odds of conceiving children. Their long lifespans were thought to be the reason. Long active periods in life made it difficult to know when best to conceive and unless the time was right, no children would result at all. Or at least that was the prevailing theory. It was even harder for them to conceive when their partner was of another race—all the more reason why many would celebrate the birth of any elf child.

Crecheto had been so happy when her long-awaited granddaughter was born.

“And you are very much the long-awaited daughter that the king and queen have been praying for, Lady Seras.”

Seras remembered those words. Crecheto’s afflicted granddaughter had been long awaited also.

She had been to see Crecheto several times and had been terribly shocked to see her nurse’s transformation. She was losing weight, and there were aspects of her personality that felt different, too.

I never thought I’d ever see Baaya like that...

Seras’s chest hurt. She wanted to save her, no matter what. Seras had been to see Crecheto’s sick granddaughter many times too, and completely understood her nurse’s obsession with the child. The little girl was very cute.

She isn’t even two years old yet. But this sickness...

The illness that Crecheto’s granddaughter had contracted was known as Shivana disease. In its early stages, the body of the victim became covered with circular, purple, bruise-like spots. The spots looked like flower buds. As the

disease progressed, they spread out, purple roots crawling from their centers to suck the life from the infected body.

The sufferer would slowly start losing weight, and the spots would spread as they did, swelling up and filling with moisture. Eventually the whole body would be covered in bulging purple lesions, and the disgusting buds would *bloom* all at once. Once the flowers began to bloom, the infected individual would die within 12 hours. Those who contracted the disease usually began to lose their sanity before death took them.

The spots could not be removed—or rather, there was no point in doing so. There were some who—as an act of compassion—simply wished to send patients with Shivana disease into the next world. But the sickness would somehow heal the victim before this could happen. A patient could be brought to death's door with a mix of poisons and toxins, but the disease would keep its host alive. Most did not die, but simply ended up experiencing excruciating pain and intense suffering from the process.

Those with Shivana disease would not die until their buds flowered. Such was the way of things.

However, it was said that while there was suffering, there was also no pain.

The infected individual's body was transformed day by day, deteriorating and shriveling. When it came time for the last drops of life to be drained, it did not hurt. There were few who could endure the process with their sanity intact. And few loved ones escaped the experience without lasting trauma as well.

The slow process of dying—and the way in which this disease showed every aspect of its progression to the family of its victims—was too cruel for words. It often ate away more at those who had to watch it than those who contracted it. The cruelty lay in how relentlessly the disease took its toll—the more love one bore for the afflicted, the harder it hurt.

The hardy Crecheto was no exception. She looked even more emaciated than her granddaughter. She would recover if her granddaughter were well again,

Seras presumed...but Shivana disease was incurable.

The Great Spirit could not heal it, for the Spirit Lord was not an all-powerful being to begin with. It was incapable of curing the sick.

The cause of Shivana disease was unknown. Those who contracted it died. There was no other way.

So they say... But no.

Seras knew a way.

In the closed stack library inside the palace, way in the back, Seras had found a room that only the royals were allowed to enter—a private library. She was the only one who dared to enter it.

There is a way to treat Shivana disease. But the treatment is practically impossible.

Seras looked out at the Rieden family mansion, her eyes fixed intently on the building.

“...The Forbidden Valley,” she whispered.

East of the capital—there was a place known as the Forbidden Valley.

Entering the valley was strictly forbidden. Every child in Hylings was made aware of that from a young age. They were told that it was filled with danger, an evil place where fiendish and ancient magical creatures roamed. Those who entered the valley were subject to strict punishment and the penalty was said to be terrible—though the specifics were never made clear. Some said that the refusal to name the punishment was a deliberate ploy to scare the children.

But the book said that a certain herb known as the *deadly dryflower* grew “in the Forbidden Valley,” blooming all year round.

The herb was the only way to treat Shivana disease, but entry into the Forbidden Valley was not allowed under the laws of Hylings as dictated by the Great Spirit. The true reason that entry was forbidden was unknown—but regardless, to the people of Hylings the Great Spirit’s laws were absolute.

The royals were no exception. Everyone who lived in Hylings feared disobeying the Great Spirit, and Seras had no hope of gaining assistance in her journey.

No... Perhaps Crecheto would come with me, even if it did mean breaking the law.

But in her emaciated state, Seras's nurse could barely walk, and the Shivana disease was spreading day by day. It was only a matter of time before the flowers of death bloomed, though none knew for certain when that would happen.

If I am to go, I must hurry.

I want everyone to smile, not just those who are nice to me.

Everyone.

It was just before noon in the royal palace. Having finished all of her preparations to leave, Seras put on her cloak and pulled up her hood before exiting the capital through a secret passageway. The passageway was intended for emergencies, an escape from the city during times of crisis. In the long scabbard on her back was a sword, its blade honed and ready. The sword was long, but not heavy—even Seras could wield it. She had left her maid with an alibi.

"Father and mother are not here today, and I will be spending my whole day in the library. I have eaten an early lunch. I would like you to tell the other maids not to disturb my reading with a call to dinner."

Seras had learned how to ride horses, and could do so with assistance. But she would have found it difficult on her own. Luckily the Forbidden Valley was only half a day's walk away. But there was one place that she had to stop first.

Leaving the road, she strayed into the forest.

This area, which was also off-limits, was known as the Site of Sealed Spirits. The land there contained spirits who had defied the Spirit Lord and were now sealed away. In Hylings, people could only make contracts with spirits that the Great Spirit approved of. The only reason the nation remained at peace was because the Great Spirit ruled over the rest of its kin. This was the place where the spirits it deemed broken or illegitimate were sealed away. Some called them “the lost ones.”

As Seras proceeded through the forest, she found a great building that looked like a tomb. There were soldiers stationed there to guard the area in shifts.

That was something that Seras was aware of. She also knew that the guards were quite lax. Nobody ever tried to enter the area, and the guards had been posted for years to protect a building that never had any intruders. They could hardly be blamed for being somewhat half-hearted in their protection.

This would make it easy for Seras to infiltrate. She clambered over a fence around the back and quietly made her way inside. The whole building was old and smelled of mildew. It was as if time had stopped, and it had sat there for years and years. To Seras, who spent so much time reading old dusty texts and scrolls, the smell was familiar.

There was moss growing on the pillars and walls—compared to the beautifully maintained interior of the Great Temple, the difference was night and day. There were motes in the air, revealed by beams of light streaming in through the windows (or holes in the wall) that sparkled as they floated through space. But the beams were sparse inside the building, which was otherwise dark and gloomy. There was barely enough illumination to make out several stone shapes scattered about the space—monuments and sarcophagi, it seemed.

It looks like they were just thrown in here at random.

Seras took a piece of paper from her pocket. Holding it up between her fingertips, she began to scan the ancient letters carved into the sarcophagi. The paper contained a sentence that she had copied from a book found in the

private closed stack library—an ancient text featuring a short story about Shivana disease.

“And she went into the [REDACTED] Valley to heal Shivana disease...” The blackened sections were letters she couldn’t read. *“And made it past the terrible, magical monsters that dwelled there. The elf succeeded in bringing home the deadly dryflower—and it was that very herb that restored her mother to health and cured the Shivana disease.”*

At least that is how the story went. Right at the end, there was a note...

“() This story was based on true events.”*

That means this really happened. There’s a chance that this flower might really be able to cure Shivana disease.

The elf in the story Seras read had borrowed the power of a select few spirits to overcome the dangers of the valley. She knew the names of some of the forbidden spirits from another book in the closed stacks of the palace library.

“Gzea.”

“Banger.”

“Zega.”

The woman had borrowed the strength of three spirits with names that sounded...something like that. With their help, she had managed to survive her encounters with the magical creatures of the valley and return home safely. That part of the story had caught Seras’s attention...

She made it home... But did not kill all of the magical creatures in the valley. They are still out there.

“Ah...”

Seras’s eyes rested on one of the stone sarcophagi. “Silfigzea,” the name read. It *sounded* like one of the ones she was looking for. She kept searching until she came across two more, with the names “Ferillbanger” and “Willozega” carved into the stone.

“It’s them...”

There were no others that matched the sounds.

Seras laid a hand on Silfigzea’s stone sarcophagus and swallowed hard—then with both hands she opened the lid. The stone slid away, and just as the opening was big enough for her to see inside, the sarcophagus lid was blown away. A great whirlwind filled the room. Seras’s hood was blown off, her long hair whipped wildly by the gust and her body buffeted by the sudden wind.

When she opened her eyes there was a semi-transparent human shape floating in the air before her. It was a little bigger than she was, but so much smaller than the Great Spirit had been.

This spirit had no head. There was no question that it *was* a spirit—a semi-transparent shape in light green.

“My seal has been broken. Why? What is your motive?”

The spirit spoke with Seras through thoughts transmitted directly to her mind. And she spoke back. She was surprised at how calm she felt—the spirit might have been one of the terrifying ones for all she knew, but Seras felt no apprehension. It was as if there was nothing to fear.

She explained her situation to the spirit.

“Very well. Wake the others.”

“R-right.”

“I am a spirit of wind,” said the being. It then pointed to two of the other sarcophagi. *“In there sealed is a spirit of ice. In there, one of light.”*

“I-I see.”

Seras barely realized that she was speaking out loud, as she hurried over to open the other two lids. One of them produced a rush of chilly air as she opened it, freezing the dust in the air and making it sparkle even more. The second burst with light as she opened it up, so bright that she had to shut her

eyes.

Once the light had passed, she opened her eyes to find two spirits floating in the air before her—one pale blue and the other pure white. The ice spirit looked like a demi-human wolf from one of Seras's stories—just without a head. The light spirit had a woman's body...but once again, without a head.

"I understand."

"Understood."

The two spirits responded immediately. It seemed that the spirit of wind had instantly transmitted its thoughts to the pair, explaining Seras's situation.

"You may borrow our strength—but a contract demands a price."

All three of the spirits' voices were united as they spoke those words inside of her head.

"A price..." she repeated.

For a moment, doubts welled up within her—but then she remembered Crecheto's withered face and made up her mind.

"What would you ask of me?"

A lonely wind raged through the valley, strengthened by the cold winter air. Seras's breath was white in front of her, evaporating into the breeze.

"This—is the Forbidden Valley..."

Seras had slipped past the ropes that were stretched out over the entrance and found the magical seals that were meant to keep out intruders. Nobody was permitted to get close to the valley, so there were no guards posted there. Apparently, they thought the magical seals would be enough.

Seras had prepared a method for dispelling the seals before setting out, but her spirits made short work of them. *"We do not have much time. I can do this faster than you could,"* said Silfgzea, the spirit of wind.

The three lost spirits now dwelled inside Seras. Usually, a spirit would lend a part of itself to its contractor to offer them its strength. This involved the spirit splitting itself and imparting a fraction of its being to the elf with whom it formed a contract, potentially unevenly distributing itself between multiple bodies in this manner. However, there were times when a contractor played host to a spirit in its entirety. This was usually a temporary coexistence, as spirits in this state lost their freedom of movement.

But in this state, the spirits could provide much more power to a contractor. The spirits had asked Seras which method she preferred, and she had chosen this, not knowing what dangers might await her in the valley.

Without the concentrated power of the spirits, there is a chance that I might never be able to find the deadly dryflower...

But in order to host a spirit in its entirety—three, no less!—an appropriate price was required.

“Your three principal desires... We ask for one as payment,” the spirits had requested.

All living things have three principal desires—food, sleep, and sex. Sex was...*insufficient*. The spirits detected that Seras did not have that particular desire at the present time. After a short discussion, the three spirits decided to take Seras’s sleep as payment. Once she borrowed power from them, Seras would be unable to sleep deeply until the spirits deemed her debt paid in full. At that point, she would be able to sleep deeply again.

If she did not borrow the power of the spirits at all, her sleep would be unaffected. But if she pushed herself too hard, she would lose anywhere from 12 to 48 hours of sleep. She would be capable of very shallow rest, drifting between consciousness and unconsciousness—but she would not know the embrace of deep and restorative sleep.

Seras agreed to these terms without hesitation. She had never heard of a spirit requesting a desire as payment, and it had not been mentioned in her

stories. Still, she had no choice. She had to make the contract to improve her chances of making it back to the capital with the herb.

And so, Seras Ashrain was now playing host to three lost spirits. She pressed on into the desolate valley, trampling the firm dirt underfoot.

A strong wind fluttered her cloak.

...Just wait for me, Crecheto.

“!”

She heard several sets of footsteps growing closer. The sources of the sound quickly revealed themselves—wolves. They appeared to be made of some kind of crystal substance.

These must be the magical creatures of the valley. Seras shifted her gaze to count them.

Twelve.

Her sword had been drawn from the moment she heard them coming. She was too short to properly pull the longsword from its scabbard, and had to detach the whole leather sheath from her back to draw it free.

The closest wolf lunged at her. In preparation to strike, Seras pressed her feet into the ground.

“You must funnel all your weight into your attacks to ensure they carry force.”

Her instructor’s words echoed in her mind as the blade sank into the wolf. In a flash, she split the creature’s body in two. Seras, expecting the creature’s hide to resist the blade, was prepared to strike again immediately. Instead, she looked down at two halves of the motionless magical creature at her feet.

My blade can slay them. I can do this.

She switched her stance from the defensive to the offensive. Upon seeing Seras strike down one of their own, the other wolves took up formation. They

seemed to recognize that while their enemy was a child, Seras was far from weak.

I won't borrow the power of the spirits just yet. I do not know what awaits me further down the valley. I should keep them in reserve.

Coordinating their movements, the wolves closed in. Two attacked her from both sides simultaneously, and Seras charged at the wolf on her right. She dodged its teeth and drove her sword into the wolf's head. Confirming that she had dealt a fatal blow, she pulled her sword free and sliced left at the throat of the second. With a spurt of blood, she opened the left wolf's neck and it rolled to the valley floor.

Their weak spots are the same as those of normal animals. That attack confirms it. Then...

Seras tightened her grip on her sword and turned to the encroaching wolves. Her heart beat furiously in her chest—her breathing was short and ragged.

This is a real fight... Real combat... A death match. Taking lives. I'm taking lives to save lives.

Seras was fighting magical creatures, but the killing felt significant when she cut them down.

Her breaths were shallow. It was cold, so she didn't sweat. Her fingers were covered by thin gloves and she gripped the handle of her sword.

Crecheto.

She drew her sword backward quickly, and fixed eyes on her next target. She brought the blade back down, mercilessly slicing apart the wolf as it lunged for her.

Seras walked across the ragged rock face, leaving behind another pile of corpses.

How long have I been walking? I expect the maids will have started to worry

by now. I haven't left the library all day...

She apologized to the maid in her mind.

On her journey through the valley many magical creatures had stood in her way. She'd cut all of them down with her sword and had yet to rely on the strength of the spirits. None of the three were conversationalists, just as Seras's books had told her. Spirits typically lay dormant, concealing their presence and only answering when called upon by their host.

She stopped and took out the piece of paper onto which she had copied parts of the ancient text.

"Is that...the Great Snake Tree...?"

There was a huge tree in her path, its thick winding branches like a mess of countless snakes entangled together. The tree limbs were without a single leaf—but it did not look lonely as withered trees often did. Instead, it was oddly majestic, in an imposing way.

"It's really here..."

From the tree, Seras looked to the northeast.

If the illustration in that text was correct—I should be getting close to where the deadly dryflowers bloom.

After heading northeast from the tree, she came to a small stream. The water was clear but Seras knew better than to drink it. After a short rest, she drank some water from her pouch.

Drinking from streams can wait until the water I've brought has run out.

She continued onward. With a fresh breeze, the temperature around her began to rise as if spring had come.

This is the place.

The flowers grew thick throughout the desolate valley. There was something different about this place from the rest of the valley. She could sense the spirits'

nervousness at being there...and their curiosity at this new place. Perhaps it was because Seras had read about the valley in her books, but she was strangely unsurprised by its appearance after seeing the curious place with her own eyes.

She stepped into the valley.

There was a peculiar stone monument stuck diagonally into the ground. The stone was misshapen, worn away by years of rain and wind. Upon the monument were ancient letters—ones that hadn't been in any of her story books.

"Ev██████████ Odiso██████████ ze██████████."

Parts of the carving were so worn away that Seras couldn't make them out.

This looks like it might be a name... No...I have no time to worry about that.

She hurried onward in search of her objective, and before long came upon the flower.

...There it is!

Seras loved books, and so ripping out a page was practically unthinkable to her. But Seras knew that she could not afford to pluck the wrong flower, and the original tome had been far too big and bulky to bring with her. So, in this instance—with a heavy heart and much apology—she had *borrowed* one of its pages. She looked from the illustration in her hand to the flower before her, then back again.

White stem... White petals... A long thin stamen rising from the tip.

The stamen danced like a piece of thread bobbing in the breeze.

This must be it—the deadly dryflower. Crush the stamen and the petals, mix with water, and give to the patient. This will heal her. This will help Crecheto's granddaughter get better.

Seras took several flowers, folding them neatly into a piece of cloth and storing them in her backpack.

There are still lots more flowering... But this should be enough.

Seras had what she had come for and she didn't have the time to wait around. The flowers of Shivana disease could bloom at any time. Seras turned and began to make her way back the way she'd come.

On her way through the valley, Seras had seen a place with several carved heads lined up in a row. Some of the heads had fallen from their places and the whole look of the display was eerie. The heads were about as big as the bell in the palace's tower. Seras had seen them on her way to find the herbs.

She thought they were unsettling then, too.

The heads weren't elven—their ears weren't long enough for that.

These must be carvings of humans—but what are they doing in a place like this? Carvings of a race from the outside world... This strange place infested with magical creatures... The Forbidden Valley. Just what is this place, anyway?

“...”

Then, behind Seras's back—several of the carved heads shot up from the dirt.

A magical creature appeared. Seras turned to the noise and saw a great hole in the dirt where the heads had been knocked aside and *something* had come up.

There was nothing here when I came through the first time... But that doesn't matter now. I must prepare myself to fight.

Seras watched the creature carefully—it seemed intent on attack. It was a humanoid, with five human faces lined up horizontally across its shoulders. The creature's thighs were thick, with strong pulsing, bulging veins.

It was large, over 4 meters tall.

The moment Seras detected its presence, she turned to face it and readied herself for battle. She had already drawn her sword—her scabbard lay in the

dirt where it had fallen nearby. Seras had reacted incredibly quickly, and the enemy had not managed to land a surprise attack. She was not as panicked as she expected she might be.

But this creature is strong... It's not like any of the others I have faced. This is the time, I think...

“...”

Seras resolved to call out to the spirits within her.

I summon you, armor of spirit... In payment I offer my peaceful slumber. I have sworn myself to you...

She silently mouthed the names of the spirits to herself.

Silfigzea, Ferillbanger, Willozega...

Three rays of light enveloped her body—the light green of the spirit of wind, the blue of the spirit of ice, and the pure white of the spirit of light. The light faded—and Seras stood wearing a suit of armor that had been manifested by the spirits’ power.

With a frozen *crack*, veins of ice crawled up the blade in Seras’s hands, and she felt a chill emanating from the sword. The spirits had warned her of the technique and their ability to provide incredible strength to their host using their three powers combined. They called it...

“Spirit armor.”

—Crunch—

Under a cloudy sky, Seras’s feet crunched in the sand below. Finally, the royal capital came into view. It would not be long until she was back—just a short walk now—but something about seeing her own home in the distance and the longing to be back there made Seras feel strangely fond of the palace. The temperature had dropped that day, and the winds were harsh and stinging on her pale cheeks. She brought her lightly gloved hands to her face and blew on

them to warm her fingers. A day had passed since she set out to the Forbidden Valley, and it was around noon as she made her way back to the palace.

Seras had used her spirit armor to defeat the giant magical creature that assaulted her near the stone heads...and all the *others* that attacked her as she made her escape from the Forbidden Valley. From there she walked toward the capital—the price of her spirits would not have let her rest even if she had wanted to, after all.

So long as my stamina does not give out, it might be better that I cannot sleep, Seras thought. She was tired, of course...but there was no telling when the flowers of death might bloom.

If I rest now, and it turns out to be too late... Then my breaking this taboo will have all been for nothing.

She wanted to return to the capital as quickly as possible.

The place is likely in a great uproar over my absence.

Seras's suspicions turned out to be correct. She encountered a soldier who was searching the area around the capital before she even made it to the city itself.

"Princess?! Wh-where on earth have you been?!"

"Take me to the palace. ...Please."

With that, the confused soldier pulled her into the saddle behind him. Seras rarely gave direct orders, and he was shocked to hear the command in her voice. He began to ask what had happened to her.

"I will explain this to mother and father once they have returned," was all that she replied. "I do not wish to speak with anybody but them."

Perhaps I am lucky that my parents are not in the capital...and that the Great Spirit is sleeping for the Spirit Festival. I have broken two taboos. If my parents or the Great Spirit were around, they might have ordered me confined as soon as I returned to the city. They likely would never have let me leave to go to the

Forbidden Valley in the first place.

Seras wished that she could hide the fact that she had entered the valley by keeping quiet. But she'd had no choice but to return to Elion with the three lost spirits still hosted within her.

I can hide them though, I think...

For the time being she asked them to conceal their presence in a state close to sleep, so that the Great Spirit would not discover that she was playing host to them. Seras felt bad for the spirits. She had finally lifted their seal only to ask them to hide away once more. But they explained that being released from those sealed stone sarcophagi was reward enough.

In any case, there were two forces in the nation of Hylings that could bind Seras—her parents, and the Great Spirit. And at the present, neither of them could touch her. She was a princess, and free to do as she liked...*within reason.*

If I am to be punished, it will be after Crecheto's granddaughter has received her treatment.

First, she headed to the palace. After an explosion of relief upon finding their princess safe, the maids began wailing over how grubby she had gotten during her absence.

"Where on earth have you been, princess?! W-we were worried sick that something might have happened to you!"

"I am sorry for worrying you. I had something I wanted to think about... Something personal... I wanted to be alone, away from the capital for a while..."

The maids recoiled in shock at Seras's answer. Their princess was dealing with a quite serious personal torment—or at least that seemed evident given Seras's tone of voice. Only the king and queen would ever be allowed to interfere in the personal troubles of the princess. So, Seras's maids did not dare press her any further on why she had left the city. An uncomfortable silence followed as the maids quickly determined that none of this could be resolved until the king

and queen had returned to the capital.

This was very erratic behavior on the part of their usually intelligent and sensible little princess. The problem she was dealing with must be much too serious for them to fathom, they decided.

Well, there are very grave reasons behind my actions, to be honest...

“First, I would like to change clothes,” said Seras, ordering the maids into action. Once that was done, she dismissed everyone from her room. She took out the various pieces of mixing equipment that she had prepared before leaving. After finding what she needed, she plucked the deadly dryflowers from her backpack.

Just you wait, Crecheto...

And so, Seras completed her cure for the Shivana disease.

Seras left her room, walking straight into the crowd of maids that she knew would be waiting for her there. One of them ran up to her.

“Princess!”

“...I told you that I will not speak of this matter to anyone but mother and father.”

“Ah—y-yes, of course!”

“But...there is someone else I would talk to—Baaya. I think I can talk to Crecheto about this. No...I *want* to speak to her about it,” said Seras.

“But at present Lady Crecheto is...”

“I will not speak, unless it is to Crecheto.”

Seras had not just escaped the palace, but the entire city. She was allowed a certain degree of freedom as a princess of course, but her actions went beyond the pale and the transgression was so recent. Seras was not allowed to leave the palace, except under rare circumstances. A crowd of maids had gathered

outside of her room upon her return. Seras also saw knights and soldiers taking up posts, too.

She had made clear through her gestures and words that she was deeply worried about something from the moment of her return. Those around her could not help but worry for her mental well-being. They hoped that *someone* would listen to the princess's worries and assist her in getting the matter off her chest. There was clearly something wrong, and the princess's instability was something that Crecheto's presence might be able to soothe.

There was also the possibility that Crecheto could get the princess to confess what had happened during her escape from the city. That would help to explain the situation to the king and queen upon their return to Elion.

Seras felt awful about causing problems for her maids and for making them worry. She silently apologized to them once more.

But this is the only way I can get this medicine to Crecheto.

Seras knew that if she handed the medicine to one of her maids, they would question her about its origin and it might even be confiscated. She wanted to hand it over directly to someone of the Rieden family so that she could be certain it was delivered. With their beloved child on the verge of death, Seras knew that the Riedens would not hesitate to try any medicine that might save her.

Having convinced the knights and maids to accompany her, Seras was allowed out of the palace and into the district of noble mansions. The royal carriage halted outside the Rieden family home. Almost the entire family came out to greet her—but Crecheto was absent, as Seras expected she would be. Her anxiety had left her bedridden, and Crecheto's daughter, Kokuri, received her instead.

She did not look well, dark shadows under eyes that were puffy from crying. The Riedens showered Seras with considerate words, happy that she had returned to the city. They had apparently learned of her escape and that she

was deeply worried about something. The family acted as if they were walking on eggshells, with a shadow across each and every one of their faces.

All of them were worried about Crecheto's granddaughter, suffering through Shivana disease. Their faces were even graver than they had been the last time that Seras had visited. While the rest of the city was in a celebratory mood, this was the one mansion filled with gloom and sadness.

I'm glad I did this, Seras thought. Breaking those taboos to find that flower...

She was quickly let inside. Kokuri led her down the hallway—Seras having asked her maids and the rest of the Riedens to wait in the entryway. Crowding Crecheto with a visit might affect her health.

"Mother has been doing nothing but sleeping as of late..." said Kokuri, sounding exhausted herself. "But she might be energized by your visit, princess. That is, if she will wake..."

But before Seras met with Crecheto, there was something she had to do. She took a bottle of semi-opaque white liquid from her pocket and handed it to Kokuri.

"Miss Kokuri—please give this to Rieri."

"Wh-what is it?" she asked.

"Please, give it to Rieri. It might...cure her Shivana disease."

"I"

"I do not *know* if it will work...but I made this medicine after intensely studying the knowledge passed down to our royal house."

Seras added weight to her words by invoking her royal house. She placed the bottle in Kokuri's palm and slowly closed her fingers around it.

"If you still believe that there is hope, then I want you to give her this medicine," said Seras.

Something in Kokuri's expression changed—a faint strength returned to her

eyes.

“I have only one request. Will you keep this medicine a secret, even if it heals your daughter’s disease? Will you tell everyone that she just got better?” asked Seras.

It seemed from Kokuri’s expression that she understood what Seras was asking. There was some...*reason* behind her request for secrecy. Kokuri swallowed hard and nodded nervously.

“I understand. I swear to never speak of this to anyone. Thank you, princess.”

“I do not know if it will work yet...”

“But if there is even a glimmer of hope, I will take it.” Kokuri gripped the bottle tightly and turned to the stairs that led up to the mansion’s third floor. She hesitated for a moment, then turned back to Seras.

“Princess, my apologies... I must...”

“Quickly. Go to her. To Rieri,” Seras replied.

Kokuri nodded and hurried up the stairs to her daughter’s side. Seras waited a moment, then entered Crecheto’s room. She was asleep, her arms so withered they looked like dead tree branches. Seras felt her chest tighten as she saw her. She walked to the bedside and took her hand.

“Rieri... Rie...ri...” Her voice hoarse, Crecheto deliriously repeated her granddaughter’s name, but didn’t come to.

She’s sleeping. But she’s still so worried about Rieri.

“It’s okay...” said Seras, keeping a tight grip on her nurse’s bony hand. “I’m sure things are going to be okay now, Crecheto.”

Seras returned to the castle.

As Crecheto never woke up, the two of them had been unable to talk. Seras’s maids were quite disappointed to learn the reason behind her escape would remain a mystery for now.

I have caused them so much worry... Seras mentally apologized to them once more. But I delivered the medicine. Now all that's left is to wait and see.

It was only Kokuri who was aware that medicine delivery had been Seras's true goal.

Perhaps some of the people of the city saw me when I arrived back in Elion... but nobody should be aware that I went to the Site of Sealed Spirits or to the Forbidden Valley. I was extremely careful.

The morning after Seras had delivered her medicine to the Riedens, one of her maids came to her room with news while she was changing clothes.

"The Rieden family..." she began, as if reporting a miracle. "R-Rieri Rieden's Shivana disease... It appears that she has *recovered*."

Rieri's mother had spent the night by her daughter's side, worn out by days and days of worrying. She had collapsed against her bed and slept the whole night slumped over the covers. When Kokuri awoke that morning, she could not believe her eyes. The unsettling black spots that had been eating away at her daughter had disappeared. The maid reported that a well-rested Kokuri had checked the child over completely and found not a single blemish.

The spots were gone—vanished.

It was then that Rieri opened her eyes.

"Tahn!" Rieri called to Kokuri the way she always did, smiling. She had been in pain for so long—but now she seemed so happy, calling to her mother. Kokuri became aware of the tears streaming down her cheeks and she embraced her beloved daughter, hugging her close. The Rieden family was so excited that morning, one would think that heaven and earth had been overturned. It was only natural—the incurable Shivana disease had been *cured*. Everyone had given up on Rieri getting better, but now she was completely fine.

The emotions began to well up inside of Seras too as she heard the story from her maid. She placed both hands to her chest, and silently closed her eyes.

...I'm so glad she's okay.

“Lady Crecheto has awoken, too... She sheds tears of happiness at the recovery of her granddaughter.” Seras’s maid also seemed relieved by the good news.

Crecheto... Seras could barely contain her emotions. Breaking a taboo is a bad thing to do—but if I had taken no action, I might have regretted that for the rest of my life. If there was something that I could have done, but I did nothing... Even when Crecheto was so weakened and tired, if Rieri had died, she might have followed soon after. Rieri... Crecheto... Kokuri... I couldn't bear to see that. I couldn't see her like that any longer.

“And so, princess... Lady Kokuri would like to meet with you once more regarding Lady Crecheto. When Lady Crecheto learned that you had visited their mansion the previous day, she exclaimed that you must have brought a miracle to save Rieri, I am told.” The maid gave Seras a wry smile.

Well. She is not mistaken.

“Lady Kokuri has said she is sure that your coming is what saved her daughter, just as Crecheto has stated. She would like to thank you for coming.”

Kokuri wished to thank Seras for her visit...but not for the medicine. It appeared that she understood Seras’s request for secrecy.

Seras went to visit the Riedens that same day.

“Princess! Rieri... Rieri is well again!”

“Yes. Congratulations, Baaya.”

Crecheto stooped down before Seras and hugged her with thin arms. Seras was so happy to see her smiling again. Rieri was looking much better and no longer wore the pained, feverish expression of sickness. Crecheto, Kokuri, and all the members of the Rieden family looked much better too. It was as if a shadow had been lifted, and they were in a much more festive mood. Seras watched Crecheto and the others, a contented expression on her face.

I'm so glad... So happy for them.

Three days after Rieri Rieden had recovered from her Shivana disease, the Spirit Festival came to an end and the Great Spirit awoke from its ten days of slumber. The king and queen made their delayed return to the capital.

Chapter 2: Banishment

THAT DAY, THE AIR in the capital was so cold it chilled Seras to the bone.

The king and queen returned on the final day of the Spirit Festival, and on the following day they were called to the Great Temple. There was something strange about that. Typically, Orio would go to see the Great Spirit to offer prayer once the festival was done—but this time he had been *summoned*. When Shireen and Orio returned to the palace, their faces were pale.

“Father?”

“Seras... What...what have you done...?” Orio’s eyes were filled with sorrow, as if he was holding back physical pain.

Shireen was even worse.

“No! No, no!” She went to her knees, hugging Seras and starting to cry.

“Mother...?”

“Oh Seras, why would you do this...? I heard what happened, I...I understand, but... Oh, you’re such a kind girl—but no, no. This isn’t right. Of course, we were so worried about her too... We thought that we might be able to find a cure outside the city... Your father has been searching for a way to deal with the situation. We didn’t find anything of course, but...but you did, Seras...”

Listening to her mother speak, Seras realized what was going on. She knew what was happening. She had broken two taboos.

Shireen placed her hands on Seras’s cheeks and touched Seras’s nose to hers. Her mother’s eyes were red and sore—it looked like she had been crying since she left the Great Temple. Seras felt her chest tighten.

“Crecheto is your wet nurse, you understand? You aren’t the same... You’re *royalty*... No, well... I know. I understand, Seras. It was so hard for you to see her

like that. I couldn't bear to see what was happening to Baaya either. But Seras..."

"Shireen," said Orio, placing a hand on his wife's shoulder. Seras's father's hands were trembling slightly, just like her mother's were. He looked at Seras with regret in his eyes.

"You found those books in the palace library, didn't you?"

Seras held back the tears that she felt welling up and nodded. It hurt to see her father and mother upset, and she felt remorse for making them feel that way.

Breaking this taboo might be a much more serious offense than I expected.

Seras had been prepared for a punishment—to be locked in a tower for years and years. But when she saw the pained expressions on her parents' faces—that was worse than any punishment would ever be. She might even have preferred to be shouted at and scolded than looked at that way.

"Father... Mother... I'm sorry. I truly am..."

"Seras..."

"But I could not bear to see it. Rieri...the Rieden family, Miss Kokuri, and Baaya... They were so very *sad*." Seras closed her eyes and clenched her fists. "I could not stand to see them like that... I..."

"You are of the royal house. The Rieden family are our servants," said Orio slowly, as if reconfirming the facts to himself. He paused for a moment. "I must ask. You did not go to the Forbidden Valley on their instruction, did you Seras?"

"..."

"I know that you went there. I am not trying to trick you into telling me that. You always were smart, Seras, but you cannot hide this from us. The Spirit Lord noticed a disturbance in the valley's seal the moment it awoke. It used its sealing monument to see memories of the break—and it saw you entering the Forbidden Valley as clear as day. The Great Spirit showed us as well. We know,

Seras.”

Orio’s stern eyes stayed on her—too quiet and serious to be the eyes of a father looking at his daughter. Orio’s eyes were those of a king.

“...I went on my own. The Rieden family knew nothing about it.”

“The Great Spirit knows about your lost spirits, too.”

Unable to bear her father’s gaze, Seras finally looked down at her feet.

“...I’m sorry. I should have told someone.”

“You broke two taboos. Two iron laws of our country that must never be broken.”

“...Yes.”

“You have failed as a royal of this nation. You have disgraced your own status. I...I cannot believe that you would break our most sacred rules to save the lives of mere servants. To give up so much for so little...”

“Orio,” said Shireen, still sobbing. “This is who she is. She is a precious thing. She acts with purity of will, unfortunately unaware of her position. She is *Seras Ashrain*. That is what makes her so beautiful and precious. From a royal’s perspective she might seem completely illogical. I know that. Her actions don’t make sense. Totally illogical. But this is too much! It’s just too much.”

Shireen hugged Seras tightly.

“But the things she’s done—they’re too well reasoned. Even as her mother, I can’t see the flaw in her logic. It’s just...too much. I feel like my heart is going to rip in two.”

“Mother...”

It was hard for Seras to see her mother shaking so much.

“I should never have left her alone,” said Shireen, her voice filled with regret. “I should have done more to make it back here to the capital. I should have stayed... This is my fault because I was not by her side. I know that...but...we

can't do this, Orio! I know you cannot believe that your daughter could be so foolish...but I...I can't help but completely understand the things she has done! I..."

Shireen's arms tightened around Seras.

"I just think—that this is what makes Seras *Seras*!"

"Shireen..." said Orio, hand still on his wife's shoulder, his tone filled with acceptance now. "I am king of the high elves, ruler of Hylings... And you are this nation's queen."

"...Still, I can't. No, no... Nooooo...! Seras... *Seras*...!"

"Mother... I'm s-sorry... B-but I... I..." Seras cried, and as she embraced her mother, she realized what was coming. The punishment for breaking Hyling's taboos might be much, much worse than she had ever imagined. Her punishment so far had been how sad and confused she had made her mother and father. She loved her parents so much, and never wanted to upset them. Seeing the two of them so sad made Seras's guilt swell, the emotion gripping her tightly.

But I didn't know... Could I ever have left Crecheto and Rieri to suffer, when I knew that there was a chance that I could save them? If I had not taken action, I would have regretted it every day for the rest of my life. But taking action has made my mother and father so sad...

Seras's thoughts were a jumbled mess. Her ability to judge a course of action and come to a decision had been shattered, and an unpleasant kind of unease was washing over her like a swarm of insects scuttling across her skin. She felt strangely light-headed, her feet soft and fuzzy. Reality began to slip away, vanishing somewhere far away until all she could feel were her mother's arms wrapped tightly around her. Seras felt as if the only place in the world left for her was her mother's arms.

"Seras... Those who live in Hylings cannot do so in peace without the protection of the Spirit Lord. Outside of the Great Spell there are those who

seek to destroy us and natural disasters that might strike our nation. The Spirit Lord protects us from all—and the laws of the Spirit Lord are absolute. Not even the royals are exempt. We must follow the rules, too. The laws would lose all meaning if exceptions were made.”

Orio pressed his fingers to the corners of his eyes for a few moments, as if holding back his agony.

“The Spirit Lord liked you, Seras. No. In truth the Great Spirit *still* does. The spirit would like for this to...remain between us. What you did, you did out of kindness and for noble reasons. So spoke the Great Spirit. But...” Orio’s tone turned stern as he continued, “The Great Spirit also said that the laws are absolute.”

As Orio said, overlooking such transgressions would lessen the power of the law and weaken their system of order.

“We will lose the protection of the Spirit Lord if we do not obey the laws. That is our contract,” Shireen sobbed. “Oh, if I could, I would take your place. I would accept this punishment on your behalf. But that would not be following the law... It would not be allowed, Seras... Oh...”

Shireen was Seras’s mother, but she was also the queen. She had to follow the laws of Hylings for the sake of its citizens.

She is my mother, but more than that... I know that she is the queen of this nation.

“Seras,” said Orio. “...You did something foolish.”

His words were stern, but his tone was kind. He sounded less like the king and more like her father in that moment. His eyes seemed to be holding something back, but they brimmed with deep affection.

He told Seras that she did something foolish, but there was no blame in his voice. He sounded like he accepted everything that had happened.

“ ... ”

Seras quietly exhaled, closed her eyes, and put a hand to her chest.

For just a moment now, I feel so strangely relaxed. Mother says that I'm kind. Mother and father are kind people, too. So is the Great Spirit. My actions broke the laws of this country. I cannot deny it. But in the end, I have no regrets. I did all that I did for those that are precious to me. I did it for those of the Rieden family...Rieri, Kokuri, and Crecheto.

Everyone is smiling now. They're smiling again.

Father, Mother... I'm sorry for making you sad.

I'm sorry for causing problems for you. Actions have consequences. I accept that. Mother and father have to accept that too: as king and as queen.

"Father, Mother..."

As a member of the royal family, this is something that I, too, must face.

"I broke the laws of this nation."

I must accept it.

"I will accept my punishment. No—I have no choice but to do so."

Banishment from Hylings was the punishment handed down to Seras for breaking the two taboos. She was to be cast beyond the reach of the Great Spell and into the outside world. When Seras heard the punishment, she understood why her mother had cried so much.

"I thought it might be better to just go ahead and kill you, rather than send you out *there*..." said Shireen, after telling her daughter the punishment.

For a moment, Seras was in shock at her mother's words.

"...But I could not do it. I could never bring myself to raise a hand to you..."

The tears dried up as Shireen gave her daughter a faint, tired smile. Seras was to be banished in three days. The three-day delay was not a show of compassion on the part of the Great Spirit, but simply a part of the proscribed

punishment as set out in law. All the same, it was a silver lining for Seras and her parents that they had the time to say their goodbyes. They spent all their remaining days together, reluctant to part.

Almost all matters of state were put off or delayed and Shireen spent most of the three-day period crying. She also scolded Seras several more times for her foolish actions, but always apologized once her outbursts were over, embracing her beloved daughter and crying inconsolably once more.

Orio did his utmost to spend Seras's last three days being not the king, but her father. Every little kindness her parents showed her made Seras more remorseful for what she had done. If time could be cruel—those three days were the cruelest that any days and hours could ever be.

"From what I've heard, it sounds like your mother really, truly loved you, Seras. She didn't reject your banishment, only accepted it in the end," he said.

"She was the Queen of Hylings first, and my mother second. I do not think that she could have turned her back on the laws of our nation. She and my father both loved me deeply and showered me with affection."

"So not even the king could defy the laws, eh...? Well, as queen, I suppose she did the right thing in prioritizing her country."

She didn't give up the protection of the Great Spirit for her daughter.

"Yes. She could be somewhat emotional at times, but as queen she knew her role."

"Still... She spent the days before you left crying, and it sounds like she was conflicted about what happened. I think she really must have loved you, Seras. From what I've heard, I think she understood you—*really* knew you as a person—as Seras Ashrain."

"Well... You may be right about that..." responded Seras, sounding unconvinced. Seras no longer had such feelings for her parents, and knew she

would likely never have them again. She had her reasons for feeling so numb—but she hadn't talked to him about that yet.

Seras's mother had treasured her—that much was certain to her. It could easily be surmised by looking at the facts. Seras's memories were all intact and she knew just what had happened.

"Once all of this is over, maybe we should go see them? Only if you want to though, of course," he said.

"You're assuming that we could make it past the Great Spell," replied Seras with a wry smile.

"That wouldn't happen, you think?"

"No. It is said that not even the divines can enter Hylings and break the Great Spell without the permission of the Great Spirit. More importantly...I cannot remember where the valley was." She looked off into the distance, still smiling. "I simply can't remember."

Seras's banishment was kept a secret, known to only a handful of individuals. Her only request was that Crecheto not be told. She knew her nurse blamed her granddaughter—not to mention herself—for the punishment.

"Publicly, we will announce that Seras has died of an illness," her father explained. "We will say that during the three-day period in which we were absent from public life, we were attending to you in your death throes."

Finally, the day of the banishment arrived, and Seras found herself in a carriage, heading south from the capital, bound for the Valley of the Great Spell.

"The king and queen have received orders from the Great Spirit to travel to the Valley of the Great Spell and perform an inspection," was the excuse the king gave to the ministers of Hylings.

They did not ride in the royal carriage, but instead a civilian carriage common

to any road. Furthermore, they were accompanied by no guards on that day. Only one other individual traveled with them: the carriage driver. He was close to the royal family and was well capable of holding his tongue. He was also a firm believer in the power of the Great Spirit. If the Spirit Lord were to ask him to keep a certain matter secret, he would never speak of it again. The windows of the carriage were covered with thick cloth, so that nobody could see inside.

Of all the inhabitants of Hylings, the king was the strongest for he borrowed the most from the Great Spirit's power. A part of the Great Spirit resided in the king to watch over them. Indeed, two parts of the Great Spirit were always hosted inside of Orio and Shireen, who were contracted to it. And still, the Spirit Lord had sent a larger part of themselves to banish Seras beyond the Great Spell that day. It was no exaggeration to say that the carriage was the safest place in all of Hylings.

However, the Great Spirit was worried about the presence of the three lost spirits that Seras had formed a contract with. Seras could feel the three of them trying to avoid the Great Spirit's notice.

The Great Spirit had declared Seras's spirits taboo and the girl still did not know why. The lost spirits were silent and showed no desire to explain the situation to her. It mattered little now. They could no longer be torn away from their contractor, nor could the Great Spirit vanquish them, or null the contract that they had formed with Seras.

Given the situation they found themselves in, the three spirits elected to remain silent. Seras knew that they were still inside of her, but they did not respond, even when she called to them. They were to be banished to the outside world alongside her.

As they traveled on the road, Shireen cradled Seras's head in her arms. The queen was calm, as if she had completely accepted everything that was about to happen. The carriage shook, and the two of them swayed together.

"There it is."

The great southern valley was thick and overgrown with life, in stark contrast to the Forbidden Valley in the east. There was green growth all over the valley, and several waterfalls tumbling from the cliffs, splashing down to form a stream. Rainbows formed near the tops where the spray was strongest. The driver took them down a neat cobblestone road that ran along the rainbow before stopping to open the door for them. Orio got out first, then turned to give a hand to his wife.

“Come, Shireen.”

“...” Shireen kept her arms around Seras, unmoving.

“...Shireen.”

“I know.”

She descended from the carriage and took Seras by the hand, helping her out as well. Their driver had already taken Seras’s things and handed them to Orio.

“Right. Let’s go, shall we?”

Leaving their driver with the carriage, the three of them proceeded down a path surrounded by uneven rocks. It seemed as if the Great Spirit was watching them from the sky. Seras heard the babbling of the river, the little splashes of fish jumping up and plopping back down into the water, and the songs of the birds in the trees. A soft, kind wind was blowing and there was rustling in the leaves around them. The sound mixed with the flow of the pure, clear water and was pleasant to the ear.

This would be such a wonderful place...if only the three of us were just here for a nice walk.

“You’re so pretty, Seras.”

“Thank you, Mother.”

The two of them walked hand in hand, as Orio went before them sweeping away the vines and brush that might block their path.

Finally, they arrived.

The valley was narrow ahead of them, contracting even more the further it went. At the end was a deep, black darkness. Seras thought to ask where it went, but knew that there was only one answer to her question.

That is the Great Spell—this path leads to the outside world.

Orio lay down the bag of Seras's things he had been carrying.

This is the place, she understood.

Orio had seemed pressed for time as he'd walked. Seras was only allowed to remain within the confines of the Great Spell until a certain hour on her third day...and that time was growing near.

"The outside world... I hope that it is a better place now than it once was," Shireen mumbled. There was no way for the elves of Hylings to know what was happening on the outside. "No. Perhaps it would be better if everything that once was out there has simply been wiped away..."

Shireen fell silent and bit her lip, mouth tightly shut. Orio looked at the queen with a bitter look on his face. He got down on his knees and brought his face level with his daughter's.

"Let me tell you this one more time," he said. "When we were last in the outside world, there was a nation known as the Holy Empire of Neah. I hope that it still survives. We had a pact of sorts with that nation during the time we lived at peace with the other races in the outside world. But one day, our relations with the other races collapsed. Our situation became so dire that there was no hope of salvaging it. We gave up on living at peace with the outside world and fled to within the bounds of the Great Spell. But... Our records tell us that the Holy Empire of Neah was the only nation that tried to protect us, until the very end."

"The Holy Empire of Neah..." said Seras, repeating the name to her father.

"First, you should find out whether the Holy Empire of Neah still exists. Our royal house had strong connections to the royals of Neah at the time of our

escape from the outside world. It should be the country closest at hand once you leave the Valley of the Great Spell. If the nation still stands, they may be willing to assist you, as they have historic connections to the high elves.”

Seras had never heard of the Holy Empire of Neah—the name hadn’t been in any of her books. She couldn’t be sure whether that was because the books had been deliberately erased, or whether she simply hadn’t gotten around to reading them yet.

The records of Hylings are very old... There’s no way to know whether this nation still exists today. Perhaps it is as mother says...no civilization has survived in the outside world.

“Finally...”

Orio said a few words to Seras as she readied her things. Seras met her father’s gaze in silence as he knelt before her and wrapped her arms around his neck to embrace him.

“I know... Goodbye, Father.”

Orio gently hugged his daughter back. “I know I have said this before—but you did something very foolish, Seras.”

“...”

“But you have no regrets, do you?”

“...No. I don’t. But I...I feel sad that this has happened.”

I never imagined that what I was doing would tear us apart.

Seras couldn’t stop the tears from coming.

“Crecheto...” said Orio. “She has made a full recovery—all thanks to you.”

“Yes.”

“As your king, I must reprimand you. As your father... I believe the Great Spirit might scold me for saying this...but I am *proud* of your actions. Heh... Have you read the books, I wonder? It is written that as we high elves have such long

lives, our goodbyes are not heavy affairs. They do not appear so to the humans of the outside world, at least. Could it be that our emotions are worn away over time? Would a human think our present interaction is strange...that our goodbye carries no weight? We...we high elves live so long that our emotions dull over time, the sensations worn away like a stone in a stream. We forget how to truly be sad. Have I forgotten, I wonder? But...I *am* sad. I *treasure* you, Seras. I truly do.”

Orio closed his eyes, and buried his forehead in his daughter’s neck. “My one and only beloved daughter... Seras... Please, be well.”

Orio softly drew himself away, placing both hands on Seras’s shoulders.

“No matter how far away we may be, we will always be family. You may forget us with time, but that will never change. Never.”

“...Yes, Father.” Seras somehow managed to hold back the tears welling in her eyes. “I’m sorry...and... Thank you.”

Let’s say goodbye with a smile. No more tears. I don’t want this to hurt right at the very end. We promised that to each other last night, when we were all in bed.

Seras looked at her mother and saw her emotions writ large on her face—a woman lost, with nowhere left to go.

“Mother...”

Shireen went to her knees and spread her arms wide. “Come here.”

Seras ran to her mother’s arms and hugged her. Shireen closed her eyes slowly.

“We’ve already said everything that needed saying, and your father has refreshed your memory... But... I have something to say to you as well.” Shireen embraced her daughter. “You have to protect yourself from now on.”

“Yes.”

“And...don’t forget about us. We’ll *never* forget about you... One day...”

Shireen stopped herself. Seras could imagine what she had been about to say. They were words that should never be spoken to one who was to be banished.

“Don’t forget about us, okay?”

Seras felt a sharp pang in her chest.

“As your father said... Rieri, Kokuri, Crecheto... You saved them. I know I’ve scolded you so much, but...” Shireen gave her daughter a bitter smile. “I am proud of you too, Seras. You are such a kind little girl. I worry that someday, that kindness will prove your undoing. Ah, I did not wish to say this to you...but there are times when integrity can be a weakness. That is what makes you so wonderful. When you have lived as long as I have, that quality of yours seems to shine all the brighter, like a jewel. It’s all right if you don’t understand what I’m trying to say. But that’s exactly why you have to be the one to protect yourself—though in truth, I would like someone to be there to protect you. Truly, I would. So long as you remain as you are... So long as you are Seras Ashrain... that weakness will remain. That is why I wish for you to meet someone who will protect you. Someone in the outside world...”

Seras racked her brain, trying to grasp what her mother was saying. She could only understand about half of it, but she could sense that her words came from a place of kindness and consideration.

“Seras.”

“...Yes?”

“Be careful.”

“Yes.”

“A short lifespan... So much is concentrated in a short period of time. Those with shorter lives in the outside world will have outlooks vastly different from ours. Such concentrated desires and wants can manifest in terribly violent words and actions.”

“...Yes. I will be careful.”

“Oh, I’m hopeless,” said Shireen, smiling to herself, her voice a whisper. “I’m sure there is so much more I could say to you. I have nagged and griped, a terrible mother to the very end...”

“Ah...”

“Seras? Are you crying...?”

“Y-you’re the best mother in the world. I love you. I will always love you... Always!”

“Seras...” Shireen had no more words. Something had pierced her heart. “Heh... I’m no good at all. Even now, here at the end, I...”

“I’m sorry for causing you so many problems... For making you so sad...”

Shireen pressed Seras’s face against her chest and wrapped her tightly in her arms.

“Heh. My Seras...I’m sure you’ve tired of hearing this by now, but you don’t need to apologize. Let’s smile. All of us now, in the end... Seras... Oh, my everything... My one and only... My wonderful little girl.”

It had seemed at first that Shireen was calm and composed, having accepted what was happening. In reality, it appeared that she was still seized by her grief and putting on a brave face for her daughter.

Finally the time came. Her back to the valley’s depths, Seras lowered her head.



“Thank you for caring for me.”

Her parents had said that there were to be no more apologies, and so instead, Seras thanked them. She looked up at the two of them standing there.

“Goodbye—Father, Mother.”

Thank you—Father, Mother.

The last memory of her parents was to be the two of them smiling—that was her mother’s wish.

“I was so lucky to be born as your daughter.”

Seras couldn’t stop the tears entirely, but she smiled at them still. Her father and mother smiled back, just as they’d promised.

“Father, Mother.”

Goodbye.

“Thank you.”

I hope...

“Take care.”

Orio Ashrain

THE KING AND QUEEN sat side by side in the carriage, shortly after they had sent their daughter away. Shireen leaned into her husband’s chest, as he gently cradled her head in his arms.

“I know what I said, but in truth I wish to forget about her as soon as possible,” said Shireen, not looking up.

“This farewell... You’ve decided to see it as a punishment then? A just consequence for our failure to properly raise our daughter.”

At her husband's question, Shireen was silent for a few moments.

"She is going to live in the outside world."

"Yes."

"It will be unbearable, I'm sure of that."

Unbearable for Seras—or for you, I wonder?

"Truly, we raised her *too well*. Too much focus on book learning. To be plain—she is too kind. As you said, the girl is pure and noble... Perhaps as a princess who was protected by a great many subjects, that would be a fine way for her to live. But with nobody out there to protect or understand her, she may end up being eaten alive."

Shireen trembled at those words, and Orio stroked his wife's shoulder in apology.

"But you know—for all her foolishness, she is also intelligent. She has the ability to think and a breadth of knowledge. That incident with Crecheto's granddaughter... She thought up a solution and used her own strength to resolve the situation. She is not reckless—her borrowing of the strength of those lost spirits in the Forbidden Valley shows her cunning."

Orio knew that these were simply words of consolation, but he spoke them to Shireen nonetheless.

"She is too kind—a dangerous flaw. But...she is by no means *weak*. She has the power to protect herself. I'm sure she'll be okay. Let us believe in her," said Orio, his words directed as much at himself as his wife.

"Let's believe in her."

Shireen began to cry—as if all the emotions of the farewell came pouring out at once, a last goodbye to her daughter. Orio wondered if perhaps the brave face that she had put on in front of Seras had been harder for his wife than he'd first imagined, given how intensely she now sobbed in the carriage.

Eventually she stopped—worn out from the tears perhaps—and fell asleep on

Orio's chest. Orio moved the window covering aside to look at the outside world. He saw a desolate winter scene—*strangely fitting*, he thought.

Shireen doesn't know. There is one more punishment given to those that are banished... The loss of their memories.

Some of the memories of a banished individual were taken from them when they were exiled to the outside world. This was the method by which Hylings was protected and their secrets maintained, the Great Spirit told Orio. Orio had told Seras of this in private...and that she should keep it a secret from Shireen.

Now, Orio remembered how his wife had spoken to her—asking her to never forget the two of them—and the memory gave him a twinge in his chest.

Should I not have told her?

Orio thought it just to warn Seras ahead of time, and the Great Spirit had not scolded him for his decision to do so. As he looked out of the window of the carriage, Orio's eyes rested upon a dried-up spring.

What does she remember now, I wonder? What has she already forgotten?

He had given his daughter a piece of paper with her name, her background, and some basic information about the Holy Empire of Neah. At first the Great Spirit had been reluctant to grant her even that courtesy, but Orio had pleaded with the Spirit Lord for understanding.

"Please. At least allow her those three pieces of information."

I am sorry that they are all that I could give you, Seras. Perhaps losing your memories will be good for you, in a way. You will not bear the pain and knowledge of this place through life with you. You can never return—and so better to forget what you have lost. But Shireen...I could not bring myself to tell her that Seras will forget her own mother... I was not capable of that.

He gently stroked Shireen's head. There was still the trail of a single tear running down her cheek.

I...I couldn't cry, either. I have lived too long, I think. My emotions are worn

away, just as I said to Seras as we parted. We high elves live long lives, lengthy even among our elven kin. But is that really a blessing, I wonder? Sometimes such doubts cross my mind. We high elves have long lives, but we are neither immortal nor blessed with eternal youth. Our lives end in death, an end which comes for all. But what if one were able to live forever, I wonder? Would a race of such beings be capable of maintaining their own sanity? I am not sure that I could. I was more emotional in my youth, but now those emotions have been blunted. Is it mental self-defense, perhaps? An instinct of preservation? Forming a society and living within it...things will never always be at peace. Emotions will stir up and rage at times—so long as we are alive. Perhaps the humans have lifespans of the perfect length...just right for serving out their time in life as creatures of emotion.

“Nh... S-Seras...” mumbled Shireen in her sleep.

Orio thought of Seras. She was miraculously beautiful, in mind and body both.

But...there is also something enchanting about that beauty. To many who behold her, it may also be a poison. If she continues to grow healthy and strong, her charm will only increase with age. The world is rife with ugliness, and Hylings is no exception. It is said that we high elves fled the outside world because of the curses of our long lives...but that isn't the only reason we fled. The innate beauty of our people caused problems for us.

Orio pressed his fingers to the sides of his nose, and gently stroked his sleeping wife's hair.

I understand your concerns all too well... If I were a younger man, would I have lost my composure as Shireen did? Would I have become as emotional as my wife, who is over two centuries my junior?

At a glance, Orio and Shireen might appear to be quite close in age. It was hard to tell an elf's age by simply looking at them, and Shireen was no exception. Orio looked away from his wife, gazing outside the carriage window once more.

Someday we will have to forget about her, I expect... Somewhere in the long, exhausting years to come. She will forget, too. She likely no longer knows my name.

"Seras."

Please, be safe out there. I could not cry for you. But the days we spent together... They were a blessing. I loved you as a father. If my heart truly wishes for your safety, then...please let its prayers be answered. I wish you a long and peaceful life of laughter... And if I might want for something more, then...

"I wish for her to come across a good man, somewhere out there in the world."

As he gazed out the window, thinking of the daughter that he would likely never see again, a ray of sunshine shone through the thick clouds to the ground below.

Chapter 3:

The Holy Empire of Neah

SERAS SNAPPED BACK to reality.

She turned back to see a dense cluster of trees behind her, dried up and bare for the winter. The wind on her face was cold—a true winter wind. The last thing she remembered was being enveloped in light, walking through that valley after saying goodbye. There was something waiting for her there.

Something? What was it?

Her memories were fuzzy, like she was seeing through a thick haze.

Suddenly the wind blew harder, cutting through her and making her duck to the ground, holding herself in a defensive crouch. She looked at the cracked ground beneath her.

“...”

Goodbye?

I was saying goodbye to...someone. But who?

I can't remember, but...

“Investigate whether the Holy Empire of Neah is still out there.”

Those words were burned into her memory.

Ah. That's right. I was in a different country. But... What was it called? It wasn't the Holy Empire of Neah. It was something else... Somehow, I know that.

But try as she might, Seras could not remember the country's name.

The Holy Empire of Neah...

“If the nation still stands, they may be of some assistance to you.”

Someone had told her those words—the same someone who had given her

the things that she carried on her back. That seemed likely.

She was also contracted to three lost spirits. Seras remembered that too, along with the fact that she could borrow their strength in various ways. She knew of spirit armor, a powerful ability that would protect her if she needed it.

The spirits... They live inside of me.

She tried calling out to them and received thoughts that spoke of freedom and release in reply. Seras breathed a sigh of relief.

I haven't lost them by coming here into the outside world.

The outside world?

That's right... This isn't the place I used to live. ...I don't think so, anyway.

Seras looked around at the cold winter forest. She looked up beyond the trees. No snow was falling, but the clouds were gray, gloomy, and heavy in the sky above her. She couldn't see anything amiss.

Did I walk here? Have I always been here? ...I don't know.

Seras felt as if she had been in a kind of dreamland, and had only just woken up.

I cannot go back, though... I think not, anyway.

Hmm?

Seras realized that her face was wet to the touch. There was a trail of tears running down her cheeks. She had been crying. She was no longer sad though—her emotions were still and unmoving.

What was I so upset about? I don't even know.

“...”

In any case, first I must get out of this forest.

Seras looked through her things and found an old map. In her pack she also found some basic rations, clothes, equipment for camping, and some old coins.

She also had a sword contained in the scabbard on her back and a short bow. She hadn't been as proficient with her archery as she was with the sword, but Seras vaguely remembered that her archery abilities had once been praised.

I remember, yes... Some memories... The details are fuzzy, but I do know some things.

My name is Seras Ashrain. I remember that.

Seras could also recall a few more pieces of information about her life.

So...I have not lost all of my memories then. But I feel as if they are the memories of a stranger. It's so odd.

"You may forget us, but that will never change."

Who said those words to me?

"I may forget, but..."

Whoever it was, they taught me something...I think. Yes... Memories were taken, and all the emotions that went along with them? The memories that need taking were plucked out—no... Sealed? I don't know. I don't remember. Anyway, it seems that I have lost a part of my memory.

"..."

Seras tried to remember something but couldn't. It was scary not knowing what she had forgotten.

Perhaps these things that I don't remember are irreplaceably precious to me. The emotions too...

...Rustle...

"Eh?" Seras noticed a piece of paper inside of her cloak.

Did I know that my memories would be taken, and place this here ahead of time?

She opened the folded piece of paper.

“Head for the Holy Empire of Neah. Royal princess of the House of Ashrain, Seras Ashrain.”

The paper contained only those two lines. The name of the country matched the one that Seras had managed to remember on her own.

It appears I should head there after all.

“Royal princess...”

Am I a princess, descended from some royal line?

“Princess.”

The title sounded familiar—Seras felt like she had often been called that.

Is there nothing else written here?

Seras went through her belongings but found no other hints.

Perhaps these words were the only ones I was physically permitted to carry with me.

She reorganized her things, hefted them onto her back, and continued onward. She heard howling from far away—it sounded like a wolf, perhaps. Thrown into an unknown world, completely alone... Seras felt oddly empty. She recalled the map that she had seen earlier, and looking down at her feet as they carried her through the forest, she repeated the name of the country to herself.

“...The Holy Empire of Neah.”

For some reason, she felt that the name was her last hope in this world.

White breath blew from gaps in the wolves’ fangs, as Seras heard the creatures growl. Seras felt like she had been attacked by wolves before—perhaps in a forest somewhere—but she could not remember. She turned her attention back to the fight.

It’s more important that I deal with the situation in front of me than become lost in my memories. If these wolves are starving, they might leave me alone if I

give them some of my food. No—that won't work.

The golden eyes of the wolves shone with murderous intent, focused on their prey. They were intent on killing her. There could be no making peace with them.

Suddenly, one of the wolves lunged.

Seras drew her sword, and felt it sink into the creature's hide as she brought it down from above. The sensation ran up her arms as the blade twisted its flesh apart. Lines of blood spurted up, and as the first wolf wailed Seras ran for the boulder behind her. Careful not to slip, she turned and swept the pursuing wolves aside. Reaching the boulder, she put her back against the rock and readied her sword.

Now they won't be able to take me from behind.

“—Haah, haah...” Her breathing was quick, heartbeat racing—but Seras felt oddly calm.

That was the first time I have ever taken a creature's life with my sword. My memories are gone, but—I think it was the first.

From the blurry depths of her mind, she recalled that on “that day,” the creature had not bled. Not so far as she remembered, at least. The wolf she had struck down was bleeding, though. Its warm blood flowed out.

I spilled that blood—took its life.

“Haah... Haah...”

The other wolves showed no signs of retreat. Seras was a child of only seven. She must have looked weak to the predators. Easy prey.

“The Holy Empire... Neah...”

She kept the words close, repeating them like a kind of incantation, urging herself onward.

If I cannot find a way to live there, I will die. I will have no reason to live. With

my memories missing, I feel as if my will to live on and move toward a goal is hanging by a thread.

Then the wolves surged, as if they had been waiting for their opportunity to strike. Some lunged for her, while others clambered up the rock, trying to get at her from above.

I can handle them...

Seras felt instinctively that she could defeat them without relying on the strength of her spirit armor. She could not remember when, but she had experienced a true fight before.

I can do this. I've done it before—I think.

Seras gripped the handle of her sword, and swung the blade at the monsters.

“ ... ”

Red blood soaked into the cracks of the dry ground beneath her. Seras stood surrounded by the corpses of golden-eyed wolves. Wiping the blood from her blade, Seras noticed something.

It's snowing.

Snowflakes had started to fall, dancing around her like white flower petals. Her white breath billowed in the air as she looked up at the cold, gray sky.

“Look. Snow.”

Suddenly the words popped into her head.

But who said them?

“Cre—” She stopped.

Cre...

“ ... ”

What is it that I was trying to say?

The start of a word had suddenly floated into the back of her mind, barely surfacing. Now the word sank away—disappearing and lost in the ocean of her mind. Seras tried calling out to her spirits and got an immediate answer.

“I see. Then you have forgotten things as well...”

The lost spirits seemed confused. They remembered that they had formed a contract with Seras, but had forgotten other things.

“That might be my fault...though in truth I do not know that either. But if I am to blame, then I am sorry.”

But... I have three spirits. They answer when I call to them.

Seras was incredibly grateful that they were with her.

I am not alone.

“Let us go.”

She put her sword back into its scabbard and resumed her walk through the darkening forest.

“So the memories of all the things you forgot have come back now?” he asked, puzzled.

“Yes, so it seems. It happened slowly at first. Around the time that I turned seventeen, a few memories began coming back to me. I still cannot remember where the valley is, so I am sure that some things will always remain lost...”

So...memories can come back once a person is banished, huh? They can recover over time? It's possible not even the Great Spirit knows that. If the world of Hylings is really sealed away from this one by that Great Spell, then the spirit should have no way of knowing what happens to those it banishes to this world.

“Then... It took ten years after you were banished for your memories to come back?” he asked.

“Yes, that's right.” Seras nodded. “But...”

“Not the emotions,” he said, before Seras could finish.

“Yes... My memories are facts and fragments of information within me. But, well...they feel so unlike *real* experiences. It’s as if they’re from a story, or the actions of a stranger I read about. Yes. A work of fiction, a story in a book whose pages I’m imagining, you might say.”

“It’s probably done this way to stop the banished from taking revenge.”

“The princess said something to that effect, as well.”

It’s unlikely everyone banished from Hylings would simply accept their fate. Some of them might resent what happened to them. They might even return to try and break the Great Spell, seeking revenge. Wouldn’t it be harder for the exiles to form that resentment if all their memories connected to the banishment were erased? They wouldn’t remember any of the important stuff... Wouldn’t even know why they were sent away from the country in the first place.

He put his hands behind his head and lay back on the bed.

“Maybe losing the emotions that go along with your memories is kind of a side effect... Having no feelings about what happened makes it easier for you to move on. It takes all that emotional turmoil and makes it a vague memory. It makes you stop caring, one way or the other, about what happened. It’s a cruel way of going about it, though.”

The young girl in Seras’s memories... That young princess must have loved her parents deeply. But now Seras barely feels as if the girl in her memories was her at all. It’s almost terrifying.

“Sometimes when I talk about my past, I’ll pretend as if I have some kind of emotion. It would be harder to explain that I feel nothing. I’m sure it would make people uncomfortable.”

“I see. Now I think I get why you talk about your time in Neah so much, but hardly ever mention where you came from.”

Seras gave him a wry smile. “And well... It makes me feel somewhat guilty. It’s as if I’m telling someone else’s story, divulging secrets that aren’t mine to tell.”

“You felt so guilty that you hesitated to tell me, eh?” He looked away, with a slightly sardonic smile. “Worried about upsetting your past self... That’s just like you, Seras.”

“Just like me?”

“I think that you hold too much back. You aren’t assertive enough. I’ve told you, haven’t I? You’re allowed to be more selfish than you are right now.”

Seras smiled, laughing. “That takes me back. The princess once said the same to me.”

The princess... She doesn’t mean that little girl who was banished from Hylings in her memories, but Cattlea Straumms, Princess of the Holy Empire of Neah.

The young Seras Ashrain was banished from her home nation, but she was about to have a fateful encounter with a certain other princess.

Cattlea Straumms

“I CANNOT BELIEVE we’re out hunting in such cold weather,” mumbled Cattlea Straumms unhappily, glancing about at the snow-covered trees as she walked the forest with her hands behind her back. She was attended to by four of her knightly guard and by the daughter of Marquess Renaufia’s house, Makia Renaufia.

She had turned ten years old that year.

She was accompanying her father’s cousin, Duke Mishel, on a hunting trip. Such trips were an annual event of sorts, but Cattlea never found them very interesting. The trip that day was made especially dull by the duke’s wish to

venture out despite the cold weather. Cattlea's father did not much like hunting either, but was generally cajoled by his boisterous cousin into a reluctant yearly outing. Cattlea's father had been good friends with his cousin Hagg Mishel since the two of them were children.

I know the bold and troublesome Hagg took my rather reserved father all over the place when they were young. I've heard the stories.

Their relationship had not changed much since then...

...Not even now that father is the emperor, and Hagg one of his retainers.

It is quite the problem, Cattlea thought to herself. I do not much care for the man, personally.

There were disturbing rumors about Duke Mishel—talk that he might be trying to maneuver his son into the royal line of succession. There were good reasons for these rumors—the present Holy Emperor of Neah had no sons or living brothers who shared his blood. They had died of illness or of unfortunate accidents. The queen had also died of a sickness, eight years ago. Cattlea's mother's death had happened when she was just two years of age, and so she had no memories of her.

The emperor and his wife had difficulty in conceiving, and his daughter, Cattlea, had been born when he was already of advanced age. Then the emperor had fallen into a deep depression after the death of his wife and refused to take any concubines. The throne of the queen remained empty.

That meant that the only child of Ortola Straumms was his daughter, Cattlea. She had been raised with a delicate hand, as one might a butterfly or a beautiful flower. The throne of the Holy Emperor of Neah belonged to the line of men—that was their custom. With no sons of royal blood to succeed the emperor in death, one could hardly blame the emperor's cousin for his spark of ambition by pushing forward his son.

I also believe he sees father as being easy to manipulate. Not to mention trying to marry me off to one of his sons...

Duke Mishel's wife was supposedly on board with the proposal, Cattlea had heard. The matter was quite beyond her control.

My precious father grows weaker day by day. Some days he speaks as if the burden of being the holy emperor is too heavy for him to bear... My my, this will never do.

Cattlea never spoke of the topic to anyone, wary that one of her guards might leak her worries to her father or to Hagg himself—and she very much didn't want to have to deal with *that* mess.

But I am sure I could confide in Makia.

Cattlea turned to look at the young girl who walked behind her, sword at her belt. The house of Marquess Renaufia had been turning out knights to guard the royals of Neah for generations. That said, their loyalty to the present emperor was questionable. There were doubts spoken openly in the nation, and they were spoken by the worried nobles of Neah.

"The holy emperor has no ambition. He lacks the ability to lead us," said some.

There are others who appreciated a peaceful emperor, though.

Cattlea also knew that the House of Renaufia would no longer be willing to serve the royals with no promise of recompense or reward...or so she had heard.

But when Makia had been assigned to her protection the previous year, Cattlea found that she was someone she could trust. It had been less than a year since her assignment, but Cattlea knew that the girl was trustworthy from her observations.

"I do not recommend that we stray much deeper into the forest, princess," said Makia.

Cattlea turned around and lowered her eyes to the ground.

"I am sure I will be fine with you here to guard me."

Makia Renaufia had sharp, red, almond-shaped eyes. She also had long black

hair, and healthy white skin. Her face was small like that of an expensive, finely crafted doll. She had added frilly trim to her armor in places, and sported a headband that she was fond of wearing.

Her choice of attire makes her look even more like an expensive doll.

When Makia was silent, she came across as cold and distant to others, but was quite approachable once she struck up a conversation. She was, however, the daughter of the legendary house of a marquess. Her elegance and dignity were evident in each and every one of her actions.

If I were to sum her up in a single word, perhaps I would call her “balanced.”

There was one point where Makia came up short, however...

Cattlea had just turned ten years old, and Makia was five years her elder at fifteen. Despite their age gap, Makia was shorter in height than Cattlea. She was often mistaken by state guests of Neah as a child. And her height *bothered* her.

It’s not as if a person’s height determines anything about their worth.

Makia was skilled with a sword, and so strong that those who saw her train doubted their eyes when they observed the raw power in her thin arms. She could freely handle a longsword with such reach that it made her height a trivial issue in battle. She could overpower men twice her size.

Makia also had a talent for incantations—one of the few on the continent capable of using such magic. On the middle finger of her left hand, she wore a ring of incantation. Unlike other magical items that enabled the use of incantation magic, this one could only be used by humans...and only by those who were *chosen*—the truly talented.

“Hah... These hunts truly are boring.”

“You have no love for the sport of hunting, I know, princess.” Makia smiled ambivalently at Cattlea’s frank comment.

“I tried it once, but it wasn’t the least bit interesting. I would not say that men only enjoy how savage it all is... But...the act of killing animals for sport does not

agree with me.”

“You prefer to walk through the forest, taking leave from his majesty instead?”

“I do, yes. I do not appreciate the cold, but the winter scenery is lovely. All these bare trees have shed their leaves... I would not like to be out here when the snow is much deeper than this, but a light covering I do not mind.”

These walks do nothing for the boredom, however. It's fine at first, but looking over the same scenery step after step becomes tiresome...though I would much, much rather be here walking with Makia than riding at Hagg's side. His stories are terribly long and boorish whenever he corners you. I cannot afford to upset my house's relationship with his, and so I must nod along and smile at his rubbish. It is exhausting. At least he hasn't brought his son with him this time.

“I don't want to hunt in winter. It's too cold,” the boy had told his father, rejecting the offer. Hagg and his wife were soft on their son and couldn't bring themselves to rebuke his stubbornness.

I appreciate their weak parenting at times like these.

Whenever Hagg's son was with their party, the duke and his wife were constantly trying to push him and Cattlea—his future wife, they presumed—closer together.

Oh, it's truly irritating. I am just fortunate that their son isn't actually interested in me.

Apparently after several meetings he had declared that he wasn't a fan of the princess—which was nothing but good news for Cattlea.

“...Oh?”

Cattlea saw several horses coming toward them.

“Father.”

It was Ortola, with several of his personal guard in tow. Cattlea's guards had been leaving marks throughout the forest so that their own path was visible. It

would have been easy for her father to find her.

“Is something wrong?” she asked.

Ortola scanned the nearby trees, then looked to his daughter.

“There have been no reports in this area, but in others—a pack of golden-eyed wolves has been sighted. I sent out several of my veteran guards to deal with them, but... I was so worried... You...ah...haah... My one and only daughter, my blood...haah...”

His breathing was unsteady—he looked less out of breath, and more physically in pain. Cattlea’s father had gotten larger too. *He hasn’t been exercising or taking walks. I imagine that even this short trip has been hard on him.*

“Should you be leaving Sir Hagg on his own?”

“Haah, haah... Hagg has sprained his ankle. He’s resting. I was thinking of heading home... Cattlea? What are you smiling about?”

“Ah, my apologies. What can I say? How awful for Sir Hagg.”

Cattlea couldn’t help but smile at the news, especially that it would allow her to return home.

But letting such emotions rise to the surface... I require more self-discipline, it seems.

Ortola looked up at the gray sky.

“It’s started snowing, too... Haah, haah... We should return to the capital before it grows too thick on the ground, I think... Hagg did mention that the clouds looked like they would soon disperse, I suppose...”

“I am so cold I can scarcely bear it out here, Father. I would like to return to the palace if possible. It would be an awful shame if the Holy Emperor of Neah and his daughter were to freeze to death in the forest, wouldn’t it?”

“Haah, haah... Hah hah, such jest. But well, I wouldn’t want my beloved

daughter catching a cold out here in the chilly air. Yes. Let us return home.”

“Yes, fath—”

Cattlea noticed the presence first. A moment later, Makia did too.

“Get behind me, princess,” she said, turning her back to Cattlea as she drew her sword. The other guards had their own weapons at the ready and were following Cattlea and Makia’s gaze. They saw it too. Ortola looked at them in bewilderment, and he was the last to turn.

“Wh-what? A child? Wh-what is she doing here...?!” Ortola exclaimed in astonishment. “Those ears, it cannot be... Is she an elf?”

A little elf girl stood in the forest before them with light, honey-colored hair. She wore thin gloves, a cloak to shield her from the cold, and a bag on her shoulder. She also had a sword strapped to her back, though it looked a little too long for her to wield it herself.

...And she...she’s...so beautiful!

Cattlea found herself completely entranced by her beauty. Here was a beautiful little elf girl, standing quietly and upright among the thick snow falling around her. Just the way she stood was a work of art.

To have one’s heart stolen away... This must be what they mean when they say such things.

Cattlea felt the strange sensation course through her body. It was exhilarating—electrifying.

I have never felt this way before. It is...enervating. Like goosebumps, my skin tingling all over.

Unbidden, Cattlea’s lips began to tremble slightly.

What expression do I have on my face at this moment, I wonder?

It seemed that the others in her party were just as speechless—even Makia. They were all completely captivated and entranced. Cattlea found herself so

distracted that she began to worry that the girl might be some sort of fairy who'd come to steal their attention and play a trick on them.

"You said...The Holy Empire of Neah, did you not?" With every word, the pleasant notes of the girl's clear voice caressed their ears. Her voice did not suit the barren winter, but made its listeners feel as if they were standing under a crisp autumn sky.

"Yes—I did," Cattlea answered, as she began walking toward the young elf girl.

"Eh! Princess?!" Makia finally snapped back to reality, freeing herself from the elf's captivating presence, and went after Cattlea. The other knights followed suit, forming a wall between the elf girl and the princess.

"Princess, w-we do not know who this girl may be! She may be dangerous!"

So that is why their eyes are so firmly fixed upon her—they believe she is a threat.

"Then you must serve as my shields. That will allow me to speak with her in safety, no?"

I want to see her up close... Is that why I began walking toward her?

Cattlea had felt that she had to be sure that the girl was real and not some creature of fantasy.

"So... What business do you have with the Holy Empire of Neah?"

"I was told that...I could count on the Holy Empire of Neah. I have been searching for it. But that is all I can remember..." The young girl looked down at the forest floor helplessly, as if she had come to apologize. As if she was expecting some punishment for her words.

"You do not...remember? You have lost your memories?" Cattlea asked.

"I have not forgotten everything, but there is much that I cannot recall... Ahem..."

When the girl placed a hand into her bag, Makia and the other knights bristled with caution...but all she took out was a piece of paper.

“Makia, I would like to see what she has to show me—could you retrieve it for me?”

“Of course, princess.”

Makia took the piece of paper and turned to Cattlea.

“Princess, I should be the first to open this and confirm—”

“No, that won’t be necessary,” Cattlea interrupted her, holding out her hand.

After a moment’s hesitation, Makia placed the folded piece of paper into Cattlea’s palm. The princess opened it and began to read what was written inside.

“...!”

The Royal House of Ashrain... I know this name. I have read of them in the palace library.

“Then you...you are the Ashrain princess of the high elf nation of Hylings. The same house that once had close ties to our home country of Neah...”

Why is my heart beating so fast?

“...Yes, I am,” answered the young girl, though she sounded somewhat unsure.

“But what are you doing out here alone?”

There must be some reason. This doesn’t appear to be some cheerful attempt to restore friendly relations. Not in the slightest.

“...Well. It seems obvious that unfortunate circumstances have brought you here.”

She claims to have no memories. Is that the reason she has strayed from her country?

All kinds of thoughts began to flow through Cattlea's mind, like a dam had burst and the possibilities were rushing into her like an unstoppable flow. It was rare for her to be moved to such strong emotion. She felt excitement, inspiration, and hope, but nothing negative. Meeting this young girl was an invigorating experience for Cattlea—so fresh and unknown.

"Father."

She looked up at her father on his horse. In his eyes, she saw...

"..."

Ortola was completely captivated by the young girl. He did not drop his gaze as he spoke her name.

"Cattlea."

"Yes, Father?"

"Beautiful."

"...? Y-yes..." It was somewhat hard to interpret, but he appeared to be speaking about the girl.

"Father!"

"Eh? ...Hm? H-hmph." Ortola appeared to regain some of his composure. "She appears to be in need of help, and has been told to turn to our nation for aid. She..."

The young girl explained her position again—that she was a royal of the House of Ashrain. It seemed that Ortola had been so captivated by her that he hadn't even processed that piece of information yet.

"...Ashrain of Hylings... H-hmph... That is indeed a name with connections to Neah, as recorded in the records of our palace library. The emperors who reigned after the elves' disappearance expressed regret at how poorly they were treated by human hands. So it is written. It was also stated that the next time a messenger came from the elves, we should welcome them with the utmost respect." Ortola closed his eyes. "We must atone for what happened."

“Your majesty, f-forgive my interruption!”

The captain of the emperor’s personal guard, Guartz Forlan, took a knee before Ortola’s horse. “This young girl may be an assassin of some kind, sent by someone with ill intent toward your majesty. The possibility cannot yet be ruled out. I believe it’s dangerous to trust her words and accept them so readily... We might take her to the capital, but I believe she must be securely bound until we can determine that she means us no harm!”

“...Hmph. Quite right, Guartz.”

“Then, your majesty...”

I don’t want things to start like this, Cattlea thought reflexively. But no. Guartz is completely right.

It was rare for Cattlea to favor an illogical decision over a rational one—but in this case, she did.

“Father...”

What if she truly is a princess—here as an envoy to reestablish a relationship between our two nations? Our restraining her might close that path to us forever. This may be a test from the nation of Hylings—measuring our worth by how we choose to treat this young girl they have sent us.

It was just as she made to push back against Guartz’s suggestion that her father spoke: “But—I will not allow it.”

The emperor sounded completely resolute. It had been a long time since Cattlea had seen such majesty reflected in her father’s eyes.

“Given how cruelly the high elves were treated by the people of this continent, it is *we* who must endeavor to regain *their* trust, not the other way around. Not to mention, this girl has seen so few summers I cannot bring myself to doubt her intentions.”

Cattlea was a little taken aback at her father’s words—*this is not like him. But perhaps this is how a holy emperor is truly meant to be.*

“M-my apologies, Your Majesty!” Guartz seemed surprised by the emperor’s firm resolve—and moved by his words, too.

“Our emperor has finally returned,” his eyes seemed to say. Ortola raised his hand to show that he accepted the apology.

“I fully understand that it was not easy for you to speak out and warn me. It was for my protection and the safety of Neah that you did so. But I...I wish to believe in this young girl. To trust in those high elves with whom we once walked hand in hand... Please, Guartz. Allow your emperor this indulgence.”

Guartz lowered his head once more.

“To hear you speak so strongly on the matter, your majesty... I have made a misstep.”

“You fulfilled your duty as my personal guard. Do not dwell on this. Your name—Seras, was it?” asked the emperor, turning to the girl.

“Ah... Yes.” The elven girl had been watching them speak in silence. Then she went down to one knee like a knight. “I am Seras Ashrain, your majesty.”

Ortola smiled at her warmly. “Ho ho ho. You have fine etiquette... But there is no need for such formality. You are still but a child, I see. Your memories are uncertain then? That may be the result of some kind of sickness. Please, rest in my palace until you recover what you have lost.”

Ortola finally turned his gaze from Seras to his daughter. “Cattlea.”

“Ah—yes, Father?”

“Look after the girl. You two appear to be of a similar age.”

Cattlea bowed elegantly, like a true noble. “Of course, your majesty. You may leave her in my hands.”

“Now then, Cattlea. This is no game,” said Ortola, giving his daughter a wry smile and a light scolding. The knights began to relax—except Makia, who appeared unsure how to react to the situation.

“Regarding Hagg... I think we should conceal this girl’s presence from him for the time being. Yes. Leave him to me. I will place Seras in Cattlea’s charge until she is brought to the capital. Have Makia assist you on your journey back.”

“Yes, your majesty.”

“Right then. Hagg will start complaining if we’re too late getting back to the hunt. Let us go.”

Ortola led his knights back the way they had come.

“This might be improper for me to say...but the emperor seemed a different man just now,” said Makia as she watched him ride away.

“I sensed it too—something in his heart was deeply moved by this meeting,” answered Cattlea.

“...I do understand why, though,” said Cattlea’s knight, turning her gaze from the emperor’s back to the young girl who stood in their midst, as if straight out of some fantasy world. What she saw wasn’t some daydream born of the suffocating dullness of everyday life.

The girl didn’t disappear when she closed her eyes.

She was real, after all.

Seras Ashrain

“**Y**OU MAY USE this room for the time being,” said Cattlea Straumms, the girl that Seras had come across while wandering through the winter forest.

She was the princess of the Holy Empire of Neah. Seras had somehow met the emperor himself too, along with his knights. They had all been out hunting in the forest.

What fortune I have.

The emperor and his men had taken Seras in, treating her with the utmost care. She had been escorted from the forest in a shaky carriage to the Neahan capital of Worainfield, then through the city streets and up to the palace. They had circled around to enter through a back door.

From there she followed all of Cattlea's instructions and was led to her new chambers. The interior was color coordinated with relaxing tones—neither too plain, nor overly extravagant. Nothing in the room seemed overdone or out of place.

“This is my second set of personal chambers. When inviting guests, I would usually offer my first...which look a *bit* nicer. But I actually like these chambers a lot better. Ah, the bedroom is over there,” said Cattlea, pointing to one of the adjacent rooms. Seras sat on a chaise longue, back straight, hands folded neatly on her lap.

“Ahem, but these chambers... Are you sure you do not mind me using them?”

“This palace suffers no untoward individuals who would dare to intrude on the private chambers of a princess. This is the *perfect* place for you to be hidden,” said Cattlea.

Seras felt strange...

Perhaps it is because of how surprisingly quickly everything seems to be proceeding. Things are going so well, it almost makes me worry. This princess... She appears incredibly open and unafraid of me, given her royal position at court.

The knight, Makia, waited outside. Only Seras and Cattlea were in her chambers together.

What the captain of the emperor's personal guard said in that forest was correct, thought Seras, finding herself agreeing with the man.

Cattlea walked over to her, perhaps sensing her confusion and worry.

“Is something wrong?”

“No, I...I feel strange saying this. But I feel as if events have been moving in such a convenient direction for me...”

Cattlea placed a knee on the chaise longue and leaned in toward Seras, causing her to draw back a little in response.

“I am surprised, that is all. Or perhaps...”

“How old are you?” asked Cattlea, ignoring Seras’s concerns.

“Seven,” she answered honestly. “I will be eight this year.”

“Oh my.” Cattlea’s eyes opened wide, and she leaned in even closer. “Your answers to my questions are ever so mature, given your age.”

“R-really? My vocabulary...I think it all comes from the many books I have read.”

“You like reading then, I take it?” asked Cattlea. She covered her mouth lightly with her hand as she spoke, as if worried about flecking Seras with spittle at such close proximity. It made it look like they were exchanging whispered secrets.

“Yes, I do.”

“We have a wonderful library here in Worainfield.”

Well—I would be very happy if I could read the books in there...

Suddenly there was a finger on the tip of Seras’s nose.

“!”

“Finally, your expression relaxed a little. You really must like books.”

“Y-yes...”

Cattlea closed her eyes, and her nose twitched as she sniffed the air a few times.

“It is subtle... But you *do* smell nice. Like the faint scent of flowers on an early spring breeze. Is it a perfume?”

“I’m not wearing any perfume...”

Elves as a race were known for their lack of body odor. Seras raised both arms and sniffed from her sleeves to her upper arms.

I don’t think I smell any different from normal, but I can’t really tell by myself.

“And yet...”

“Hm?”

Cattlea smiled and took her by both hands as Seras tilted her head at the princess quizzically.

“You must have been cold out there? How would you like a bath?”

Seras scrubbed herself with the piece of cloth soaked in soap. The little stool she sat on was of high quality and craftsmanship. The same went for the cloth cover draped over it. She watched as steam rose from the surface of the water. The bathroom that she had been taken to was for the exclusive use of the princess herself and was located in her chambers.

Cattlea had directed Seras to the bedroom and had gone outside to have a word with Makia. Before long, a crowd of maids had arrived to prepare a bath.

“We have special, ancient magical items that help to keep the water at a reasonable temperature,” Cattlea had explained, along with the fact that such items were not widely available and that she was only allowed to use them because she was a princess. The bathroom was about as spacious as the bedroom.

I expect that three girls of my size could bathe together in here.

Seras picked up a pail full of water to wash away the bubbles.



“ ... ”

She felt a little heat in her cheeks and after brushing her wet hair behind her ears, she looked at herself in the mirror. What she saw was a reflection of her own naked form, her long hair tied up behind her head.

I was walking through that cold forest not half a day past, but now... Maids have prepared a hot bath to cleanse my body.

It was said that most spirits preferred pure and clean contractors—and for that reason, Seras had been happy to accept Cattlea’s offer of a bath.

The spirits are happy. ...But why is she being so kind to me? The same goes for the Holy Emperor of Neah. If he had not spoken up for me—who knows where I would be now. It is only because he and the princess strongly stated their wish to protect me that I am here.

“Rely upon the Holy Empire of Neah.”

I cannot remember who said those words to me, but I believe they were right. Still, the mystery leaves me uneasy. Why are they doing so much for me? Am I being tricked, perhaps? Are they scheming to do something terrible to me and this is preparation for what is to come? Am I being used? What for?

Seras shook her head, as if to free herself from the cloud of doubt.

No. I cannot think like this. Cattlea doesn’t seem like that kind of person—I can’t think of her like that. I don’t want to. I want to trust her. I cannot stand to go through life suspicious of everyone. I wish I could tell when a person was lying—that would make everything so much easier.

“Pardon the intrusion.”

“Eh!”

Seras immediately balled herself up and covered her chest with both hands. She turned to see Cattlea standing there naked.

“Lady Cattlea...”

“Ah... We are both girls, but perhaps I should not have joined you?”

“N-no, it’s all right...”

I was just a little surprised, that’s all. I am in no position to refuse, in any case.

“I was worried you might float away on a puff of steam, so I came to check on you—or rather, that is my official *excuse*. I thought we might get to know each other.”

Seras was confused.

“I-I see...”

“Pfft,” Cattlea burst out laughing. “I see you can make silly faces, too.”

Seras felt her cheeks grow hot. “I-I’m sorry.”

“No, no! You have nothing to apologize for. Anyway... Might I join you?”

“Well—yes, of course. This is your bath after all, Lady Cattlea.”

“Then if you’ll excuse me.”

Cattlea placed the cloth in her hands on the floor and sat her bottom down upon it, to Seras’s amazement.

“L-Lady Cattlea?!”

This is the princess’s bathroom... There is only one stool, and naturally, she should be the one to use it.

Seras panicked.

“My apologies...”

She stood up in a hurry, and immediately slipped on a patch of soapy water beside the stool. She fell—or rather, just barely managed to avoid doing so. Cattlea’s eyes opened wide, mouth opened in shock as her hand reached out to keep Seras from falling.

“That was marvelously done,” she said, giving her a round of applause.

“...”

Unsure how to react to the praise, Seras froze in place and looked a bit silly standing there in surprise.

“Well, I don’t particularly *mind* sitting on the floor... But since you have risen for me, I will take the stool.” Cattlea sat and ran her hands through her own hair.

“Ah... Would you like me to help you?”

“Oh, would you? Well thank you.”

Seras picked up a new cloth, soaked it in soapy water, and began to wash Cattlea. She had no idea if she was doing it right, as she’d never washed anybody else before. Cattlea seemed to be comfortable enough, so Seras assumed it was going well. She then picked up the pail of water, and rinsed the bubbles from the princess’s back.

“Lady Cattlea... Might I ask you a question?”

“Of course. But let’s wait until we’re in the water for that.”

The two of them got into the bath, sitting facing each other.

“Well, then, what would you like to ask?”

Seras looked down. “Wh... Why is that you are doing all this for me?”

Perhaps, as the holy emperor said, the people of Neah feel they must atone for what happened in the past... Is that why Cattlea is being so kind to me?

“Well... Perhaps it is because you *moved* me.”

I...moved her? What does she mean?

“I have always felt so constrained, you see.” Cattlea placed a hand to her chest. “I feel as if time has stopped within me... As if nothing will ever change. I have always been tormented by these emotions. Perhaps one could dismiss it as boredom. But...the moment I saw you, I felt something *move* inside of me. It was strange. I have never felt anything like it before in my life.”

She took Seras by the hand and smiled at her, narrowing her eyes.

“And well... I have always wanted a sister.”

“A sister?”

“Yes. A *little* sister, in your case.”

“A little sister...”

“Excuse my asking—but when will you return to your home country?”

“Return...?”

No. I can't go back there. ...But why?

...

“Hm.”

That's right. Now I remember. I was banished.

“...No. I...I cannot return.”

“You cannot? What is it that you mean?”

For some reason, Seras felt that wording it as “*I just remembered...*” might arouse suspicion.

“I am sorry that I did not tell you sooner, but...I was banished from my country.”

“Oh my.”

“I have lost some of my memories, and I believe that might be the result of my banishment. And so...” Seras averted her eyes, suddenly filled with conflicted emotion and guilt. “The Holy Emperor of Neah hoped that I might be a bridge between your nation and the high elves... But I am sorry. I do not believe I can serve as that link.”

What am I saying? I'm putting myself in danger.

Hesitant and trembling, Seras returned her gaze to Cattlea to find her wide-eyed and staring back at her.

“Then you mean... You'll be able to stay here forever?”

“Eh? Y-yes... Perhaps. I suppose that is one way of looking at it...”

Seras was shocked.

Am I here to serve as an ambassador for the high elves, reestablishing relations with the country that banished me? Is that the role that these people want me to fulfill?

“Well... That’s truly wonderful news!” Cattlea’s eyes were gleaming, but she quickly cleared her throat and corrected herself. “M-my apologies—I do not know why you were banished, so it was improper of me to describe this situation as wonderful. I’m sorry.”

“...Please, do not let that concern you. In truth I do not remember why I was banished from my country. But well...I am sure it is because I committed some crime.”

“Oh, is that so?”

“Yes.”

That must be it. I must be a criminal.

“So, you committed a crime... But that was in your old nation, right?”

“Eh?”

“It doesn’t really bother me, you know? And in any case, you’ve forgotten about it... So I suppose in some ways it’s as if it never even happened.”

“Lady Cattlea.”

“Yes?”

“Perhaps I should not be asking this... But why is it that you believe everything that I have told you? My memories are vague...unreliable... I must seem terribly suspect to you. I don’t even know what crime led to my banishment...”

“It’s because you are *sincere*.”

“Eh?”

“Your character. It seems to me to be very sincere. That is why I trust you.”

“B-but...you have not known me for even a single day!”

“It is clear to me that you are nothing like the other liars and cheats that infest this world.” Cattlea squeezed Seras’s hand tight. “I was born as the princess of this nation. Even as a child, I see who you *really* are.”

“—”

There was something in Cattlea’s eyes that scared Seras for a moment.

“...Heh, my apologies. My frightening personality seems to have slipped out. Well, in any case...the boredom and constraints imposed upon me for being born princess of Neah truly are terrible. Perhaps it would have been different if I’d had siblings for company. Unfortunately...I am the only child in the Holy Emperor’s direct line. There are many who approach me, seeking to influence my opinions and thoughts on politics. How should I put this... The plots and intrigue of this nation are far too complicated...” spat Cattlea. “It is *suffocating*.”

She seems so grown up—so unusually adult for her age. I can scarcely believe that she is only ten years old.

Cattlea smiled, regaining some of her warm composure. “But...when I am with you, I feel as if I can breathe. You help me catch my breath. That is the role that I would like you to serve. ...If you would.”

So the princess needs somebody who she can talk to without reservation. If that is the reason for her kindness, I believe I can understand it. She feels as if she is being crushed under the weight of this pressure... She must continue to serve out her role faithfully as the only direct descendent of the emperor, fighting the plots of the adults around her.

I...I want to support her.

Seras and Cattlea went into the bedroom once they had finished their bath. The fireplace had warmed the room nicely, with firewood crackling quietly in the hearth.

“The powers of your spirits truly are impressive... That gave me quite the shock,” said Cattlea, running a brush through Seras’s long hair.

After they had dried off and each dressed themselves in a set of pure white pajamas, Seras had told Cattlea about the power of her spirits—demonstrating by using the spirit of wind to dry their hair. After that, Cattlea had asked if she could brush Seras’s hair. Considering her position, Seras thought that she should be the one doing the brushing...but this was a request from the princess. Seras sat on the chaise in the bedroom while Cattlea stood behind her, gently passing the brush through her hair.

“Hmm, hmm... Then you must pay a price to borrow the power of these spirits? You may not sleep deeply until the price has been paid?”

“Yes. I can engage in shallow rest, halfway between waking and sleeping, but I cannot *truly* sleep.”

“Are you sure you should be using such an important power for something as trivial as drying hair?”

“I wanted to show you the power of my spirits, Lady Cattlea. ...And the price for such a small act is not great. Please do not let it concern you.”

“Come to think of it...you were carrying a sword when first we met. Can you wield a weapon?”

“More or less, yes.”

“Then you’ll make a fine guard too,” replied Cattlea. She spent a few more moments running the brush through Seras’s hair.

“Your hair truly is pretty...”

“Th-thank you...” Seras replied, not really knowing what else to say.

“But it isn’t just your hair. *Everything* about you is so beautiful, it’s almost miraculous. But I expect that beauty gives you much to be wary of. I know little of elves, but human desires can be ugly things when taken to their extremes...” Cattlea scooped up a bunch of Seras’s silky hair in one hand and brought it to

her nose. “You *smell* lovely too. Do not worry... I will be sure to protect you, no matter what happens.”

“I...I would also like to offer myself up to your service, if I might be of any use, Lady Cattlea.”

I have nowhere else to go. No goals. No objectives... All I set out to do was reach the Holy Empire of Neah. I do not know how to return home. Perhaps all I am searching for now is a reason—anything at all!—just a reason to live.

“I would like to repay you for rescuing me from that forest, so... Please, I wish for you to make use of me in whatever way you see fit.”

Cattlea let out a little snicker.

“Well, then, what about using you as a sister?”

Seras blushed, flitting her long, slim eyelashes to the floor. “I-if that is what you wish...Lady Cattlea.”

“You’re truly a cute one.”

Cattlea was human, but Seras didn’t think she was that much different from an elf. The biggest difference between them was the length of their ears, she supposed.

...And that Cattlea was unable to interact with the spirits.

That seems the biggest difference between their race and ours.

It was then that Seras noticed that Cattlea had fallen silent.

“My lady?”

“In truth... There is also another reason that I brought you here to the palace.” She was no longer brushing Seras’s hair. “...It’s my father.”

“The holy emperor?” asked Seras.

“When we met you out in the forest, a sort of change came across father the moment he laid his eyes on you. I have never seen him like that before. Quartz reminisces of the days when he was wiser, more dignified in his words and

deeds... But I have never seen him speak that way before today.” It sounded as if Cattlea was speaking as much to herself as to Seras. “The Royal House of Straumms is currently in a very weak position.”

Cattlea’s tone was casual, but there was an uncompromising weight to her words.

“My father has been so weakened since mother died. ...So listless, clearly neglecting his health. And he has slowly been losing his sway as the emperor of this nation with each passing year. He has been this way for as long as I can remember... The famous Holy Knights of Neah, the uniquely talented personal order of the emperor himself, were disbanded long ago. I expect that was part of their scheme to weaken the emperor’s position of authority. All that the emperor holds now is a small number of personal guards... And few soldiers have true, deep loyalty to the emperor himself. Neah is maintained by the respective armies of its nobles.”

Seras listened quietly, amazed that a girl of ten years old had such a grasp of matters of state.

“But... When he met you, I have never seen him look that way before. Perhaps a spark was lit within him—a desire to atone for what was done to the elves and clear the name of our past emperors. I believe that passion welled up inside of him. Father, he... I think that he was looking for a reason to live. In any case, when I saw him like that I...I felt such hope, you see.”

Seras heard the clink of the brush being placed upon a little table beside her, and Cattlea put her hands on her shoulders. “Hope for the restoration of our house.”

Seras felt the princess’s hands clench a little.

“Meeting you feels like a miracle. I think maybe now something can change. Something in father—or in this nation—it gives me hope.”

I think I understand a little better now. Cattlea had given up on something. But something in my meeting with her and the holy emperor has sparked a change.

She's trying to rise again. She needs me. She has treated me with kindness and now she needs my help. I wish to assist her. To lend her my strength. I want her to smile—to never see her sad.

That's it. Now I'm sure this is how I was meant to serve... I want to return sincere affection in kind to those who show me sincere affection.

"Lady Cattlea, you said that I might be your sister earlier," said Seras, placing her hand upon the princess's as it rested on her shoulder. "If you ask it of me...I would be your sword."

"Seras..."

"You gave me a place when I had nowhere else to turn. You have trusted me. I wish to return your loyalty in kind...though I am not sure of how much assistance I can be to you."

Seras gave her a wry smile, and Cattlea moved her fingers to entwine them with Seras's, taking her by the hands.

"Of course that would please me..." Cattlea smiled. "But I would appreciate it if you would serve as my sister, too."

Seras couldn't help but smile at that. She closed her eyes, and her mouth drifted into a deep smile.

"Of course. You can count on me."

I am glad that she is the first human I have ever met. She has not just protected me, but shown me the path to take when I was so lost.

I will do my utmost for her in return. Devote all of my strength to her.

...To protect her.

"The emperor's a changed man of late," went the whispers around the palace halls.

Firstly, he had begun taking better care of himself—where once he had drunk

to such excess that those around him worried for his health, now he was completely sober.

“I must act in a way befitting my position as emperor,” Ortola had said to his retainers as he began bettering himself, even at his old age. He also took a much more active interest in state affairs, no longer leaving almost everything to his retainers as once he had.

What was most noticeable to everyone was the sudden sharpening of his wit. He had grown somewhat foolish in the past several years, but those days were now gone. He was still gentle as he always had been, but now appeared kingly and dignified. Motivated in his actions, he was almost a completely new man.

“Our emperor has returned,” whispered those who had known him before the change. Some were even moved to tears as they spoke of his new condition.

“What in the world happened to his majesty?”

“He went out hunting in the northwestern forests with his cousin Duke Mishel, no?”

That was all the public knew. Nobody was yet aware of Seras Ashrain, the girl that their emperor had come across in the forest.

However, some noticed a masked young girl that had been at Cattlea’s side ever since their hunting trip. They noted that the girl had long ears—she must be an elf.

“She must have something to do with this,” they whispered.

“His majesty intends on restoring our ancient bond with the elves,” said Captain Guartz and other members of his order, all of whom were aware of the situation.

“His majesty’s meeting that young elf girl in the forest has awakened the true soul of our holy emperor. It has motivated him to return to his former self. He has changed and will no longer bring shame to our past line of holy emperors. I cannot speak of this quite so openly...but that elven girl has lifted the curse

which laid upon him.”

In truth, however, Cattlea had had influenced Guartz to reach this conclusion. When the captain began to search for the reason the emperor had returned to his senses, it had been Cattlea who had provided him with hints. She guided him to her preferred conclusion on the matter. Yet Guartz was under the impression that he had formed his own *correct* opinion on the emperor’s return.

“Individuals may doubt views that are foisted upon them but tend to be less suspicious of their own reasoned deductions,” noted Cattlea.

Seras was constantly amazed at how grown up the princess was for her age. She was nothing like other ten-year-olds. Seras was not the only one who was always by Cattlea’s side, as she was also accompanied by Makia. Seras and Cattlea’s personal knight watched the princess from afar as she went off on one of her “walks”—a practice which also served as a method of gathering information.

“She look ten to you?” asked Makia.

“No. She may be only ten years of age, but on the inside, the princess is very much a grown adult.”

Seras had started calling Cattlea “princess” around the palace. She watched as Cattlea talked with a palace knight who was on guard duty—all part of her intel gathering process.

She is very good at getting in the good graces of others.

Makia was silent for a few moments before speaking again, never taking her eyes from Cattlea.

“That’s just what she has to do, y’know? Since the moment she was born, she’s been in danger. One false step and it’s over...and she knows that. I think it’s instinct. She’s got to be a grown up to everyone around her, whether she wants to or not. She didn’t have any other choice but to mature beyond her

years. That's just what it means to be the only child of the holy emperor. It's a heavy responsibility—she holds an important position in this nation.”

“She had no choice but to grow up so fast...” said Seras slowly, turning her eyes back to Cattlea.

“The princess has many enemies here in Neah.”

“Enemies?”

“She needs allies—friends who are more powerful than those who oppose her. Her father might be the emperor, but he's been weak for so long... There was a limit to the power that she could wield. With his majesty back on his feet though...recovering... Things have taken a fortunate turn.”

Seras turned to Makia and smiled. “Are *you* one of the princess's allies?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you.”

“Eh?”

“I am very happy that the princess has people like you by her side.”

Shocked by Seras's comment, Makia blushed a faint red and looked away. “Hm...w-well... I'm protecting her the best I can, y'know? I've only been at her side for less than a year though now, right? It's not just 'cause of me that she's been kept safe all these years. She's got her own strength.”

“But you have been protecting her. You've been her ally these past months.”

“Well...yeah.”

“I have also heard that you come from a proud house of knights, Lady Makia.”

“And yet I was treated as a failure by my family at first.” Makia spoke briefly to Seras about her past...

There had come a point during Makia's childhood when she had ceased to grow any taller, despite her years. Many said that she would never look the part of a Neahan knight. No matter how much she honed her skills with a sword or

her mana manipulation abilities, she was shunned for her appearance. There were even some who mocked her—exclaiming that she would never even find a husband, given her height.

Makia explained to Seras that she could never give up on her dream of becoming a knight. She told her of the day that she met Cattlea and how the princess saw her for who she truly was, and how she became a knight. She told of the mockery that she received at court, those who claimed she was knighted only by the whims of the princess, and that her armor was only decorative. She also told Seras of her awakening as one of the few incantation users on the continent, and the complete change in the attitude of those around her—and the members of her family—upon the discovery of her power.

“The important part is...”

“The princess saw your worth *before* your awakening as an incantation user... Is that correct?” asked Seras.

“Hmph.” Makia folded her arms. “You *do* get it, then.”

Makia’s eyes narrowed as she looked back to Cattlea, like she was staring at the sun.

“That’s why she’s worth devoting yourself to.”

“Yes... I think so as well.”

On the middle finger of Makia’s right hand was a ring—a magical item that allowed her to cast incantation spells.

“...”

“Ahem... Lady Makia?”

Makia still had her arms folded but was now giving Seras some serious side-eye. Her small lips formed a cute little pout.

“Ehm... Is th-ther something wrong...?” Seras asked.

Makia sighed in resignation. “To be honest... Look, I have to admit I might’ve

been a bit jealous of you for the first few days. I thought you might be trying to take my position as the princess's close confidant."

"Ah. I...I see." Seras wasn't sure how to respond to that, and was sure her answer must have sounded a little lame.

"But hey." She shrugged. "I've been watching you, and I see how valuable you'll be as an ally. The theory that you're some assassin sent here by someone with ill intent can't be taken off the table yet, just like Sir Guartz said...even if the cautious princess trusts you. But I don't think that's likely. And well..."

"Yes?"

"If you ever betray the princess... You won't get away with it."

"Do not fear," Seras replied. "There would be no benefit to my betraying her... None whatsoever."

Makia glared at her, trying to size her up—searching for something inside her.

"If that's acting, then you've gotta get yourself into a theater job."

"I appreciate the compliment, Lady Makia—you honor me."

"..." Makia quietly turned back to look at Cattlea, but her calm only lasted a few moments.

"Gh... Gaah!" Makia began pulling at her hair with both hands. "You're a real piece of work, you know?! You're as bad as the princess is!"

The knight jabbed a finger in Seras's direction—pointed *up*, given her height.

"Wha?"

"The princess is grown up for her age, but there's no way you're actually *seven years old*, right?! You're way too composed! I mean, what the heck do you think *I* was like at seven?!"

The masked elf that accompanied the princess was a frequent topic of discussion at court. Some speculated that the girl wore a mask due to scars

from deep cuts on her face. Others said the scars were from some terrible burn. All of these rumors were spread by Cattlea herself—lies leaked to her connections around the palace.

“I intend to reveal your beauty at some point, Seras. But at present I believe it may be somewhat dangerous to do so. I would like you to remain as my masked follower until suitable preparations can be made.”

Seras trusted Cattlea and did as she asked. She did not often appear in public as the masked elf. And since staying cooped up in her room was unlikely to be conducive to her mental health, she was allowed relative freedom to walk the palace halls. She also went on outings with Cattlea in her carriage—though she was always accompanied by Cattlea, Makia, or others the princess trusted.

“Revealing your face to the world will lose you another kind of freedom,” said Cattlea, explaining why she wished for Seras to wear the mask.

If she thinks so, then...perhaps it is best that I wear it.

The princess of Neah was known as an eccentric and most at court were prepared to accept her new masked-elf attendant as just another of her strange games. In the palace, at least, it seemed as if Seras’s presence was not considered of much note.

“I find it convenient to demonstrate certain mild oddities on a daily basis—it allows others to discount certain actions I take that might not befit my position as princess as simply *peculiarities of character*. It can be quite useful to avoid their suspicions in this way, you know? In times like these, for instance.”

As for Seras, she spent much of her time studying and training during this period.

She had very little knowledge about the world she found herself in. She still had her old learning from the books she had read in her old country—even though she still could not remember its name. Those tomes had been ancient, and much of what was listed in them had been out of date.

Seras was happy to have access to new and unknown books by making use of the palace's library. Royal permission was required for entry, and so it was a convenient place for her to spend time alone.

Seras was absorbed by the letters on the pages of her books. Cattlea had picked out a number of volumes for her to start with and had also procured a number of other books that hadn't been in the library to give to her.

Seras felt her small little world expanding around her. *This is it*, she thought, quivering with the joy that swelled up inside of her.

"You're quite a little bookworm, aren't you?" said Makia with a sigh.

The royals and nobles of Neah typically had other hobbies, Seras was told. When they did read books, they were stories of beautiful queens, princesses, knights, and travelers from other worlds and dramatic tales that centered on love for the most part.

Seras mainly spent her time reading in silence, but Ortola would also visit her from time to time. He was the emperor and required nobody's permission to enter his own library. When he had first visited her, Seras thought it would be terribly rude to keep reading in his presence... But the emperor had insisted that she continue her study.

"My apologies. I did not mean to disturb you. Please, keep reading and pay me no mind. The world around me buzzes with activity! There are days when I come here to these bookshelves simply to escape the noise," he said with a wry smile.

"Cattlea told me in no uncertain terms that I am never to disturb you while you are in your books. I do not wish to incur my daughter's wrath."

Seras had recently come to realize just how much the usually dignified and strong holy emperor doted on his daughter. Ortola would usually sit in one of the library chairs some distance away from Seras and read a book. Though whenever she looked up at him, he never seemed to be that interested in what he was reading.

Perhaps he is only here for the quiet, and not for the books, thought Seras.

There were also times that he slept, seeming to be exhausted by a long day. When she found him asleep in his chair, Seras had once gently covered him with a light blanket that Cattlea had given her. He had found it on his chest when he awoke.

“Such a kind child and full of compassion... I must be a better emperor, for your sake,” he said, moved to tears by her small act of kindness.

It was not just Seras’s knowledge of the world that was improving. She poured much of her time into training with the sword. Cattlea selected several instructors for her training. The first group had been under the impression that this was another of the princess’s whims. Training her masked elf might be a new frivolity of hers. The others soon realized Seras’s true quality from the moment that they crossed swords with her.

“You have found someone incredible, princess...” noted one, wiping the sweat from his brow after a spar with Seras. *“I see now why you wish to have her at your side. She has talent—an innate ability with the sword.”*

Seras was given the opportunity to meet many different blades, all with their different styles of swordsmanship. None of the swords they used at practice were blunted. As Cattlea had selected each and every instructor, Seras’s teachers were all truly talented swordsmen, and many outstripped Seras with their technique.

Over the course of the following year, she would overtake them all in that respect.

Yet Seras’s magical abilities were not all that remarkable. Elves were not known for their magic and they had difficulty manipulating mana. The amount which they could absorb and store within them was small.

So, Seras’s efforts were focused into the sword and bow instead.

“The specialty of the elves is their spirit techniques, I suppose,” noted Cattlea.

Seras's spirits grew alongside her. Her spirit of light now gave her the ability to change some small features of her outward appearance.

"We should decide which of your spirit powers we disclose, and which we keep secret, I think," said Cattlea, as the two of them discussed her powers. "You are an elf, of course. So it would arouse suspicion to claim that you had no spirit powers at all. Let us then conceal those that might serve us as secret weapons and allow the rest to be revealed to the public. That is the best way forward."

Seras had a question: "Are there other elves on the continent?"

"They are rarely spotted...but yes. They form communities that are far from any human settlements, living apart from us. And given their history, they strongly avoid all human attempts to contact them. The dark elves are more in contact with our society than the other clans...though they are rarely seen within Neah's borders."

Seras had read a lot about elves in the palace's library and had asked lots of people about them as well. She learned that there was also a demi-human race of beast-like people living on the continent—though they were treated quite badly by society. And on this continent, *society* and *humanity* were mostly synonymous.

"The dark elves haven't been seen much—especially not since the Forbidden Witch was chased out of Alion, I have heard."

The Kingdom of Alion was a large nation located to the northeast of Neah. The most notable thing about Alion, Seras learned, was that it played host to a divine being—a goddess named Vicius. Vicius was considered the guardian deity of the continent.

The continent was plagued by a periodic natural disaster known as the root of all evil, which appeared every few centuries. But at other times, only decades might pass between appearances of the evil. And then a full millennium might elapse before the next emergence. The root of all evil was *unpredictable* in its

timing.

But when it appeared, the goddess would summon a group known as the Heroes from Another World in order to fight the army of the root of all evil. The evil could sap the strength of the inhabitants of the continent, but the Heroes from Another World were somehow immune. They were also granted special powers by the goddess herself. The hero summoning goddess truly was like a protector...

Seras had read a little of divines before, but in her past country there had been very few details that were recorded about their nature.

The divines... So they do exist. I wonder what they look like? How they behave?

Seras found herself interested in Vicius, though unfortunately the Goddess had not shown herself in public much during the past decade. She had not been seen since the time of Cattlea's birth, in fact. Not even the princess had met her.

"I hear talk that she may be in the dungeons underneath her castle, and there have been reported sightings of her venturing to underground ruins... I also have heard a claim that she was seen in the woods of southern Ulza. I am sure she is busier than our human minds can properly comprehend," said Cattlea.

"Perhaps she needs a long time to prepare for the coming disaster," noted Seras. "The summoning of heroes may be a lengthy process. This is not something that a non-divine could ever assist her with. She must engage in the long process of preparation alone... She concentrates, devoting diligent effort to ready us for the disaster to come. She truly is the guardian of our world."

I'd like to meet her someday. She operates alone to protect the peace of this world, hard at work to prevent calamity. I am sure she is a wonderful person.

"Hmm?" Cattlea noticed her father, Ortola, crossing the sunlit courtyard as the two of them spoke.

He had a number of his attendants in tow. She almost mistook him for

someone else, his appearance had changed so dramatically. His stomach no longer bulged out. His body was toned and lighter than it had ever been. He could not hide his age, but all the vitality of youth had returned to him. He had also transformed on the inside—or so Cattlea thought, at least.

“I am sure it is all because of you,” she had once told Seras.

I know nothing of how the emperor once was, only what others have told me... But if something about my presence has changed him for the better, then I am happy.

Ortola sent his attendants away and walked toward the two of them with his hands clasped behind his back, smiling.

“You two are friendly as always, I see.”

“Father.”

Seras went down on one knee, bowing deeply. “My emperor.”

“Oh, stand up. Raise your head, Seras.”

“Understood.”

Cattlea stood at Seras’s side as Ortola stroked his beard and gave them a satisfied grin. “You are like true sisters now, I see. I never imagined my own daughter would find a sibling so beautiful. I am the luckiest man in the world.”

“I know that Seras is your favorite daughter, Father.”

“Hmph—you are not getting jealous now, are you, Cattlea?” Ortola reached forward and stroked his daughter’s hair. “Worry not, blood of my blood, you will always be my number one... That will never change. You and Seras have much in common, but your ability to worry over nothing sets you apart. Come now, your emperor is tired from a busy day. Cheer me up, won’t you?”

Ortola crouched to her height, opened his arms wide—and Cattlea embraced her father.

“You have been working so long of late, Father. I know you continue your

wonderful work as emperor of this nation. Please, I ask only that you do not push yourself too hard.”

“Hmm... I appreciate your concern, Cattlea. I will ensure our nation of Neah is one in which the two of you can live in comfort.” He pulled away from his daughter’s embrace and turned to Seras. “Come Seras. You too.”

“*Father.*” There was an edge to Cattlea’s voice—her tone sharp. She frowned daggers at her father, glaring with half-closed eyes. “Did you not mean to quell my jealousy? What are you doing?”

“Hoh hoh hoh, merely a joke.” Ortola placed his hands on his knees, and slowly rose to his feet. “My my... I am not sure if I should rejoice or despair at how jealous my daughter has become. I find myself blessed, but as a man this is also quite troublesome.”

“Father, think of your age.”

“Hoh hoh hoh, what do you mean? I am still so young. Isn’t that right, Seras?”

“Y-yes—you are still so young, your majesty.”

“See? Seras understands.” He narrowed his eyes and stroked his chin. “Would the two of you like to join me for some tea, perhaps? You are fond of baked snacks, are you not, Seras? I have had some brought in that were made by the finest chef in the country. I ordered them myself.”

Seras had been amazed at the soft and sweet cakes and pastries of Neah when she’d first arrived. She never knew it was possible for something to taste so good.

“...” Something changed in Cattlea’s eyes as she looked at her father.

“Princess?”

It’s as if...she’s noticed something very wrong... But no...

Seras blinked, then looked again, and saw the same old Cattlea.

I must have been imagining things.

“Of course we will accompany you, Father. Won’t we, Seras?”

“Y-yes.”

“Good! Very good. Let us go.”

Seras, the emperor, and the princess spent the next hour elegantly drinking tea together. Seras found herself teased by Cattlea for her delight in the sweets they both enjoyed.

“Oh, you make the most interesting faces as you eat,” she said.

Days, then months passed. If there was one big change that took place over the course of that period of time, it was the holy emperor’s return to power and influence within the nation of Neah. His personal guard—which had dwindled to so few in number—grew into a full, properly trained order of knights once more. Guard Captain Guartz was promoted to lead this new order and renewed his commitment to the emperor’s cause.

The emperor also began to speak more openly as his power expanded, and his popularity among the people grew. The emperor’s retainers began to be steadily replaced and the nobles who had fattened their own purses through illicit means were punished. The citizens of Neah welcomed the change that had come across their emperor.

Then there was the princess of the high elf nation, Seras Ashrain. Her name was known far and wide throughout the nation. Cattlea decided in retrospect that she had made a crucial mistake in announcing Seras’s existence to the world. She had been naive...or so she said.

Cattlea sounded as if truly regretted her actions when she later spoke of that night, and blamed herself for the failure. But what happened? It all transpired when Seras was ten years of age, at a certain evening party...

The princess’s attendant—the masked elf—let her true face slip. What follows

is the story, made up of both Seras's experiences and things that she would later say about the events of that night.

"This is Seras Ashrain, princess of a high elf nation that once had deep ties to the Holy Empire of Neah."

That was how Cattlea introduced Seras to the court. The elven princess had come to trust her important friend. Certain circumstances had made it impossible for her to return to her home country and she had been taken in by Neah three years ago.

Cattlea explained that those three years had been a trial period of observation. Now she had a deep and abiding trust in Seras. Seras would remain living in Neah, in official service to the princess. Cattlea said nothing more on the topic, but those at the evening party were shocked at the announcement.

"A princess from a high elf nation...? But that's all just a fairy tale, isn't it?"

Many were hesitant to believe. Elves rarely showed themselves in human society in the first place, and so the attention and surprise that Seras's identity gathered was predictable. Cattlea later revealed to Seras that she had very much expected it. And yet...

"Eh?"

Everyone was stunned. It was as if time had stopped—the moment completely frozen in eternity. The sound of several silver cups falling to the floor filled the hall, echoing off the walls.

"...She's so beautiful."

"...Beyond words, even."

"Like a flower spirit, given life..."

"Is this a miracle that stands before me...?"

“Wonderful... She’s so beautiful just standing there, living and breathing...”

It was not the fact that she was a high elf princess that stunned them, but Seras’s appearance instead. Truly a beauty of mythological proportions. Once the shock of her appearance wore off, she was met with thunderous applause. Someone started the clapping off and others followed suit.

Seras was wrapped up in an evening dress for the party and incredibly confused. She froze up completely. Her mind went blank as if all the emotions and sensations she’d forgotten about were suddenly flooding into her all at once. She looked to Cattlea for help. The princess’s eyes were wide, too. Seras had only seen that look on her face once before—the day they first met.

“Damn it,” Cattlea mumbled to herself, unable to hold the words back.

The great hall’s applause and cheers sounded like a battle cry, and a crowd of people surrounded them to cut off their escape. They were beset by a wave of bodies and Seras felt them closing in from all sides.

Then came the hands, reaching out. She pulled back from them reflexively, watching as Makia formed a wall between them and the mass of people. But soon the knight was knocked to the ground by the crowd.

Seras tried to jump forward to save her, but Makia was quickly swallowed by the wave. Nobody paid her any mind as they surged toward Seras.

“Pr-princess,” stammered Seras, her voice quivering with fear as she reached out to Cattlea for help.

The nobles had rushed in, but stopped just short of Seras. Though she still felt she might be crushed at any moment, given how close they were...

Suddenly a hoarse cry rang out as Cattlea forcefully shoved back the hand of a noble who tried to reach out and touch Seras.

“Barbarian! You call yourself a noble?!”

Seras had never heard Cattlea speak so sharply before—but her words were swallowed in the whirlwind of excitement. Only the man whose hand had been

knocked back went pale and shrank away, disappearing into the throng.

Cattlea clasped at Seras's arm and pulled her to her back to protect her. Their knights were being overwhelmed by the crowd.

This... It's all too much. My legs are trembling. I'm so scared.

"Halt!"

A booming voice suddenly echoed through the hall—a voice each and every one of them knew. It was not just the voice that stopped them in their tracks. The nobles were stupefied...

...They had never heard the holy emperor shout with such anger before.

Ortola had been late to the evening party that night—another of Cattlea's miscalculations. Perhaps it had been the absence of the emperor and his knights that drove the nobles to such reckless abandon. The emperor had recently regained much of his majesty—but he had never spoken with anger before. The sheer rage he now exhibited was entirely new.

His rebuke shook the crowd. His fury cooled their passions in an instant. Some of the young women in the crowd were so shocked by his outburst that they went pale and fainted in complete shock.

Ortola cut through the crowd, rage burning in his eyes so that his glare could have killed a man on sight. The nobles parted for him without a second thought, cowering before his approach. Knight Captain Guartz followed, with four other knights in attendance. He halted before Cattlea with Seras in her arms. Then the emperor's expression changed and he looked worried to death for the two of them.

"Are you okay, Seras?" asked Ortola.

Cattlea finally found air in her lungs once more. "Y-yes. Thank you for your help, Father."

Then Cattlea frowned, as if she had just noticed something. Her expression quickly shifted and she called out to Seras.

“Ah, Seras... Are you okay?”

“Y-yes...”

Ortola bent down to lower himself to their level. His eyes were fixed on Seras.

“Those scoundrels did not touch you, did they?”

At last Seras’s eyes came into focus, and she slowly looked up at the emperor.

“They did not... Lady Makia and the princess kept me safe...”

“I see.” Ortola’s expression finally relaxed a little. “We must be grateful to Cattlea and Makia, then...”

He breathed a sigh of deep relief.

“Yes, my emperor. Thank you, princess.”

“ ...”

“Princess?”

“...Don’t mention it. You’re quite welcome.”

In the corner of Seras’s eye, she saw Makia being helped up by one of the emperor’s female knights. It seemed as if she was unable to stand without the knight’s shoulder for support. Her ankle had twisted when she was knocked to the floor.

It looked then as if Ortola suddenly returned to his senses, noticing the eyes of the crowd that were fixed upon him. Perhaps he had been surprised by his own outburst, but Seras saw something strange in his behavior. The emperor rose, sighing deeply, and turned to face the assembled nobles with fear and confusion writ upon his face.

“I was disturbed by the strange atmosphere that I found in this hall moments ago. But my outburst was not befitting of my position as emperor... My apologies to you all. But...this girl may yet form a bridge between Neah and the high elf nation. Would you taint this chance to reconcile our peoples? Go forth and read our histories. Read what we humans did to the elves.” Ortola turned

to look over his shoulder at Seras.

“The beauty of the elves sets them apart from us. That fault is ours. We must constantly be aware of that. We will regain the trust of the elves, and we must go further to be loved by them in due time. They will leave us once again if we show them that we are nothing but barbaric slaves to our base desires.”

His words were proper and just, befitting a holy emperor. The humans had treated the elves poorly, and Ortola had taken in the young high elf girl to atone for the sins of humanity. All of the nobles present were now fully aware of that. They also knew now that any rudeness toward the elven girl would earn them the swift ire of the emperor himself. Ortola was lauded for the sincerity of his emotions and desire to make amends.

After the evening party, Seras and Cattlea retired to the chambers that had been assigned to Seras, and at long last she managed to calm herself down. The bedroom very much belonged to Seras at that point and was a special place for the two of them to spend time in each other’s company. To Seras, it felt like the most relaxing place in the whole world.

First, Cattlea apologized to her for what had happened. Then she set out her plans for their next steps...

The night’s events had left Seras with an aversion to nobles—particularly noblemen—and Cattlea developed a hatred of men of her own. Seras could not say whether the princess’s hatred was genuine, but it seemed clear that she reviled them.

“I am afraid of allowing you to appear in public places,” said Cattlea. “We will restrict your access to most events... That is how we will play this off.”

I am no good with those affairs, and my experience today has only confirmed that fact, Seras thought to herself. She appreciated the princess’s new plan.

“Understood.”

“I am sure that Father will agree to this as well.” Cattlea sounded confident.

“But princess... Did you have some aim in revealing my face to the nobles at the evening party tonight?” asked Seras.

She had been aware of Cattlea’s plans—though she did not know the full details. She had simply appeared in public on the princess’s instruction and taken off her mask just as she’d been asked.

“Yes, but...suitable preparations were not made, it seems. I was naive. We needed more protection there to defend you from those...*nobles*. We need more strength.”

Sitting on the bed facing Cattlea, Seras looked down at her lap.

“...I am sorry.”

“What for?”

“I should be the one protecting you, princess...”

“It’s okay.” Cattlea gently embraced her. “You protect me, and I protect you— isn’t that right?”

Seras squeezed back, holding her body to Cattlea’s as she closed her eyes.

The way the princess smells relaxes me so. I want to help her. I have lived these past three years with that desire in my heart. I wish to continue to serve her. She is more important than I am. My preferences can yield to hers. If following her instructions will help her achieve her goals, then that is all I wish for. I’m sure it is for the best.

“Yes... You are quite right, princess,” said Seras, pressing her face into Cattlea’s neck.

Cattlea Straumms

THAT NIGHT, CATTLEA slept in Seras's bed alongside her. The room was dark, lights extinguished. Almost everyone in the palace seemed to be sleeping.

The dark walls of the chambers were completely silent. She looked over at Seras.

She must be exhausted after what happened tonight.

Seras breathed softly in her sleep as she lay beside the princess.

You're even pretty when you're sleeping, Cattlea thought.

Seras's head was laid upon the pillow, a lightly curled hand resting beside her little face.

She is a pretty picture indeed—so pleasing to the eye. Sharing a bed with the one and only Seras Ashrain is the real benefit to being princess in this nation.

She tore her eyes from Seras and looked up at the ceiling.

I expect my senses have been dulled, as I personally see her each and every day. Only Makia and a few others close to me know Seras's true face. I was careless.

Cattlea cast her mind back to the winter forest where they had first met, three years ago. Those who laid eyes on Seras for the first time were so captivated by her looks that they simply couldn't control themselves.

And in the past three years, Seras has only grown more beautiful. She was also wearing that lovely dress I picked out. I suppose the shock those nobles felt was much, much stronger than the reaction my father's men had to young Seras in that forest. Her charms haven't even fully developed yet. In several years' time, I expect they will be out of this world.

Cattlea looked back at Seras.

An enchantress—that is what she will be. And an incredibly potent one, at that. That enchanting beauty doesn't just extend to her outer appearance, either. That terrifies me. Seras's soul is just as beautiful, too.

There are many beautiful women in this world—but there was something uniquely shocking in the divine way in which she appeared in that forest. It cannot simply be put down to outer beauty.

That was how Cattlea understood Seras's charms.

There is something that seeps out from within a person... Their character, to put it plainly. Perhaps it might be instructive to picture two identical twins, one of foul character and one of good. The good will always appear the more charming, despite appearing just like the bad. The more time one spends with an individual, the clearer their character becomes. Only those whose character has been fully revealed can obtain true beauty.

Cattlea thought of this as a universal truth of the world, and she believed that she had the ability to see a person's true character—the shape of their soul.

It is not just Seras Ashrain's outer appearance but also her soul that is beautiful. Perhaps it is too beautiful... An incredible beauty that drives people mad. That's why I called it enchanting.

Cattlea knew that none of this was Seras's fault and she loved the shape of Seras's soul from the bottom of her heart.

But that is why I must protect her.

Cattlea stretched a hand up toward the ceiling and closed it into a fist.

I require power. A greater strength... Tonight's events have shown me that. What would have happened at that evening party had father not appeared when he did? But relying on father's strength will make me dependent, never truly in control. And I can only utilize Father's power to a certain extent. Not to mention...

Cattlea remembered the way her father had acted at the evening party.

Perhaps he...

After that day's events, Cattlea was now certain.

With things as they stand, I shall need a delicate hand to steer my way

through these waters. I cannot replace my father as emperor at present, but I must maintain my position as the only direct descendent of the Holy Emperor of Neah. Any efforts to weaken his influence at court should be avoided...for now. His new strength has finally silenced those ambitious and assertive nobles.

Father has a soft spot for Seras—unsettlingly so. I can use that. Yet I should not convey any of this to Seras yet. She is a serious child, and an awkward change in her attitude toward Father might cause him to catch on. That could lead him to lose his strength as emperor more rapidly than I intend.

“Hmph...” Seras stirred in her sleep and Cattlea turned to look at her, stroking her hair gently to keep her from waking.

I need an organization, I suppose... One that will follow my orders and protect me from harm... What I require are knights more loyal to the princess than the emperor.

The party at which Seras Ashrain had first revealed her true face to the public became a frequent topic of conversation in the days that followed. And talk was not restrained to the borders of the Holy Empire of Neah. There were even individuals from foreign nations who had expressed a desire to meet with her.

“I would ask you to wait until she has conquered her fear of the opposite sex,” Cattlea responded to all inquiries, refusing them without exception.

She had even refused Duke Mishel, a man who oft pretended to be the brother of the emperor. Duke Mishel could no longer speak to Ortola as casually as he once did. And the emperor was *incredibly* careful to avoid letting any men get close to Seras.

Too wary, perhaps, Cattlea thought. But as it served her purposes, she allowed it.

Those that had attended the evening party spoke unceasingly of that night—bragging of the miraculous beauty they had witnessed. With time, the people of

Neah gave the party a name—the *Night of Wonders*.

Chapter 4:

The Princess Knight of Neah

CATTLEA STRAUMMS'S second set of chambers now belonged to one of Cattlea's most trusted personal knights—Seras Ashrain.

The summers in Neah were crisp and dry, with little humidity in the air. The capital was especially famed for its pleasant weather. Seras looked down on the city from one of the palace's third-floor windows, a warm breeze lightly swelling the curtain. The thin cloth flowed across Seras's white skin as if caressing her, then fell back to its place.

Ring, ring, ring!

Seras heard the bell attached to her door, ringing in the familiar pattern that she and the princess had agreed on.

"Come in."

Seras turned away from the window as the door opened and her master appeared.

"Good morning. It is ever so hot today, isn't it, Seras?"

Seras smiled in reply.

"Yes it is, princess."

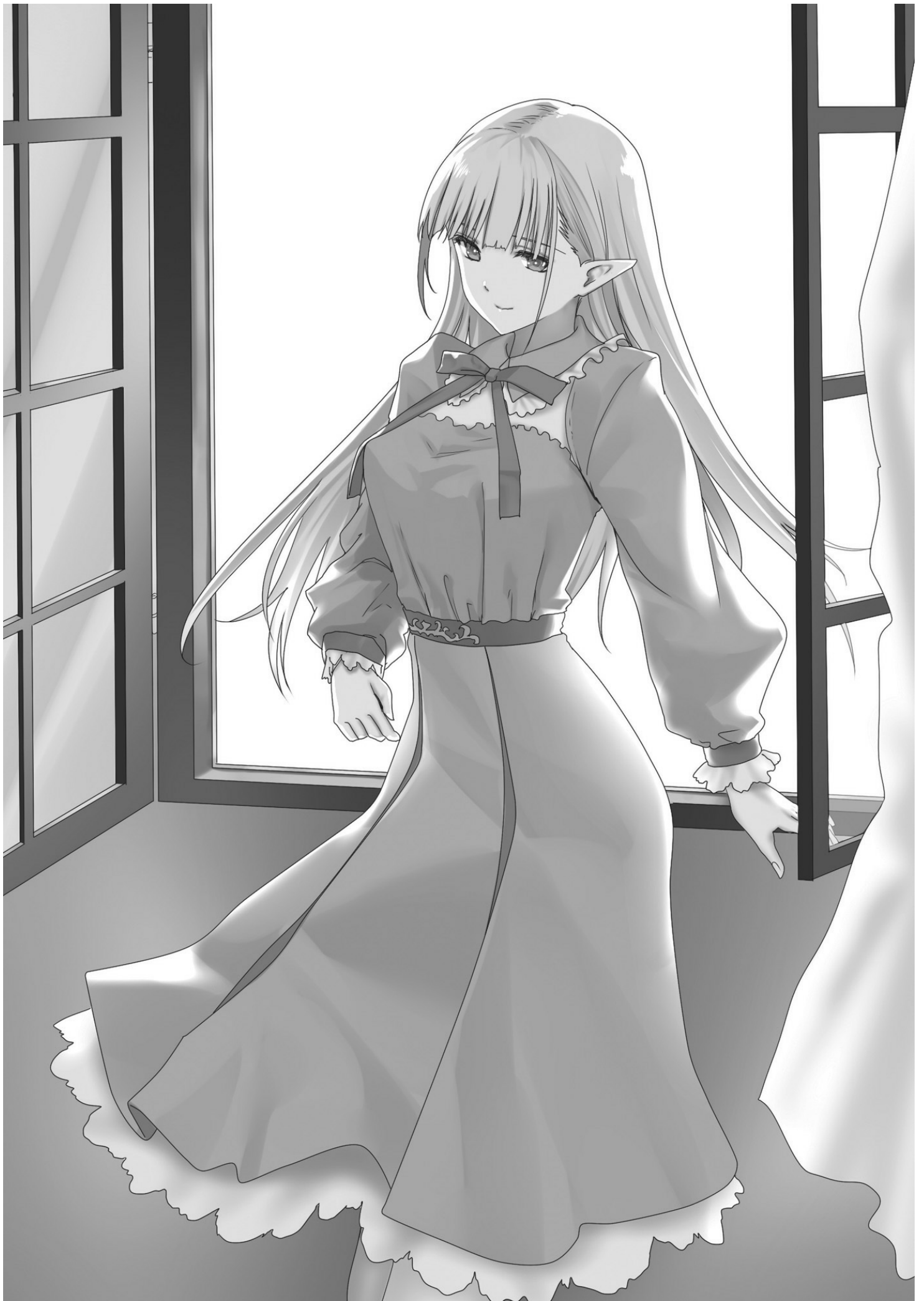
Cattlea Straumms was eighteen years old, and Seras Ashrain had turned fifteen.

In Neah, those who had reached fifteen years of age were eligible to become knights—though it wasn't as if everyone in the nation *wanted* to become a knight at the age of fifteen. But Seras had been waiting for the day that she could officially become a knight of Neah, even if it was partly because that was

what Cattlea wished for her.

After the annual new year's celebrations, the next day was traditionally reserved for the knighting ceremony. Many new knights were made of noble sons, as was customary...but most of the attention that day was on one of the attendants in particular: Seras Ashrain. She was no longer wearing her mask in public, but had taken to putting on a light veil to conceal her face from view.

It had also been declared that the knighting of Seras would be performed by Cattlea. Everyone in Neah was aware of their relationship, and nobody thought it was strange that the princess should be the one to personally do the job.



Most of the people of Neah considered it a thoughtful gesture from the emperor to his daughter...if they even thought much of it at all.

The princess stood by her father's side, and her authority to knight Seras was just as valid as the emperor's. There was also something else special about the knighting ceremony that day—Seras would not be wearing her veil when it took place. It would be the first time that she had shown her true face in public since the *Night of Wonders*. Everyone in attendance held their breath, waiting for the moment to come.

When Seras removed her veil, they found themselves holding their breath for another reason entirely.

"I was so shocked, I could scarcely breathe..."

"It was like a scene from the stories of myth!"

"I had thought everyone who witnessed the Night of Wonders must have been exaggerating... But now I see!"

Lucky were those who saw Seras that day.

In the five years since the Night of Wonders, Seras Ashrain had only become ever more beautiful as she flourished with age. The pace of her beauty seemed to accelerate as she matured.

While her young girlishness had receded, Seras of late had gained an air of maturity about her. It showed in her face. As cuteness faded, beauty took its place.

Her figure had also become more distinct as she had grown. Her chest filled out, and her hips widened to clearly accent her shapely behind. Her white thighs were thick and alluring. ...In any case, age had done nothing to halt the development of Seras's charms.

Cattlea had Seras reveal her spirit armor at the ceremony too, a sight that brought gasps from any in attendance.

Their hearts were moved, but there was no repeat of the disturbance of the

Night of Wonders—mainly due to the fact that Makia, Cattlea’s closest knights, and the holy emperor along with his own personal guard were watching over Seras closely during the event. Cattlea was sure that anyone who knew of the original riot would understand their caution. Few were troubled by the extra security.

The knighting ceremony ended without incident, and the former princess of the high elf nation took her place next to Makia as an official knight in service of the princess Cattlea.

From that day onward, Seras Ashrain was known as the Princess Knight of Neah.

Seras shook inside the carriage as it made its way down the bumpy road. In the past year she’d been given more opportunities to leave the royal capital, as the number of knights serving Cattlea had increased in number. Cattlea had made a request to the holy emperor for more personal knights following the incident five years ago. Ortola had been just as shaken by the occurrence as his daughter and had agreed to the proposal at once.

“You may choose whichever knights you wish to attend to you,” he said—although Ortola had given one condition to his assent. *“But your knights are to be female only.”*

And so those that rode alongside Seras’s carriage were all women. Makia had been left in the royal capital to serve as the princess’s proxy for a number of court matters. Her importance was not just as a knight, but a true servant of the princess. Cattlea was always grateful for her help, as it allowed her to go on longer excursions away from the capital.

“Princess,” said Seras, looking out of the window at the knights riding alongside them. “I am sorry for asking...again...but are you sure that I should be the only one joining you in the carriage?”

Cattlea sat facing her in the carriage. “Heh heh. I need someone in here protecting me and I also require someone to speak with to stave off my boredom. I have told you that countless times now.”

“The sun is strong today. Perhaps we should switch out the close guard at regular intervals?”

The view from the window was suddenly blocked out, as the flank of a great horse rode past them.

“I will not allow it. If we were to allow your beautiful skin to become sunburned, Lady Seras...” said the horse’s rider. “Well, that would be treason against the princess—not to mention the Holy Empire of Neah.”

The knight then smiled at her brilliantly, showing Seras a set of healthy white teeth.

“I would hardly go that far, Alda.” Seras gave her a wry smile.

The knight was Esmeralda Nedith, daughter of Baron Nedith’s house.

Following the *Night of Wonders*, she had been the first whom Cattlea had invited to join. Alda had green eyes, with sharp, strong eyebrows and tightly pursed lips. Her ochre-colored hair was close cut at the back and sides.

But what stood out about her the most of all was her height. Alda was broad-shouldered and almost two meters tall. Her muscles were toned and fully developed. She looked far more intimidating than any untrained man.

Esmeralda had spent her days in obscurity within her house. There were few female knights in Neah, and it was common for noble girls to be married off to some other house. But Alda was square-jawed and bulky, and nobody considered her to be a great beauty. Those around her said that her build was more likely to make men shrink away than attract them. She knew this and resolved to become a knight once her fifteenth birthday came.

Her parents had been against the decision, but she held firm. She took the test to become a knight the moment she was able. Those without sponsorship

to become a knight had to earn the title through testing. Only nobles were allowed to take the test, but any individuals who passed it were knighted into service. Esmeralda's grades in magic were average, but she had talent with a sword and horse riding.

I'll try my best, and my efforts will be rewarded, she thought to herself.

Alda failed the test.

I'll take it again in six months. I wasn't trying hard enough. I can do more. This is just the beginning.

Even as their daughter sought to motivate herself, Esmeralda's parents were merciless.

"Leave off, Alda. You aren't much to look at. Quite homely, actually. I know what they'll be saying about you behind your back in that knight order, even if you do manage to get in. You'll be a laughingstock. You'll bring shame to our house... Stop, please, for heaven's sake."

After weeks of her parents' abuse, Esmeralda finally lost heart.

With the path to become a knight closed to me, what am I supposed to be? It's hopeless. Who would take me as a wife when I look like this? Should I turn to farming, then? Become a milkmaid?

But Esmeralda's house would not approve of that either, saying that it was no worthy trade for a noble.

They say they will not allow me to leave my home. I cannot go out and become a mercenary. What then? They want me to sit in the family mansion and stay quiet? They wish to keep me from being seen? I bring shame no matter what I do?

Is that all I am—shame?

Then what shall I be? Why was I even born?

During those days of despair, Cattlea came to visit her. The Nideth house was in uproar at the princess's arrival and her request that Esmeralda become one

of her personal knights. At first, Esmeralda thought this might be some cruel prank that the eccentric princess was pulling. ...But it quickly became apparent that Cattlea was *serious*.

She had looked over the results of Esmeralda's test and had come with an offer in hand.

"You have a quite wonderful gift. I do not know whether to be angry at the fact that they failed you or rejoice that their blindness has allowed me to welcome you as one of my knights. My emotions on this are mixed, I fear."

"My apologies, princess... But due to my appearance I am not suitable to stand beside you as one of your knights. The noble high elf who rides with you—we would look as different as night and day! Surely you know this?"

Esmeralda was hopeful, but she still sought to guard her emotions.

This cannot possibly be happening. It is too good to be true.

But Cattlea's eyes were deadly serious.

"No. I absolutely need you in my retinue."

The princess spoke of her need for a well-built, strong, tough female knight at her side. Having looked over her test results, Cattlea explained that she could ask for nothing more. Esmeralda was of noble birth and was well-mannered too. Their brief visit only confirmed her intuition.

"You are perfect," said the princess. *"Allowing a knight of such quality to sit here gathering dust would be too wasteful for words. My goodness... I cannot believe that those fools could have been so blind, to say nothing of your family. They have such treasure sleeping within their midst. Those bluish-green eyes of yours... I think they are delightful, you know?"*

Esmeralda suddenly realized that she was crying. She buried her eyes in her forearm, and sobbed so hard she thought her throat might close up.

I'm so happy.

My decision is made.

I will serve her.

Perhaps someday the princess may tire of me and toss me aside, but... Why is it that I wish to trust in her, I wonder?

Seras had heard the whole story from Esmeralda herself.

She is right, thought Seras. Cattlea has a kind of magic about her that makes you trust in her...

It had been five years since the princess's magic had captured Esmeralda and she became one of her personal knights. Seras and Alda both served the same master and trained at the sword together. Seras called her "Alda" at her request—apparently she felt that the nickname suited her best, and she'd always preferred it. And while Seras was younger than Alda...

"Speaking in terms of the length of our service, you are much more experienced than I," Alda had claimed. She always spoke respectfully when addressing Seras.

Seras had called her "Lady Alda" at first, but Esmeralda politely asked her to drop the "Lady" after a while. She was stronger than any man, after all—that much was certain.

The way that Esmeralda held herself and the courtesy with which she spoke made her the absolute picture of an upstanding knight. Seras felt affection toward her from the moment they met. The other knights the princess recruited were also noble girls who had failed their tests. They were in the lower class of noble houses, Cattlea had explained to Seras. The army of Neah was a male-dominated institution, with only a small proportion of women within their ranks. Cattlea had spoken to Seras about the issue before she began her recruitment drive.

"I believe this unjust exclusion of women is because the knights that represent the strength of our nation are almost all men—or that's the main reason, at least. The phenomenon also exists within my father's personal guard. Well...the

great noble houses do have a tendency to hold deep-rooted, old-fashioned thoughts about these matters. 'Men should become noble knights! Women should become their wives and protect the home!' they think. I suppose by the standards of this nation, those that I surround myself with are a little unique."

All this was said as the princess scanned another test result scroll that she had acquired.

"My my... It is only the comparatively good-looking young noble girls that ever seem to pass this test. How mysterious. It certainly puts that savage evening party into context..."

Women from the most noble houses were being accepted as knights—true strength and ability didn't seem to be a condition for passing the test. Seras was angered by this news, too.

"Hmm..." Cattlea murmured after looking over another of the scrolls. *"These results also do not seem to match the knighting ceremony announcements. Heh, I suppose we should be grateful that the test graders took their roles seriously, at least. I would never have been able to notice this discrepancy otherwise."*

Cattlea's eyes were filled with joy.

"This is a gold mine."

Their carriage was headed for the domain of Marquess Wynn, located a short distance from the capital of Neah. In his land was a valley that cradled a city clustered within. Their destination that day was the marquess's mansion located there. Cattlea had not informed the House of Wynn of their visit ahead of time, so no contingent came out to greet them. In fact, their carriage rolled straight past the Wynn mansion and entered a small, forested road adjacent to it, eventually emerging to the sight of another, smaller mansion than the Wynn estate.

They stopped in front of the manor and Seras covered her face with her veil

before descending from the carriage with Cattlea. The two of them passed under a dirty old gate and found someone watering flowers in the yard outside as they walked the path to the front door. It was a woman—slim, short, and neatly dressed. Her back was to them, so Seras couldn't see her face.

“Good day,” Cattlea called to her.

The woman turned around in front of the flower beds, and a dangerous look appeared on her face—there was hate in her eyes. Her long purple hair was braided, dangling behind her back like a tail. She was about the same height as Cattlea.

“Go home! I ain't got a damn thing t' say t' you!” The woman's tone was rough, at complete odds with her appearance.

“What an awful way to say ‘hello,’ Dorothy.”

“Shut up!” The woman that Cattlea called Dorothy shook her arms as if she were shooing away an insect. “Get lost! Get outta here! I don't want t' even see your face!”

“...”

“You deaf now, too?!”

Her shoulders heaving, Dorothy stomped toward them. Seras was ready to react at a moment's notice, and Esmeralda's hand was at her sword. There was nothing ordinary about how angry the woman looked. Dorothy stopped just short of the princess, glaring her down. She was a tinderbox just waiting for a spark. But in the next moment, something changed.

“—Oh! What *took* you so long, princess?!” Dorothy dropped her intimidating tone in an instant, and with a dulcet cry, she embraced Cattlea.

“Good grief... You just had to do that routine, did you? What of your first impression?”

“But c'mon! It *was* funny, wasn't it?” The hatred and tension had completely vanished from her face, and Seras felt herself relax.

I had my suspicions, but...I see. So that was all an act.

Cattlea turned to look back at her knights, with Dorothy's arms still wrapped around her.

"Allow me to introduce you. This is Dorothy Wynn, daughter of the House of Wynn."

Dorothy peeked out at them from behind the princess's shoulders.

"Hey. That's me. Problem child of the Wynn family, li'l Dorothy. Nice to meet ya."

"Princess, ah... What just happened?" asked Esmeralda, who still seemed to be confused.

"Ah, I suppose I did not tell you anything about her. Well, now you've all seen it, at least... It's a mischievous bit that she is quite fond of doing, you see? She enjoys playing pranks on others, trying to surprise and shock them. You do tend to sulk when nobody plays along too, don't you, Dorothy?"

"Sooorry." Dorothy stuck out her tongue and closed one eye in a cute little apology. Outwardly, she appeared to be the quiet and beautiful type, so the gesture was quite at odds with the way she looked.

"So... I hear your engagement has been called off?"

"That's the idea, yeah! C'mon... For a future husband, there was just all kindsa stuff that was, like, *underwhelming* about him. Like, you really expect me to be satisfied with that *thing* for the rest of my life? Cut me a break, I mean..." Dorothy complained.

"Eh?" Seras tilted her head a little.

While she was speaking, Dorothy had spread her legs as if she were riding a horse and was thrusting her hips back and forth.

What is she doing?

The other knights looked away, some clearing their throats uncomfortably.

“Like, it looked so funny I was genuinely shocked, y’know? Couldn’t help laughin’ my head off, it was jus’ too much! Then finally he starts cryin’ and wailing. Didn’t help that the guy’s family had had it up to here with me, too. The parents were all ‘*Enough! We can’t take it any longer! We withdraw our offer of marriage!*’ and just gave up. Then poor li’l Dorothy gets sent back to her parents’ place, where her father is sooo mad. They confined me to this damn house! Well—I s’pose I do get to walk around outside a bit, at least.”

“I understand what happened, and I would ask you to...*refrain* from such untoward topics of discussion. I may be capable of such discussions, but Seras and Esmeralda are still pure.”

“Ah, sorry ’bout that... Eh? Seras? Seras, Seras... Ehh? Ah, look at them long ears...meanin’ she’s the one from the *Night o’ Wonders*...?”

“She is indeed.”

Dorothy clapped her hands together, and her eyes were glimmering. “Well, incredible! Ah... Totally makes sense that she’s hiding her face, then! What’s a big shot like her doing out here in the wilderness? I’ve never even seen a high elf before! Man, ah, I’m sorry for bein’ so rude... Please, look upon my transgressions with leniency, I beg of you...”

She’s bowing more to me, a mere knight, than to the princess of her nation...

Cattlea seemed unbothered, and a faint, prim smile crossed her face.

“We have been friends since we were children. For as long as I can remember, Dorothy has been promised to a noble boy from Ulza...and has spent most of her time there since the age of five as a result. We met from time to time, but for the past five years, our correspondence has been through letters only. And well...as you heard, circumstances have changed and returned her to Neah.”

Dorothy raised two fingers and smiled. “A triumphant return! ♪”

“Triumphant? You believe breaking off your engagement was a victory, then?” asked Cattlea.

Dorothy's shoulders sank. "All right, then... My triumphant *escape*."

"..."

She seems like a unique and eccentric individual. And if Cattlea is visiting her now, then that can mean but one thing.

"Princess—is she the one whom we have come for today?" asked Seras.

"Indeed," answered Cattlea.

Dorothy looked at them in confusion, from Cattlea to Seras and back again.

"Dorothy, I would like you to be one of my personal knights."

The woman looked at her through half-open eyes, raising a hand to her chin as she pondered.

"Oh ho? You want little Dorothy to join your party? Are you quite sure about that?"

"In spite of your jokes, you are a talented individual. But most importantly..." Cattlea drew Dorothy's face to her chest, holding her tight. "You are someone that I can *trust*—and what I most pressingly need are more *trusted* knights by my side."

"Well...you're all grown up now. ...Even if there still ain't enough chest here to get buried in."

Dorothy's words were about as rude as rude could be, but Cattlea didn't seem the least bit angered.

"Will you help me, Dorothy?"

"..." Dorothy looked up at the princess and for just a moment she smiled like a proper lady. The smile was so charming that Seras felt that if Dorothy had been a boy, it would charm her in completely. Dorothy looked so graceful that nobody would ever believe that she wasn't the sheltered, fragile daughter of some noble house.

This is how I pictured she might be when first I laid eyes upon her...

“I accept the offer gladly, princess.”

“Thank you, Dorothy.”

Then Dorothy’s expression shifted to a smirk. “Can’t stand living in this dump anyway. I’ll have more fun livin’ in the capital. So let’s hit the road...”

Dorothy winked at Seras and the other knights.

“Lookin’ forward to workin’ with you, ladies. ♪”

He frowned at her.

“Hmm? Dorothy? Back when we defeated Einglanz at the White Citadel of Protection...I think I heard her name in the princess’s tent, didn’t I? Sounds like she might be the same person based on your description...”

“It was, yes. It was Dorothy that she sent to find Makia.”

“So that holy knight of Neah’s a real character, eh?”

Dorothy is very different on the inside from how she appears on the outside. She might be a little like him in that respect.

“There was no such thing as the Holy Knights of Neah back then though, right?” he asked.

“The order was abolished as the emperor’s grip on the throne weakened,” said Seras.

“I see... But not before you rose from the ranks to become captain, eh?”

“I became captain only with the help of those around me.” Seras smiled faintly, remembering. “That is why I had to live up to their expectations—to become their leader.”

With Dorothy’s recruitment successful, the party began their trip back to the capital and Seras found herself sitting alone with Cattlea in the carriage once

more. Dorothy was riding one of the horses she'd brought with her from home, talking to Alda and the other knights.

"Do you think you'll be able to get along with her?" asked the princess.

"Yes. I do not think I will find her that difficult to speak with. You chose her personally, after all."

"That performance she put on when we first met—the prank... You didn't have an extreme reaction to the way she was acting because you knew it was a lie, didn't you?"

"Yes... That is right."

"I see..." mused Cattlea, leaning back against the wall of the carriage. "Then this ability to see through lies that you developed last month... It truly is something valuable."

The spirits that lived within Seras had been developing as she matured—and it appeared that the spirit of wind had given her the ability to see through lies. All Seras had experienced at first were unsettling feelings and she had reached out to Silfigzea for guidance, only to be told of her new ability—the spirit conveyed to her through thought that no lies would escape its notice any longer. Seras only told Cattlea of her ability, and she and the princess had set about determining whether this was a reliable skill with the help of the other knights.

In the end, it turned out that she truly had the ability to tell when a person was not being truthful. Though the other knights had helped in establishing this fact, none of them were told of Seras's ability. Only Cattlea and Seras knew that she had the ability to see through lies.

"It will be best that way. Very convenient for our purposes," Cattlea had explained. She shifted the cloth covering from the window and looked out at the wide plain beyond. "I believe I will be able to move up a number of my plans thanks to your new ability."

“I am honored that it will aid you, princess.”

“Meeting you, Seras... It changed everything for me. Thank you.”

“No, I should be the one thanking you, princess.”

“You really are a good girl, aren’t you?”

For a time, Cattlea just stared out at the scenery, not saying a word. She appeared lost in thought...or perhaps just tired. Seras had resolved to leave the princess alone at such times. Besides, the silence was not unwelcome to Seras.

The summer heat had raised the temperature outside, but it was a little cooler inside of the carriage, thanks to the power of her spirit of ice.

“It seems such a waste—that you should sacrifice your sleep for this,” Cattlea had once said.

But to Seras it was more important that the princess travel in comfort, even if it was only marginal. The price exacted for use of her spirit of ice was trivial in comparison to the price that her spirit armor demanded.

“Seras, you say you are grateful to me...” said Cattlea, suddenly breaking the silence. “But what of my *father*?”

“I owe him a great deal, even now. I have respect for him, of course. I think that he is a fine emperor.”

“Heh, I’m sure he would be very happy to hear that. But you do understand that now you are an official knight of Neah, it is important that you keep your distance from the emperor, don’t you?”

Cattlea had often spoken to her of the respectful distance that Seras should keep from Ortola. Her warnings had started after the events of the *Night of Wonders*. Seras still remembered what happened in the palace courtyard when she was seven years of age. After Ortola had embraced his daughter, he had turned to Seras and asked her for a hug—and Cattlea had stopped him.

“My my... I am not sure if I should rejoice or despair at how jealous my daughter has become.”

What happened in the courtyard had stayed with Seras and bothered her even to that day.

Growing too close to the holy emperor might make Cattlea sad and cause her to feel that I am stealing her beloved father from her... I cannot blame her for those fears. She was only ten years old when it happened, after all.

Wanting the love of one's father was only natural, as Seras knew. And Ortola was the only blood relative that Cattlea had left.

It is not my place to come between them. To stand in the way of the sacred bond between parent and child.

For that reason, Seras made every effort to ensure that whenever she met with Ortola, Cattlea was present. And it seemed that the princess wished for that also.

I was not lying when I said I feel a great debt to Ortola, and that I greatly respect him. I do think he is a fine emperor.

But Cattlea meant more to Seras than anybody in the whole world.

I do not wish to make her sad. Never.

"Do not worry, princess. The emperor treats me as your sister, but I am a mere knight at this court—a foreigner swept in from abroad. I will do my utmost to uphold my position as a knight, that I might serve my emperor—and serve *you*, my princess."

Cattlea pursed her lips a little, closing her eyes—as if holding back some emotion or blaming herself for something. After some time, she opened her eyes and looked up at Seras.

"Thank you." She turned back to the window. "And... I'm sorry."

"Hm?"

What is she saying sorry to me for?

I can tell that she means every word, both the thanks and the apology. This

ability to tell truth from lies really is amazing. But even with this power—there are so many things that I cannot know.

Cattlea Straumms

CATTLEA SAT ALONE at the writing desk in her room. She'd had Makia working in the shadows, preparing for so long. The desk before her was piled up high with scrolls of meticulously gathered intel.

I should've expected as much from Makia Renaufia.

Cattlea had spent little time with Makia of late, but she had been diligently concentrating on her task of intelligence gathering, never uttering a word of complaint.

I am grateful to her, from the bottom of my heart.

Equal in importance to Makia now was Seras, whose ability to see through lies had considerably accelerated Cattlea's plans. Cattlea had bolstered the ranks of her personal knights...and now she had almost finished preparing the ground for what she intended to do next.

The time was right.

"It is now or never."

Cattlea set her brush aside and turned out the light.

Seras Ashrain

IT WAS THE DAY after the princess welcomed Dorothy into their ranks that Cattlea went to Ortola to request that he revive the Holy Knights of Neah. The

emperor's personal guard—significantly increased in number—was now fulfilling the role that the Holy Knights of Neah once had. There were also former holy knights in retirement, recruited by nobles across Neah for their personal armies. Some had remained with the emperor of course, but those were now firmly entrenched within his personal guard.

There was almost no interest in a revival of the Holy Knights of Neah of old.

“Hmph... You wish for them to operate as your own personal army, then?” asked the emperor.

“As you are well aware, the Holy Knights of Neah were once a symbol of our royal house. My personal leadership of their order would only serve to increase our authority.”

“I see. Your logic is sound. It does appear that the number of your personal guard has been growing in recent years... It might be a good idea to solidify them under the banner of an official order.”

“I would like to select Seras as the Captain of the Holy Knights of Neah.”

“...Seras, eh?” Ortola's eyes turned to the high elf, who stood just behind Cattlea, at her side.

“I believe the suit of armor that the previous captain once wore would suit her perfectly. It lies unused in the armory at present,” said Cattlea.

“Well... Hmm...” Ortola's gaze went slowly from Seras's feet to her head. “Once she becomes Captain of the Holy Knights, not even the most renowned nobles in the land will be able to touch her—such an act would sully the name of our royal house. One false step might even lead to charges of treason.”

“Hmm...”

“I believe that installing Seras into this position is the best thing that we can do to protect her. What do you say, Father? What are your thoughts on the matter?”

“You're right... You may be correct about all of this.” Ortola stole another

glance at Seras. “Her beauty—her charms only flourish with each day that passes. I see it myself each time we meet. Hmph... You are also correct that leaving her as a mere personal knight in your service might lead some individuals to attempt something untoward.”

“I also believe that this will only further solidify Seras’s ties to our royal house. I know that the appointment of a foreign princess to the position of Captain of the Holy Knights may raise eyebrows among those at court... But your personal guard takes precedence above her order. Her appointment will also demonstrate to foreign powers our connection to Seras’s former nation of Hylings—a check on their ambitions, though admittedly it would be a bluff.”

“Yes... Of the seven nations on this continent, ours is the smallest. But intimating to the others that Hylings secretly stands behind us... Well, that might serve to improve our standing.”

“The other powers are bolstering their forces as well. Magnar has recruited the younger brother of the White Wolf King, the ‘Black Wolf’ Sogude Sigmus to lead their White Wolf Riders, and the rumor is that he is gaining strength. Yonato is still recruiting for its Holy Order of the Purge, and the Holy Priest of Yonato and the Four Holy Elders are growing in prestige with each passing day. The renown of the Band of the Sun now reaches far and wide across this continent. Ulza—even ignoring their Monster Slayer Knights, their nation’s Dragonslayer is well respected across the land. Alion holds its Thirteen Orders... and more importantly, the Goddess capable of summoning Heroes from Another World.”

All the nations of the continent had talented and capable warriors or organizations that left their neighbors thinking twice.

“But Neah has no order with which to intimidate those who lie across our borders. Your personal guard is strong, Father...but the great nobles that serve as your knights cannot unify this nation. There is an impression abroad that we are fractious.”

“I am sure that you are right. I have tried my best, but... Unfortunately a number of the great nobles have been unable to shake the habits formed during the time when I...eh, left them to their own devices. It pains me to speak it so. My own sloth is to blame.”

“There is also the Strongest Man in the World, Civit Gartland, to consider.”

Cattlea’s words sent a shiver down Ortola’s spine. Sweat began to form on his forehead and his eyes twitched open wide as his bottom lip quivered.

“...Father?”

Ortola shifted in his chair, placed a hand to his sweaty forehead, and sighed deeply. “It’s...nothing. Y-yes, you’re quite right. O-of course I hear the stories of his deeds, ridiculous as they may seem... The tales they speak of him are terrifying...”

“With Civit’s rise, the Black Dragon Knights are now the strongest fighting force on the continent.”

“I see. You are correct that Neah needs a force capable of fighting back.”

“As our practical army, we may simply choose to continue to expand your personal guard. But I believe that the time will soon come when Neah requires a powerful *name* at its disposal.”

“That is why you wish to revive the Holy Knights of Neah, then.”

“As I just mentioned, appointing Seras as Captain of the Holy Knights would also suggest a link between Neah and Hylings. I believe Seras’s position as captain would also afford her more opportunities to be seen with you in public, offering us opportunities to effectively display the friendship between Hylings and our royal house.”

“...H-hmm.”

“Finally I would like to remind you—this would be a way of *protecting* Seras from the evil clutches of those who might seek to harm her, foes both domestic and abroad. What say you, Father?”

Cattlea's insistence seemed to clear all remaining doubt from the emperor's mind, and after a short interval of silent reflection...he assented.

The sun was beaming down over the palace training grounds, hot and humid. Seras placed her training sword up against the wall in the shade. Then she put the leather water pouch she had been drinking down on one of the long benches against the wall.

"Lady Seras." Esmeralda handed her a piece of cloth.

"Thank you, Alda." Seras wiped the sweat from her face, while Alda made a grand show of finishing off the water. With the customary *ahh!* of relief, she wiped down her chin and arms.

"I must say...your skills with the sword are unmatched, Lady Seras. Lady Dorothy's technique is superb, but nothing compared to yours in my estimation," said Esmeralda—and that seemed to make Seras happy.

She watched as Dorothy crossed swords with another knight.

"I did not sense it when the two of you trained together, but Lady Dorothy appears much stronger than the other knights. I think I now understand why the princess wished so badly for her to join us."

Seras and Dorothy had just trained together for the first time. Dorothy wielded a shifting sword and her style of swordsmanship was very unique.

"I learned much when facing Lady Dorothy's sword. I feel as if training with her will be fine practice for fighting against opponents who are much larger than I am."

Esmeralda couldn't help but give a short laugh.

"Is something wrong?" asked Seras.

"It's nothing... It's simply that having someone like you speak to me in such a friendly manner each day feels strange—as if I'm living in a dream. Sometimes I wonder if I am going to wake up one day... I never imagined this would be

possible—that someone like me might ever be able to serve the princess and stand by your side.”



Esmeralda gazed at the other knights with a look of nostalgia in her eyes as they worked hard at their training.

I don't think she's looking at them right now, Seras thought. I expect that she's looking at her past self.

“Alda... *Someone like me* is no way to put yourself down. You were chosen by the princess personally, you know? Do not underestimate the princess who selected you by speaking of yourself in such a way.”

Esmeralda closed her eyes and smiled again. “You’re quite right, Lady Seras.”

Esmeralda’s addition to their order had been a great benefit. She was bigger than most male knights and there were very few individuals who tried to bother Seras when Alda was by her side. Cattlea, Seras, and Makia looked a little too much like a group of young girls, but Esmeralda’s presence changed all that—just as Cattlea said. She knew that her other knights paled in comparison to Alda’s imposing presence.

“The purpose of a guard is to deter conflict from the outset—it is good that she has such an effect,” the princess noted.

Seras was quite capable in real combat—but not all situations could be resolved with a hastily drawn sword. In such cases, she was glad to have Esmeralda at her side.

Her presence causes men to shrink away—particularly the savage ones, it seems.

“I rely on you too.”

“I am happy to hear you say that.”

The two of them had formed a strong bond with each other during their days of training. Esmeralda watched the other knights, Seras by her side.

“I understand the role that I am being asked to perform.”

“Alda...”

“No. It makes me happy. This huge body of mine—my rugged features... They serve an important *purpose* now. I’m proud to look the way I do.”

Seras peeked out past the eaves, gazing up into the blue summer sky. “This is a good place, and there are good people here. I love all of you. I love it here.”

That’s why I want to protect this place, Seras thought with all her heart.

From the day after the restoration of the Holy Knights of Neah, Cattlea set about her work on the building she planned to be the new order headquarters. She assembled four of her knights in one room there—Seras, Makia, Esmeralda, and Dorothy. Cattlea sat in a chair far too uncomfortable for a princess as she set about explaining her plans.

“Restoration of the Holy Knights of Neah, eh?” said Dorothy, once Cattlea paused in her speech. Seras had already known of the princess’s intentions, and Makia also seemed unsurprised by the news.

“Seras will be captain, and Makia her vice-captain.”

Nobody raised any objections. Cattlea and Makia had discussed the matter the night before in Cattlea’s presence. Makia was the princess’s oldest serving knight—by rights, *she* should have been made captain, and Seras did not want problems to arise between the two of them later. Makia freely gave the title of captain to Seras, though.

“I am more suited to the position of bodyguard to the princess. And well, you’ve heard that she intends to make you captain by now, haven’t you? I don’t believe she’s wrong. Enough talk. The issue is settled.”

Seras remembered her words. It had sounded as if she never had any desire to be captain. Seras’s lie detector had confirmed that Makia’s words were from the heart.

“Oh, and I will also be speaking to you differently from this day onward. You’re going to be Lady Seras. I’m grown up now. I respect you, too. That’s not just for

show. And please, call me Makia. It would never do for a captain to refer to their vice-captain as 'Lady Makia.' The same goes for everyone else in our order. You understand that, Lady Seras?"

Makia would not resent Seras for her position as captain and would support her in her position as vice-captain. Seras was reassured to have Makia by her side.

"Do not worry, Makia will serve loyally as your vice-captain in a variety of matters."

Seras was to be a sort of symbol for the order, the princess had told her.

If that is what she intends, then I will obey without question.

She remembered Esmeralda's words.

"I understand the role that I am being asked to perform."

She's right. I should do everything I can to fulfill the duties that are set for me. For the princess. For everyone I love.

"Yes, princess. And I will be counting on your support, La— Makia."

"I will be counting on you too, Lady Seras," Makia replied, her face covered in a smile.

"Ahem... Esmeralda, Dorothy." Seras turned to face the other two knights. "In many ways, you will find me lacking as your captain...but I will always try my utmost. I will count on your assistance in the days to come."

She bowed.

...I'm still not used to speaking from a position of power. I must get better at this.

"As will we, Lady Seras."

"We're countin' on ya, cap—! ♪"

Cattlea placed a hand on her cheek to prop up her head, looking exasperated at that last remark.

“I feel as if becoming captain has made you more serious... You are stiff as a board now, Seras. You’re so sweet when it’s just the two of us.”

“Pr-princess? You jest...”

“Your protests only lend credence to the claim.”

“R-right...”

The other three knights’ expressions softened at the heartwarming exchange. In the days that followed, Cattlea sent letters and servants in search of new recruits, drawing heavily from the pool of individuals who had failed the knight’s test. She also made frequent trips into the city, taking Dorothy and Esmeralda with her.

“I’m sure Dorothy will be able to find some interesting talent to serve the Holy Knights of Neah,” the princess had explained to Seras.

I see... It appears that when recruiting Dorothy to join us, she had this in mind.

The test to join the Holy Knights of Neah was done largely by interview, especially when a candidate’s physical and practical abilities were already evident from their past test scores. For that reason, only the bare minimum practical fighting ability was tested, simply to ensure that a candidate hadn’t lost their edge.

What was considered most important was the interview stage. Seras sat with Cattlea by her side and asked several questions of their candidates, discussing different topics as she went. The absolutely vital condition for entry into the Holy Knights of Neah was *character*—in short, whether the candidate could be trusted or not. Usually this would be quite difficult to detect, as a certain degree of acting could carry one through the process.

Considering that there are knights like Dorothy, I can imagine the difficulty of seeing through human deception.

But Seras had the ability to detect lies and knew when a candidate was not answering truthfully. Cattlea had confidence in her abilities as a judge of

character—but in truth, the princess had only her instincts. She had confided that concern to Seras. But with Seras’s ability to see through lies on her side, Cattlea’s character-discerning powers were unbelievably accurate.

“It is not just in selecting new knights that I will need you. You will be incredibly useful to have by my side in negotiations.”

Cattlea spoke of her plans for the Holy Knights of Neah’s recruitment strategy.

“I have no intention of turning this order into a playground for noble girls who wish to play at being a knight for a day. The trusted and capable will be admitted with little regard to their station. We will accept anyone who is truly talented. I have no intention to allow anyone into our order who dislikes dirty clothes, not bathing for three days, or eating soldiers’ rations. Those that join us, however, will be welcomed and treated justly.”

The trusted and the capable. For candidates who were both, very little else was required. As for those who were admitted into the Holy Knights—there were many like Esmeralda who had lived hard and difficult lives despite their strength. Many could barely believe when their acceptance letters arrived, and one refrain in particular was common:

“I am not blessed with sufficient looks to be a member of the Holy Knights of Neah or to serve at the princess’s side.”

The candidates had all interviewed with Cattlea and Seras Ashrain—of the *Night of Wonders* fame—who now had her true face exposed for all to see. Several prospective knights just stared at Seras in stunned silence upon entering the interview room or were uncomfortable throughout their tests.

“Even those who are confident in their own looks can feel defeated by you. I cannot blame those who are insecure about their appearance for shrinking in your presence,” Cattlea once remarked with a wry smile.

But looks did not factor into Cattlea’s judgment. The girls of the petty nobility who were insecure about their appearances at first had difficulty accepting that they had passed their interviews, but all of them rejoiced once they realized

that their invitations to become Holy Knights were genuine.

“This should also improve how these girls are treated by their families,” said Cattlea, a protective, possibly maternal look in her eyes. It was a trait that captured the hearts of her new knight recruits. They became believers within just a few days of meeting her. And, as if by design, they gradually began to turn their faith on Seras as well.

“She has always been good at influencing people,” Seras remembered Makia saying once.

The days flew by, kept busy with interviews and preparations for what was to come.

“Father will announce the official reformation of the Holy Knights of Neah at a ceremony in two weeks,” Cattlea told Seras at their order’s headquarters.

“That is when you will be appointed by the emperor as Captain of the Holy Knights of Neah.”

“Understood.”

“Oh, and... The decision has been made to invite not just the influential nobles of Neah, but a number of guests from the foreign powers as well. I understand that might be of some concern to you...”

“Given that I am to be granted the position of Captain of the Holy Knights, I can no longer show dislike for appearing in public. I have been appearing in public a little more often without my veil of late...and now I have reliable companions by my side for support.”

Cattlea looked a little surprised, then smiled. “You’ve become quite reliable yourself, Seras.”

It was noon on the day before the ceremony where the reformation of the Holy Knights of Neah was to be announced. Seras had been called to Cattlea’s chambers, and found her holding a sword that was still in its sheath when she

entered. The sheath looked prestigious, inlaid with lines of silver decorations.

“This sword is proof that you are Captain of the Holy Knights. It has been passed down from captain to captain for generations—though it lost its master once, when I was five years of age.”

Seras understood the princess’s meaning.

“Then that is the sword that the emperor will grant me in tomorrow’s ceremony?” She had already been informed about the weapon. “But why show it to me now?”

“Stand over there for me, won’t you, Seras?” asked Cattlea, pointing to one of the walls of her room which had the crest of Neah emblazoned high upon it. Seras did as she was told, and the princess approached her with the sword, holding it out level for her to take.

“Before Father’s ceremony tomorrow, I thought we might have one in here... just the two of us.” Cattlea tilted her head just a little to the side and smiled at Seras. “A *personal* ceremony, if you will.”

“Princess...”

“I wanted to do this—wanted to be *first*. In any case, please think of it as a rehearsal.”

Seras smiled with understanding, straightened her back, then went down quickly to one knee.

“Understood.”

“Well, then. Rise—Seras Ashrain.”

“Yes, my princess.”

As Seras rose, Cattlea spoke with a quiet calm, formal and austere. “In the name of Cattlea Straumms—I appoint you, Seras Ashrain, Captain of the Holy Knights of Neah.”

Seras lowered her head and held out her hands.

“I accept.”

Cattlea handed her the sword—the symbol of the Holy Knight order, handed down through generations of former captains.

“Rise—Captain of the Holy Knights.”

Seras took the sword from the princess’s hands and looked her straight in the eyes.

“I will serve as a sword of Neah... *Your* sword, princess. I devote all of my strength to your service.”

For a time, the two of them simply locked eyes, as if reconfirming the deep trust that they had in each other. Their silence was finally broken by a sharp laugh from Cattlea.

“Just be sure you say ‘your majesty, Holy Emperor of Neah’ tomorrow and not ‘princess,’ okay?”

Seras smiled and held the sword to her chest.

“Yes—princess.”

Cattlea visited Seras’s room that night, explaining that she hadn’t been able to calm herself enough for sleep.

“Are you nervous about the ceremony tomorrow, princess?”

“Perhaps so... Yes. I still have so much to learn.”

She sat with Seras on the edge of her bed, the two of them dressed in light nightgowns. They had just taken a bath together for the first time in a while, and both still blushed from the heat.

“Seras... When the Holy Knights begin to operate in earnest, the burden placed upon you as their captain will become heavier. I will do what I can to support you, but...”

“You need not worry, princess... I wish I had the self-confidence to say the

same thing to myself... But I have done my best to prepare for what is to come. I wish to help you, not be a burden.”

I have continued to train with the sword, and with my bow—though my skill with that weapon bears no comparison to the blade. I have also learned to ride and handle horses. And I have knowledge now, too. While I have little practical experience of the world, I know much about this continent.

Recently Seras had been studying up on how to command large groups of her subordinates.

“...I am sure that someday you will have to kill another.”

Seras paused for a moment. “Thank you for considering this.”

I have killed a wolf—but never a human being.

“I have no fondness for the meaningless taking of another’s life...yet there are times at which lives must be taken to protect another. I know that and I am ready.”

Cattlea slipped her arm around Seras’s waist and leaned in to embrace her. “Thank you, Seras.”

Cattlea closed her eyes, head resting on Seras’s shoulder.

“You seem exhausted, princess.”

“Yes, but my mind is racing... I cannot sleep.”

“I see—well then...” Seras moved to the middle of the bed and sat with her legs folded neatly beneath her. “Would you like to sleep in my lap?”

“In your...lap? Who taught you this?”

“I read of this in a book, once—that it might soothe those who are tired. But well, it is my first time... I cannot guarantee that it will be at all effective.”

“My my, I suppose this is one perk of being a princess.” Cattlea happily shifted to the middle of the bed and laid her head on Seras’s lap, eyes facing the ceiling.

“This is...the finest pillow I have ever laid my head upon.”

“You flatter me, princess.”

“I do not.” The corners of Cattlea’s mouth curled into a smile and she closed her eyes. “There is nowhere in this world I feel more comfortable than right here.”

“Thank you.”

“Heh heh... Hey, Seras.”

“Yes?”

“If you ever find a gentleman who becomes special to you, I believe you should offer him your lap when he is anxious and cannot sleep. Do it just as you have done with me now.”

“A gentleman who is special to me...”

Honestly, I cannot even begin to imagine. I have been a little wary and uncomfortable around men ever since that dinner party. There are those I have a fondness for—the honest and upright captain of the emperor’s guard, Guartz, for instance. And I have become more used to speaking with the men around the palace... I can even hold a conversation now. I suppose it helps that they have become used to my appearance.

Perhaps the holy emperor is one individual that I trust quite deeply.

In terms of members of the opposite sex, however—Seras could not imagine growing close enough to a man that she might fall in love. There were stories of love in her books...but she could never seem to put herself in the characters’ shoes. Sometimes they made her feel that she was reading about a whole different species entirely.

Love is something that I do not know yet.

“You haven’t met anyone who makes your heart beat fast or feel obsessed over... Not yet, it seems. Perhaps I am partly to blame for that. But, well...” Cattlea was about to say something but cut herself short. “...In any case, be sure

you save this lap pillow for him when he does show up. I would appreciate it if you would let me use it in the meantime, though.”

“Heh heh, understood. It will be yours for the time being then, princess.”

“...Ahh. I truly do feel relaxed... Most of all, when the two of us are together, I...” Cattlea’s voice started to sound dreamy, and before long, she drifted off. Seras stroked her head softly, affectionately.

You really must have been tired. I cannot blame you. I know you are more exhausted than anyone else in our order. It is not just me... Makia, Dorothy...

There were many sides to Cattlea that Seras didn’t know yet, she was quickly realizing. The past few years had seen several wars across the continent—though Seras had been largely unaware of them. There had been battles at court, also.

The holy emperor’s increase in power had not pleased some of the more prominent nobles or their wives...and there were some who began plotting against the throne. Cattlea couldn’t afford to lose the emperor, as he was the one who maintained her strength. And there were also times when the princess herself had been a target of these plots. Cattlea had been nipping these issues in the bud, crushing them behind the scenes before they could be put into action. At least that’s what Makia once told Seras.

“She doesn’t want to involve you in this kind of dirty business,” Makia had explained when Seras asked why the princess never came to her for help.

But in recent days, Cattlea had begun slowly teaching Seras about intrigue—though she seemed reluctant to do so.

“I will teach you what you must know to protect yourself, but I would like you to involve yourself as little as possible with these matters,” she had said.

Whenever there was an incident in the palace, Seras worried that the princess might be involved, but Cattlea did not speak to her of what was happening. She only lived an otherwise normal life in Seras’s presence.

Princess...I ask nothing of what you are doing, because you would prefer me not to. But I know. I want to make your wishes come true. I—I want to be who you wish I was.

Your sword.

The ceremony the following day went ahead as planned. A force of eighty individuals were declared the new Holy Knights of Neah. Ten of their number participated in the ceremony, revealed in public to the audience. According to Cattlea, these ten knights were to be the public face of the Holy Knights. They had been invited using Makia's connections to the prestigious House of Renaufia. All of them were daughters of noble houses.

There was Seras, Makia, Esmeralda, and Dorothy—the other six were chosen for their families' ranks and their physical appearances, in spite of Cattlea's usual recruitment standards.

There were some issues with their past behavior and some had challenging personalities, but all came from the high ranks of the aristocracy. They were "worthy" of the ceremony around them. Most importantly—their past conduct notwithstanding—the six knights were all outwardly attractive individuals.

"Whatever my personal convictions on these matters, high noble status and attractive looks are desirable in this world. That cannot be denied. That is why we will require you ten knights to be our public face," Cattlea had explained.

None of the Holy Knights had any issue with this plan. Cattlea's idea was realistic and made logical sense. Most importantly of all, most of the other knights worshipped Cattlea as a sort of goddess and would never dream of raising complaints about her actions. Makia and Dorothy were chosen for their innate good looks, and Esmeralda for her *other* attractive qualities. Her presence alone was enough to dispel the sort of saccharine aura of weakness that the other girls might otherwise have given off. It seemed that Esmeralda had developed a cult following of female fans as well, perhaps because she struck a uniquely gallant figure and looked so at home in her suit of armor.

Among the knights were also a number of sheltered girls and women who were not good with men, having only ever interacted with those from within their own families. It was among these girls that Esmeralda was most popular.

But it was inevitable that during the ceremony almost all eyes were turned to the Captain of the Holy Knights of Neah. When the ceremony began, Seras entered not at the head of the procession but at the back—a decision that Cattlea had made. Quiet excitement and anticipation gripped the crowd and waves of commotion spread through the spectators the moment that she came into view. It was especially a shock to those who saw Seras for the first time. The overpowering sense of surprise may have been what prevented another riot. But more importantly, Ortola was watching this time: The holy emperor was presiding over the ceremony.

He had ordered the elite members of his personal guard to be positioned throughout the crowd. Seras was also preceded by Esmeralda, whom Cattlea had given instructions to protect her captain if anything should happen. That was partly the reason why Esmeralda was glaring this way and that as they moved into the ceremony space. The crowd were completely entranced by Seras...but didn't dare think of making a move. They were petrified.

The Holy Knights of Neah formed a line as Cattlea introduced them. Then Seras went up to the holy emperor to receive her sword—proof that she was Captain of the Holy Knights of Neah.

“In the name of Ortola Straumms—I appoint you, Seras Ashrain, Captain of the Holy Knights of Neah.”

Almost exactly as it had happened yesterday, Seras was officially sworn in as captain. The holy emperor attached a piece of shoulder gear to Seras that was the other symbol of the Captain of the Holy Knights of Neah and she went down on one knee again—the bow of a knight. Then the ceremony hall was filled with thunderous applause. Seras saw tears on Ortola's face as if he were overwhelmed by emotion, his expression one of pure contentment.

Cattlea clapped too.

It seemed that she had some issues with the ceremony and had complained of the state of the foreign dignitaries before it began.

“Ulza, Alion, and Bakoss have been summoned—but no nobles of great station are in attendance. This was Father’s doing, it seems... He thinks it premature to allow your true face to be too known to the wider world.”

And yet he had allowed some of them to be present.

“Does he wish to announce you to the public, or hide you away? I do not understand him,” the princess had said—though Seras gauged those last words a lie.

It is likely that Cattlea knows the true intent behind her father’s actions. She understands what is in his heart.

But Seras didn’t pry into the matter. There were some lies that it was considerate to tell—Cattlea had taught her that.

I am sure this lie is for my sake, she accepted.

After the ceremony was done, a grand feast was held in celebration of the event. Seras went with Ortola to greet a number of people she had never met before. Yet each time she introduced herself, the emperor would place his hand on her back and eloquently explain just what a marvelous knight she was. Esmeralda and Guartz were always standing right by their side.

When Seras walked the floor of the feast hall, she attracted attention—though perhaps that was to be expected.

“She is simply lovely,” was the general sentiment, and a wave of people constantly followed them, eager to get a closer look at her. The emperor’s personal guard and the newly appointed Holy Knight formed a wall to block off the crowd completely. The waves at the feast were reduced to ripples. The events of the *Night of Wonders* were well known, and all those present were

aware that going too far in pursuit of Seras would incur the wrath of the Holy Emperor of Neah. The crowd tried to approach, but nobody dared to anger the emperor.

“My name is Seras Ashrain,” she introduced herself to a Bakossi noble during a moment when Ortola had stepped away.

“He had to inquire about a horse,” Guartz had informed her discreetly—and Seras had caught his meaning.

The local Bakossi nobles she was speaking with were a plain-looking count and his wife, and they returned her greeting kindly before introducing their son.

“Come now, greet the Captain of the Holy Knights of Neah.”

The son’s face flushed red, and he began fidgeting with his hands. “Ah, right—n-nice to meet you...C-Captain...”

The child was still young, and clearly very nervous. Seras knelt before him and smiled.

“Nice to meet you. My name is Seras Ashrain. Is the food here in Neah to your liking?”

There was still some of the food left at the corner of the boy’s mouth. There was nothing uncouth about that for a boy of his age, and it made him appear rather cute. Seras took a clean handkerchief from her pocket and wiped the boy’s face clean.

“Heh heh, so you did like the food, after all? You were so caught up in eating it you did not notice this ...”

“Ah—nh...” The boy flushed even redder, and clasped his hands together firmly before his chest.

I know I am not good with the opposite sex, but there is nothing of that with younger boys.

“What is your name?”

“Oh, how gorgeous!” Suddenly a tall man ducked in between Seras and the young boy. “I am pleased to make your acquaintance! My name is Monk Droghetti!”

“ ... ”

The little boy was pushed aside as the man barged in and the child quickly jumped behind his mother in surprise.

“Despite my looks I’m quite the famed mercenary in Bakoss, you know? Madam here hired me as her bodyguard and that is why I am at this ceremony, Captain of the Holy Knights of Neah!”

The mercenary man bowed politely, as the count’s wife tried to reprimand him—though her words fell on deaf ears.

“Would you like to go for dinner with me sometime? How about it? Oh, please do! You see, I have never been more certain that I’ve finally found my soulmate! A woman worthy of *me*! I finally see it now! I should have been going for high elves, not humans! I’m moved, see? Moved! Grateful for this wondrous meeting of ours! Hey? Who the heck are you?”

Esmeralda stepped in between Seras and the man. “Lady Seras has to move on to her next greeting.”

The man took a step back, intimidated by Esmeralda’s height—but still, he persisted.

“Lady Seras! Please, tend to your guests,” said the count’s wife. Seras smiled at her.

“It was wonderful to make your acquaintance.”

“Ah, yes. It was nice to meet you too, Lady Seras...” The noblewoman regained a little of her smile. Seras then turned her back on the man, eyes cold as she addressed him over her shoulder.

“Farewell.”

“Ah...wait!”

Seras looked down to see the young boy smiling up at her, his fingers in his mouth. She waved at him, and the little boy blushed and waved back.

“I apologize for being so late to intervene, Lady Seras.”

“No, no. *Thank you*, Alda. You rescued me.”

Causing a commotion at this feast would ruin the event, and perhaps even spoil the whole ceremony. If I had remained there, I might have ended up slapping that man on the cheek.

“Let us go, Lady Seras.”

“Yes.”

Seras and Esmeralda made to leave, but the man reached a hand toward them.

“H-hey! Wait a minute, you—”

“What is the meaning of this?”

Stunned by the voice, the man retreated. “Gah?! Y-Your Majesty—Holy Emperor!”

It was Ortola, back from his short break. Wary that an angry outburst might ruin the atmosphere of the feast, Seras explained to Ortola that there was no problem.

“Well... If you say so. I can hardly argue with that.”

While Seras and the emperor were talking, the rude man disappeared. He had been faced with a wall of cold glances from those who saw what he’d done, and soon found it impossible to remain in the hall.

“Odd... Such things only occur when I have taken an absence. I must ensure this doesn’t happen again.”

“No, my emperor... I believe it’s possible that... Well... Perhaps the man was

only so forceful because he could see that you were not accompanying me?”

“Hmph.”

“It is perhaps proof that I will be safe at this feast, provided I am by your side, my emperor.”

“Oh—ho ho! I see, I see! Yes! You’re quite right! Fear not... I will not leave you until this feast has reached its conclusion, you have my word!”

“Thank you, your majesty.”

“Come, then, on to the next guests—Seras, my knight!”

It had been some time since Seras had seen the emperor in such high spirits. Cattlea had told Seras to keep her distance from Ortola, keeping her position as a knight in mind. She had followed those directions in her everyday interactions with the emperor. However, this evening was different...

Cattlea had explained that to her before the ceremony. “During this feast, a certain degree of fraternization—familiarity between you and father—must be seen by those in attendance.”

Seras looked around the hall as she remembered Cattlea’s words.

Come to think of it—where is the princess?

Ah!

She found her standing with Makia, Dorothy, and a number of the other Holy Knights. Dorothy was chatting away, putting on her usual persona for the event.

Cattlea is...

“Hm?”

The princess’s arms were folded, and she was staring across the hall.

There is something in her eyes—what is she gazing at, I wonder?

Seras followed her line of sight and saw a man standing on the second-floor balcony above, overlooking the main hall space.

I believe that is...Duke Mishel? Hagg Mishel—Ortola's cousin.

Seras had heard that he hadn't been leaving his own domain much of late and was now rarely seen in the capital. Cattlea speculated that his absence was due to the increase in her father's strength and influence.

Seras had met him several times before. She'd heard that he was fair and broad-minded...but the first time Seras had met him he spoke very little. She remembered his eyes as he had looked at her—as if they were searching for something.

Ah...

Duke Mishel suddenly vanished from the balcony.

But why was the princess looking at him like that...?

"Seras, this is no time to get absent-minded. Come this way!"

"Ah—yes, my emperor."

Focus. I have my role as Captain of the Holy Knights to think of. I must be on my duty.

And so, forgetting about Cattlea and Duke Mishel for the time being, Seras continued making the rounds at the feast.

"Monk Droghetti..." he said, recognizing the name. "Isn't he the guy who tried to mess with you in Mils?"

"Yes."

"Jeez—talk about holding a grudge."

Seras returned a knowing smile and nodded.

"I had no idea that he hated me so, but yes. Perhaps I could have turned him away in a more deft manner. I am sure the princess could have managed that... It is but another sign of my inexperience, I am afraid."

“But hey, you don’t often get angry. You did for that little boy and the count’s family, right? That’s just like you, Seras.”

“Is it really?”

“Some might see it as a weakness—but I like that about you, y’know?” he said, like it was nothing at all.

“Oh!”

That’s it then. That is why.

He smiled a little. “But you know, Seras... I think you should get angry for *you* more often.”

Chapter 5:

What She Found

CATTLEA WAS TWENTY-ONE years of age, and Seras had turned eighteen.

In the three years since the official reformation of the Holy Knights of Neah, Seras Ashrain had proved to the people of Neah that she was not just in her position as an attractive figurehead.

First, she maintained peace within the empire's borders. She journeyed to take out a group of bandits that had been harassing Neahan citizens, rapidly taking care of the problem. Whenever land disputes broke out between nobles, she traveled to meet with both parties and mediate their dispute. These were interventions that Cattlea and her personal knights would not have been permitted to make.

Despite being a princess, Cattlea did not have a huge amount of power in Neah—and the actions that she was allowed to take were surprisingly limited. She could exercise her authority in the capital, for instance, but had almost no sway in the domains of the upper nobility. Neah was an empire ruled by old and outdated traditions. But to hold power over the entire empire, one needed to follow those traditions to a certain extent. Respect for them was how the legitimacy of the Holy Knights was established—and Cattlea now had far more power than she did when she was operating alone.

There were those who did not care for the reformation of the Holy Knights and the corresponding rise in the emperor's authority, however—chief among them the upper nobility, who had spent the period of Ortola's weakness amassing power and authority for themselves. They had already been complaining about the emperor's personal guard for some time.

"They are a force intended to protect the emperor and they have no right to march into our lands! Those men are meant to guard the Holy Emperor of Neah!"

Nothing more, nothing less! The former Holy Knights we might have permitted, but not a dispatch from the emperor's personal guard! Do you hear me?! This refusal to follow proper protocol could lead to a loss of faith in the emperor himself. It might even spark a rebellion of the upper nobility across this empire!"

Ironically perhaps for the nobles, their complaints ended up giving legitimacy to the interventions of the Holy Knights of Neah.

The Holy Knights never failed to capture the love of the people. Cattlea made sure that their order had regular interactions with the citizens of Neah, supporting areas in need of food when harvests failed and helping to rebuild and repair after natural disasters struck towns and villages.

Just as the princess planned, the popularity of the Holy Knights grew with each passing day. Seras was a large factor in that, and Cattlea often reminded her of it. The young Captain of the Holy Knights of Neah—just eighteen years of age—was so popular that she could cause a commotion simply by being seen wearing her Holy Knight armor and riding through town on her white horse.

"The Princess Knight of Neah."

The past three years had seen that name spread far and wide to the other nations of the continent. As famous as Seras Ashrain was for having many passionate suitors, she was even more renowned for never granting audiences to them. It was said that either the princess of Neah or the holy emperor himself strongly refused to allow her to meet with others. The official portrait of Seras Ashrain was also very rarely shown to the public—though someone who saw it once had recreated it from memory, and so there were quite a number of counterfeits making their way around the continent.

This increased public fascination with Seras Ashrain with each passing day—an interest that flourished particularly in the foreign nations. Rumors of her beauty abounded, spreading in the way that only rumors can do with embellishments and additions at times.

Seras spent those three years incredibly busy with her work as a Holy Knight

of Neah. She never complained of the workload and performed all of her duties with enthusiasm.

To purge this country of its sickness. To achieve the wishes of Cattlea Straumms, my princess. But such a severe pace is not sustainable... That cannot be maintained.

To maintain such consistent effort, it was important that sweet rewards be provided from time to time. The Holy Knights were given high salaries, and other benefits for their service. The headquarters of the Holy Knights had become a much more comfortable space as the years had passed. Rules for the knights were fairly lax when they were away from the public eye, and so long as their behavior did not damage the standing of the Holy Knights of Neah, Cattlea did not scold them.

This degree of freedom was comforting to the knights. They were given time to eat baked goods and have tea together, dining in a cafeteria set up solely for their use, where the food was delicious and high quality.

“You will feel better with a little sweetness in you,” Cattlea said.

How much sweetness was difficult to judge—too much, and the knights might start to become lazy. It was Cattlea and Seras who took the lead in doling out sweetness, skilfully selecting the right amounts to give to the knights in their order.

Seras was much more serious now that she was a captain—but that untouchable aspect of her character only made her seem divine. The knights who received her training always had looks of intense respect and admiration on their faces. The rules of their order were loose, but everyone played the pure and upright Holy Knight in front of Seras...or at the very least, tried their best to do so. (At least all those who were not named Dorothy.)

There was talk that Seras had stopped displaying her emotions so publicly and that she came off a little cold at times. But others saw the change as her finally developing an air of authority befitting a captain after three long years. She was

still loved by the other Holy Knights, and she loved them in turn.

But—perhaps there is now a distance between us.

Cattlea noticed what was happening and tried to be considerate. The knights went on outings sometimes—short trips to land owned by the emperor, located just south of the capital. There was a beautiful lake there, which Cattlea took Seras and the other knights to one day, and a mansion by the lake for the royals' personal use. It was regularly serviced by those who lived in a nearby village, so it was always neat and clean.

One edge of the lake was sandy like a beach.

“This is the perfect place to escape the heat this time of year. Oh, but it has been so long since I visited.”

“Princess, what is this?”

Seras was standing on the beach holding a piece of cloth in her hands.

“Whatever do you mean? Just put it on.”

“Well, but... These are undergarments, aren't they?”

“It is a swimsuit—designed like swimwear passed down to us by the Heroes from Another World. Such outfits are not often seen in Neah, but are quite common in southwestern Ulza and in parts of Mira during the summer months. This is culture, Seras. *Culture.*”

“Culture...?”

“You could hardly swim with your present clothes all soaked with water, could you? You would not swim in the nude, right?”

But there's so little fabric to this outfit... Is the princess sure about this?

The Captain of the Holy Knights of Neah turned pale. She looked deeply unconvinced by the argument.

“What'cha so embarrassed about, Lady Seras?”

“Dorothy... Ah!”

Dorothy was already wearing her swimsuit.

“I’m wearing mine underneath my clothes, in fact,” said the princess.

“Princess?! What are y—”

Before Seras could finish, Cattlea pulled off her clothes with a flourish. Seras reflexively closed her eyes, and when she opened them, she found Cattlea standing before her, her chest and lower body covered by just two strips of cloth.

“No—those are undergarments, surely. They must be,” Seras insisted.

“Pfft... Oh Seras. You’re making the most wonderful faces today.”

“Please don’t tease me, princess...”

“It’s just us girls here today, so surely there is no harm, Lady Seras,” came another voice.

“Makia.”

Makia had started to look at Seras differently of late—a change that Seras saw as proof of her own growth as captain.

“She’s right, Lady Seras.”

“You too, Alda...?”

Suddenly Seras realized that she was the only one who wasn’t wearing a swimsuit.

There are all kinds of colors and sizes... But should they really be exposing themselves so much?

“Aren’t you used to wearing clothes like these, Seras? You’re always telling us that you need to concentrate on the breath of the spirits, and that’s the reason why spirit users need to show so much skin.”

“Well... You may be right...”

Everyone's eyes were turned expectantly on Seras.

Come to think of it—I might be the strange one here. Everyone else is wearing swimsuits, but I'm the only one who is still fully dressed.

"Lady Seras," said Esmeralda, placing a hand on her shoulder. "Please do not feel that you have to change if you don't wish to. But... Personally I would like to see you in a swimsuit... I just don't wish to see you *forced* to do something you don't want to do."



“Ah, you’re so freakin’ cool, Alda! You just love Lady Seras, don’tcha?” said Dorothy, teasing her.

The other knights spoke up and expressed their own love for Seras.

“Ahh...” Seras’s sigh was one of resignation. Esmeralda’s words of kind consideration—and her expressed desire to see her in a swimsuit—had moved Seras’s heart.

It seems I have a soft spot for her kindness and straightforward honesty.

“Understood. Just for today though.”

The knights rejoiced, their voices so loud that the caretakers inside the mansion who were preparing dinner jumped outside to see what all of the commotion was.

One evening, Cattlea took her Holy Knights with her on a walk around the palace. The knights that accompanied her that day were solemn and dignified in their every action, a complete switch from the day they spent relaxing and liberated by the lake south of the capital. The inhabitants of the palace were used to seeing the Holy Knights around, but even so the spectacle could be intimidating. It was a vivid demonstration of their influence at court. Their influence was now even beginning to rise across the whole of Neah itself. Their regular “parades” about the palace were Cattlea’s idea.

“The Holy Knights of Neah are the symbol of our nation.”

Cattlea Straumms

IT SEEMS THAT EVERYTHING has gone to plan with that recent offer of marriage

made to Seras.

Cattlea had recently sent a proposal to the eldest son of the house of Marquess Pulto—a man famous for his womanizing—suggesting that he and Seras should meet. Such an act would have incurred the wrath of Ortola, but Cattlea had explained her intentions to her father before making the offer.

“This is no true promise of engagement—it is a fiction, meant to improve Seras’s resistance to men. Please do not let this worry you, Father—I will be strictly supervising their meeting.”

Seras appears in public regularly and has conversations with the opposite sex. She is sometimes said to be humorless by some of the boring nobles she speaks with—but she has no problem making it through a conversation. However...she does not yet know the womanizing type.

Every man alive knew that approaching Seras would anger the emperor. Men had been imprisoned in the dungeons of Neah and flogged for doing so in the past (though Cattlea had convinced Ortola to forgo the death penalty).

Increasing the difficulty was the fact that Seras was supported by Cattlea, and that there were Holy Knights constantly surrounding her.

No man in the country is reckless enough to try and approach her at present. But not knowing anything of men is dangerous.

Cattlea had earnestly explained her reasoning to Ortola in detail, until finally he nodded, and allowed her proposal.

“H-hmph... You may be correct. There can be no guarantee that someone will always be by Seras’s side to protect her. When the time comes, she must be able to defend herself. Yes, quite so. For her sake, this might indeed be necessary. I have your word, however, that no misfortune will result from this meeting—don’t I, Cattlea?”

It was with strong insistence that nothing could go awry that Cattlea received her father’s permission—and in the end, everything had worked out fine.

Well, given the situation, there was never any chance that Seras might express an interest in the man. Not even a little. I suppose that learning about attractive, assertive, yet ultimately empty men has been instructive for her. Yet while I believe this was a success in terms of teaching her how to protect herself, I do fear that I may have pushed her perspective on the opposite sex in the wrong direction...

There was something else that was always on Cattlea's mind.

Seras Ashrain has so little sense of ego.

For the sake of another Seras would move to decisive action—but when it came to acting for herself, she mustered none of the same enthusiasm.

She places too much value on altruistic action. Sacrificing herself to save others... Is that trait of Seras's really what is best for her?

"..."

No. I don't think it is.

The worries had tormented Cattlea for so long.

Am I the one who made her like this? I should admit that it is most convenient for me that Seras is the way she is. That fact is unavoidable—and I like her soul shaped the way it is.

I like it, do I? Even when I am turning her into a killer? In riding out against those bandits, Seras has already stained her hands with blood. But at heart she is not made for such conflict... She should live a more peaceful life. She respects me, trusts me, and offers me her strength fully and without reserve.

Cattlea stared down at the palms of her hands.

For my own desires, I may have taken all "selfishness" from her. Taken even her crushes and her love. Love is the truest illogical embodiment of selfishness, after all. Yes... If there comes a day when she loves someone, then I—

I will do all that I can to support her.

I will ensure that her love comes true—that is the least I can do to atone.

So it was that Cattlea Straumms made her solemn vow.

Seras Ashrain

IN THE WINTER that year, a message came to the Holy Knights of Neah asking for a dispatch of their forces—the request was from Duke Mishel. He asked the knights to take out a group of bandits known as the “Eulogy Mirage,” a name infamous in the city. They had been terrorizing the main roads of Neah for some time, always disappearing into thin air after their evil deeds were done.

They were organized, yet formless—and no witnesses had ever even seen their leader, a man known as Mirok. He was rumored to be of heroic blood, tracing his lineage back to a former Hero from Another World. Those of heroic blood had incredible abilities and strength beyond what normal humans were capable of.

The Eulogy Mirage also had the Dead Warriors within its ranks, followers of the War God known as the Dead One. The Dead Warriors were said to be led by someone, but nobody had any information on them either.

“Our intel states that Mirok is inside that abandoned fortress,” said Seras, gazing up at the castle which was tucked inside of a cliff face. Situated as it was, the castle wasn’t visible from most angles and only came into view once they were up close. Once Cattlea had received the request for aid, she sent out the Holy Knights of Neah, two hundred strong. Seras was leading her own unit of fifty knights while the rest of their order were split into groups targeting other Eulogy Mirage targets within Mishel’s domain, one of which was the bandit group’s main base of operations.

Crushing their targets one by one would give Mirok the time to escape once

he learned of their attacks. And if he was not present at the bandit stronghold they assaulted first, Seras knew he would disappear into thin air as he always did.

That is why we have coordinated our attacks. It's the ultimate purpose of this strategy.

"They may have bases like this all over the country," said Makia.

Esmeralda was a part of Seras's unit, as was her vice-captain Makia. Their intel stated that the castle they were about to attack was the most likely location that they would find Mirok himself.

Then the standard tactic is to hit them with the strongest forces available to us.

As horses would have struggled on the slopes, Seras and her knights made their way on foot. Still, they sensed no ambush. The abandoned castle was misshapen and had been rebuilt in pieces, making it look the part of a villain's stronghold. The drawbridge seemed to be broken and was left down for them to walk across. Hiding among the shrubs and trees, Seras and her knights cautiously made their way to the entrance.

"I do not sense any human presence here."

Our mission is to capture Mirok—or kill him, if capture is not an option. The Eulogy Mirage will continue to survive as an organization unless we can show proof of his death. We are reality—and we must kill the mirage.

Seras was well aware of the scale of the bandit group that they faced.

"...Makia."

"Yes?"

"I think that the two of us should infiltrate this castle first and look around. Entering in force might cause Mirok to flee. What do you think?"

Makia adorably placed a balled fist to her chin and thought for a few moments.

“Agreed,” she answered finally.

Leaving the other members of her unit on standby, Seras and Makia infiltrated the castle through an abandoned sewage drain. Seras used her spirit of light to provide a little illumination in the gloomy, cramped sewer.

“Lady Seras.”

Makia found a stone staircase leading up, and the two of them ascended slowly, careful to conceal their presence. There was a wooden door atop the stairs. Seras turned out her light and turned lightly on the handle.

The door opened—it hadn’t been locked—and Seras peeked through the crack.

There’s nobody here. It’s quiet.

Eyes on their surroundings, Makia and Seras slipped through. They walked cautiously, backs to the wall. Seras called on the spirits within her, borrowing their strength to listen carefully to her environment.

“...”

“Let’s go this way,” Makia indicated with a finger, and they proceeded down a hallway. Seras stopped and indicated something on the floor to Makia. It was a human footprint—and a recent one, at that.

This may be a base of operations for the Eulogy Mirage after all.

Then suddenly, there was a voice.

“Welcome.”

It came from the darkness behind them—followed by several sets of footsteps.

“Makia—to me.”

Seras ran, and Makia followed. They tried to make a left down the hallway but heard more footsteps coming for them from that direction. Turning to the right, they were again met by the sound of men marching up to confront them.

We're being cut off... They're leading us down a path.

Seras and Makia came to two double doors.

If these doors are locked, we'll have no choice but to turn and fight.

But the doors opened and the two of them stumbled inside and turned the heavy lock behind them. They were only a few steps from the door when they heard the voice again.

"Welcome," it echoed from the darkness.

The two knights spun on their heels and prepared for a fight. The room seemed to be a hall of some kind—the walls and floor were piled up with dirt and muck, and there was the sharp stink of rot in the air. The space was bright, lit by the orange light of sunset pouring in through the windows.

Several men emerged from behind pillars around them.

"Now this *is* a surprise."

Seras saw the man had green hair and tanned skin as he emerged from the dark—his voice had been the one that welcomed them. He held a black-bladed longsword in each hand. There was something different about him—something in the way he stood that set him apart. The man's eyes appeared to be covered by a black blindfold that was embroidered with golden thread. As she looked closer, however, Seras saw that there were holes in the cloth to allow the man's eyes to peek through.

"You are as beautiful as the rumors say... No, *more* beautiful."

"You're..."

"Mirok," the man answered quickly. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance... Seras Ashrain, *Princess Knight*."

The men surrounding them drew their swords, and Makia tightened her grip on the handle of her own.

"Lady Seras."

“Yes. It appears...” Seras stood back to back with Makia and raised her own sword. “We are surrounded.”

Seras glared over at Mirok.

“The mirage finally shows its true form, then?” she asked him.

“Yes... Meeting you just the once will be enough. I wished to see the Princess Knight of Neah with my own two eyes. Then, with my own two hands, I’ll...heh heh. Well...*just give up.*”

It sounded like a crowd of bandits was pounding on the double doors they had entered through, trying to get in. The doors creaked on their hinges as the men outside threw themselves against them.

We were right to lock those doors.

But then Seras saw something strange. One of the bandits in the hall was locking the other entrances.

It can’t be... Does he mean to keep the rest of his men from entering this room...?

“Hah-haah! We’re gonna have the Princess Knight of Neah all to ourselves, boys! You get your turn after I’m done with her, y’hear?!”

I see... So that is his intent. That makes things easier.

“Heck, you even brought us a cute little doll as a bonus... C’mon now, surrender. Lay down your swords. We’ll play with you right until the end. It’s gonna be a long night... Heh heh. Finally—a *real treasure...*”

The man’s voice was thin, but he had real strength. There were others too—strong fighters, peering at Seras and Makia from the darkness.

But Mirok is a step above the rest, I see.

“Hey now, surrender quietly or we’ll have’ta—”

Kicking off hard against the ground, Seras lunged. Mirok lowered his center of gravity and raised his two swords.

“Nhh~... Gonna be a pain in the neck tryna beat you without killin’ you... Man, you’re only gonna get yourself hurt, y’know? Nothin’ else for it then... Time for your punishme—uh... Eh?”

—*Slash*—

A red line ran across Mirok’s throat.

“Urk.”

Seras stood before Mirok, her sword finishing its swing. She had charged the first third of the distance between them using only half her speed, and Mirok had calculated his counterattack based on that speed. But Seras closed in on him after accelerating to her full speed. Mirok’s calculations had been thrown off and he never got a chance to defend himself. With their leader playing it cool, Mirok’s men had shown no sign of moving in to assist him. They believed he would best her, as he always did...

But Seras’s abilities had been far greater than any had expected.

“Interesting. A suitable opponent for a Dead One.”

A man appeared from behind another of the pillars. His cheeks were tattooed, and he gripped a short spear in his hands.

“My name is Droogan Dead Stridt.”

“Makia, get behind me! Prepare to use Mistoe!”

Seras had whispered to Makia ahead of time that she should follow the charge against Mirok. Makia had done as she’d been asked, and now circled behind her captain.

...*Thud*...

As Mirok hit the floor, his underlings snapped back to reality.

“Overwhelm them,” said one, in a flat voice.

“You’re right.”

“Crush them with numbers.”

“Yeah.”

“A farewell gift to our leader—a *feast*.”

The men all ran at them at once.

“We’ll make you wish you were deaaad! Guh?!”

Droogan pierced the man’s neck with his spear as he ran alongside.

“Do not get in my way,” he said, drawing out the blade. “There is nothing more disrespectful than interfering in the combat of a Dead One. Come now, Princess Knight—to battle!”

From outside the room, Seras heard voices.

“Two, one...!”

Bang!

With the force of a battering ram, the men outside threw themselves against the double doors. They were almost through.

“Learnings of the academy of the sacred nation, those who seek revenge... As the Four Great Calamities loom, they who seek the sword of light—”

Makia stopped her incantation for a moment. Light continued to gather above her head, growing in size and intensity. Then the locked double doors burst open and an avalanche of underlings rushed into the hall. Seras moved one of her feet and swung her blade with perfect control to the limit of its reach.

The tip of her sword cut vertically across both of Droogan’s eyes.

“Gah... Fine work!”

He could no longer see, but Droogan charged forward nonetheless, cackling as he came.

“Spirit armor.” As her spirit armor formed, she swung at Droogan again, this time opening his throat.

“I did not think I would require my armor against an opponent such as

Mirok... But given this crowd, it's best to not take risks."

Seras stepped back again, positioning herself to shield Makia and turning her sword on the oncoming horde of men.

"If we must fight... Then you will face me in my spirit armor."

Just as Seras made her statement, a great light in the shape of a sword formed behind her head, floating in the air above Makia.

"Mistoe."

Makia activated her incantation.

"Lady Seras!"

Esmeralda and the other knights charged into the hall—Seras had instructed them to follow her and Makia into the abandoned castle if they did not return within a window of time. The Holy Knights of Neah, swords in hand, charged through the broken set of double doors. They stopped the moment they entered, speechless at what they saw.



“Th-this is...”

It was devastation—nobody was left standing but Seras and Makia. Few of those on the ground still drew breath. Seras and Makia were almost completely unharmed.

“Impossible... You did this on your own?”

“Possibly,” said Makia with a shrug. “Oh drat...my favorite armor has gotten all stained with blood.”

“I’m sorry, Makia.”

“No fault of yours, Lady Seras. I will ask the princess to order a replacement.”

Seras and the other knights left the castle. The sun had set outside, night insects chirping in the growing dark. Esmeralda had taken the heads of Mirok and Droogan, placing them in two thick leather sacks.

“I apologize... We were too late to assist, I fear.”

“No—our objective was Mirok and we needed to draw him out. That is why...”

“Lady Seras used herself as bait in order to get close to the enemy, entering with only myself for company,” said Makia. “There was a good chance that a troop of knights marching into that castle would have caused Mirok to flee, resulting in the failure of our mission.”

“I apologize for placing you in such danger, Makia. And also for the state of your armor...”

“Well, I am a little pleased you chose me to go along with you, you know?”

“Your incantation spells are very useful when facing large numbers of foes.”

“I can’t fire them off in quick succession...”

Makia was currently being carried by Esmeralda, and looked completely exhausted. Her incantation spells consumed large amounts of mana, and even a single activation left her terribly fatigued afterward.

“Well, I mean... I can still walk...”

“No. At least let me carry you to the foot of this slope, Lady Makia.”

“Oh, you are the best, Alda. Really.”

“Heh heh, thank you. Let us away, then, Lady Seras?”

“Yes.”

Seras and the other knights returned to the foot of the slope and joined back up with the Holy Knights, who had been tending their horses. They planned to return to the capital city to report their success. Once their preparations were done, they set out on the road. Esmeralda rode double with Makia ahead in the saddle, keeping Makia’s horse by the reins beside her.

“Their numbers were greater than our intel suggested, and several were clearly *more than mere bandits*,” noted Seras as they rode away.

“Yes, Lady Seras,” agreed Makia, looking back at the little mountain keep of the Eulogy Mirage.

“The princess was right.”

Hagg Mishel

DID EVERYTHING GO to plan? Did Mirok and the others pull it off?

Oh—I was so close to having it all. My son was being maneuvered into place as the next emperor, and Ortola was so lifeless and weak. In those days, he was so frail, I suppose he would have done anything I told him to.

So close! But now he has returned to life. He no longer listens to my words... He resents me, even! I feel my influence over him weakening with each passing day. Thinking back, I believe I know when the change happened... The day of that hunt. It was a cold winter afternoon, just like today.

I wondered for so long. How did it happen? How did the Holy Emperor of Neah suddenly return to life, as if some divine revelation had restored his strength?

Was it his daughter? No. She's always been by his side. Then what?

I didn't know... But when talk of the masked elf spread, I started to think. Then there was the Night of Wonders, and my suspicions hardened. But I didn't know for certain. When I investigated her position at court, she didn't seem like Ortola's favorite—rather it was the princess she accompanied.

Reports said that her time with Ortola was very limited. Did I make some sort of mistake?

...Well, perhaps Ortola will weaken once more, and return to normal. Human emotions can be surprisingly fleeting. He was never much of a man to begin with. But no matter how many years passed, he never faltered. The emperor only increased in strength...

And in the meantime, though at first I had mocked them as pranks and fancies, Cattlea's movements began to trouble me too.

"The Holy Emperor of Neah intends to appoint his daughter, Princess Cattlea, to be his successor."

The rumors made me doubt my ears! What is the matter with you, Ortola? What changed you? Was it that elf? Is she the source of your strength? The events of that night were only hearsay—I wanted proof! I cannot tolerate failure.

I must drive the holy emperor back into the depths of despair with a single blow. That is why I came to the ceremony to appoint the new Holy Knights of Neah—to see the truth with mine own eyes...

And that is where I saw it. It is the girl—there is no doubt in my mind. Seras Ashrain. She is the source of Ortola's strength. I see that she truly is in possession of a wondrous beauty.

But how I hate her.

That high elf has stolen my future. Robbed me of the shining path that awaited my son. She is the key. I will kill her and I will have the old Ortola back. Then I will be in charge and my son will be Holy Emperor of Neah. I do not think it wasteful to kill such a beautiful knight. I never had any wish to marry a beautiful wife anyway. Marriage is just an agreement between two houses. I have no desire for women. They are filthy creatures, nothing more. She may be beautiful, but I think nothing of taking her life, nor of making her mine. Oh, she is such an annoyance—truly so.

We cannot confront each other directly, though. I must remain pure. I will use my bandits to do it, those I have carefully trained and nurtured. I have been sending them into the domains of the other nobles at regular intervals to crush those who stand in my way. Once they become a big enough threat, I will conceal them in one of the castles in my domain... Yes, it is them I will use. Luckily those Holy Knights are filled with noble ideas of keeping the peace and maintaining order—they will jump at the chance to clear out a group of bandits. It will be all too easy to lure them to my lands with a request that they be dispatched. The famed Eulogy Mirage should bring her riding out of the city—Seras Ashrain.

Hagg waited in his mansion gardens, staring up at the cloudy sky above. He expected news of the Princess Knight's death to come at any moment—and he could hardly wait.

Ah. Snow.

I wonder if it will stick this year, as it did the last?

“Duke Mishel.”

“Hm?” He turned to see... “P-Princess Cattlea?”

It was Cattlea, leading her Holy Knights.

“I finally have all the proof I need.”

“Wh-what?”

“You tried to kill Seras using the Eulogy Mirage... How wicked you have been, Duke Mishel.”

“Wh-what is this nonsense? I have been waiting here for word from the Princess Knight that Mirok has been valiantly defeated in battle. You insult me with your accusation.”

“I was leaving you at large, you see.”

“At large...? What in the world are you speaking of?”

“We recently captured one of your co-conspirators and I had Seras question them. They told us the truth about you.”

“Hah hah... The babbling of some scallywag who means to destroy me, no doubt. I have many enemies, you know. You cannot possibly believe them, can you?”

“Then—how do you explain this?” Cattlea showed him a letter.

“Hmph? What is that?”

“A letter you addressed to Mirok.”

“Ridiculous.”

“Yet this handwriting matches your own...” Cattlea said, turning over the piece of paper in her hands.

Hagg seemed to have had enough, striding over to the princess with his shoulders heaving. Cattlea handed him the letter, and he snatched it from her hands.

Ridiculous. Even if I were to give Mirok orders, I would never leave evidence written in my own hand to be discovered. I would have someone else write it.

“Impossible? Th-this is my handwriting... B-but no... I have no memory of writing this!”

“It was last month.”

“Eh?”

“You wrote to Father, did you not?”

“Wha!”

She stole some of my recent letters to Ortola? Then this is...

“Th-this is a forgery! This is a serious offense, princess! Even for a royal, these kinds of tricks are unacceptable!”

“You tried to have Seras killed.”

Hagg was taken aback by the sudden force to the princess’s tone of voice.

“I believe I know the reason why...and here I have proof.”

“B-but that’s... It’s just a forgery! It’s not my handwriting!”

“I wonder how father will punish you when I tell him the *truth*.”

“Ah!”

Cattlea smiled, and her eyes narrowed like a fox.

“I have received a report by magical war pigeon from Seras and the other knights on their mission to dispatch Mirok. Everything is falling into place, it seems. I mean...it does seem as if all of the events detailed in this letter match with those that have unfolded in your domain.”

“Gah...”

“Do you believe the *current* holy emperor will believe your excuses once he learns of all this? Oh, it terrifies me to think of what he might do...”

The emperor is in love and I tried to kill the Princess Knight...the very object of his affection! If he hears of this now!

“Ugh...”

“I have been waiting for this day to come, you see? You have been a standard bearer for the anti-emperor faction in the upper nobility, of course... And I would find it most convenient to have you out of the picture. Not to mention

that this allows me to crush the Eulogy Mirage that you have been using to cause such disquiet across Neah. Two birds with one stone, one might say.”

“You...you vixen! Graaah...!”

“You should have left this a daydream—you lost because you took action.”

“Uraaah!”

Hagg drew a dagger from his pocket and charged at Cattlea. Dorothy drew her sword in reply...

...But it was the point of Cattlea’s own sword that pierced Hagg’s chest.

“Hah... How terrifying, charging at me like that. But I suppose this was self-defense... What a shame it had to come to this.”

As Hagg’s consciousness faded, the last thing he saw was Cattlea’s vixen eyes, smiling down at him.

“Your mistake was trying to take her head—Hagg Mishel.”

Seras Ashrain

“**S**ERAS.”

“Princess.”

Cattlea and Seras embraced, reunited at the capital after Seras’s return from Duke Mishel’s domain. She had heard rumors that the princess journeyed there also for a time.

“...Princess?”

Something’s wrong.

Cattlea’s face was buried in her chest, unmoving.

She’s trembling.

“Is something the matter?”

“I received your magical war pigeon... I knew you had not come to harm, and yet... You did so well to make it back here safely.”

They were words of gratitude.

She has been worried about me! I do not often see her grow so emotional.

“Yes. I have returned safely as always.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing, princess?” Seras gave her a bitter smile.

She apologizes to me like this sometimes, completely out of the blue.

Cattlea never explained why she was saying sorry, so there were not even lies for Seras to analyze. Seras did not press her on the matter—she never did.

It’s snowing.

Seras gently squeezed Cattlea back. The Holy Knights of Neah watched on—Makia, Esmeralda, and Dorothy.

“I’m here with you—so is everyone else,” said Seras.

“Yes.”

“We are your knights, princess... Our swords are yours.”

That day the Holy Knights drew themselves up in mounted formation under the cloudy sky. In the distance they saw the horde of golden-eyed monsters, roaring as they rushed toward them. The night before they had flooded out of the underground ruins within Neah’s borders, and the Holy Emperor Ortola had ordered them to be annihilated, officially sending word to all of the noble houses to rally their troops.

Seras Ashrain was mounted on her white steed and was wearing her Holy Knight armor. She had just finished delivering a resounding speech to her

troops as Captain of the Holy Knights of Neah and they were ready to fight. The monsters charged with complete abandon—no strategy or forethought. In their path stood a city filled with citizens of Neah.

Citizens who we must guard from harm—those whom Cattlea wishes to protect. I wish to protect them too.

Rearing up on her white steed and causing the mount to whinny loudly, Seras raised her sword.

“Warriors of Neah, lend me your swords! Protect your people!”

At the cry of their captain, the soldiers and knights behind her picked up the call. Suddenly the thick clouds above them shifted, and countless streams of white sunlight poured down to the earth below. Seras leveled her blade at the golden-eyed horde—and gave the order.

“Charge!”

I swing my sword to guard those in need of protection.

One month later, the Goddess of Alion made her return to the public stage after so long hiding herself away.

“I believe it is almost time. I have detected a sign,” she announced.

The words were unsettling.

Almost time... The Goddess must be referring to the coming of the root of all evil, must she not?

As the most plausible interpretation, the unsettling rumor spread.

“I wish to meet with the Princess Knight of Neah. I have heard much about her,” came another of the Goddess’s pronouncements.

The house of the Holy Emperor of Neah had risen in power and influence within their nation—the anti-emperor faction nobles surrendered their armies and their forces were reorganized under the royal banner.

It was that very year that the attack came. The invasion by the Empire of Bakoss and their Strongest Man in the World began.

Epilogue

“**W**HEN THE BAKOSSI INVASION came, there were those who argued strongly that we should take up our swords and fight, the captain of the emperor’s personal guard chief among them. As Captain of the Holy Knights of Neah, I indicated my willingness to fight on to the very end, and yet... When the messenger came with news of the Strongest Man in the World, his majesty was so panicked that he ordered a full surrender.”

Seras looked down at her feet.

“After that, the princess... Her decision was incredibly swift. She asked me to flee the palace—it appeared that she had been preparing for such an event and had plans in place to spirit me away. I didn’t accept her decision. She wished for me to escape on my own—leaving her, the emperor, and the Holy Knights of Neah in the palace. I insisted that I was staying of course, but... In the end I was left with only one choice remaining to me.”

Seras smiled, a look of resignation on her face.

“I have to hand it to the princess, heh heh... I could never beat her. She told me that if I remained, she would take her own life. If I stayed by her side, I would be killing her... That is what the princess said to me. Every word she spoke was *the truth*—she was serious... And when I thought of the princess taking her own life, I...I could not bear it. It was what she wished of me and so I accepted, and fled the capital alone.”

After her escape, Seras changed her face using her spirit of light. She then dressed in the garb of the Holy Order of the Purge, and made her way to Yonato taking the southern route through Ulza as Cattlea had suggested. In the aftermath of the invasion, however, the large number of pursuers sent after her became such a nuisance that she found she was unable to travel for some time. She stayed where she was, stuck in place and unable to leave Neah’s borders...

Though it took her a long time, Seras managed to make it into Ulza. As she left

Neahan territory, she found herself able to travel faster... But then she was confronted by the White Walkers, the four famous and incredibly strong mercenaries who stood in her way. Seras tried to escape them, moving west as she went.

“And that’s when you met me, huh?”

“Yes, that is correct.”

Seras and I were at camp, our tent surrounded by the army that was marching to destroy the goddess.

According to the reports, we’re going to run up against Vicius’s eucharist army tomorrow. It’s not like this is our last night together or anything...but I wanted to spend some time with Seras before our showdown with the Goddess. Just the two of us. I need to get this time in while I can.

I’d asked Seras to tell me about her past, and she had wanted to speak about it, in fact.

Well actually she asked if “I wouldn’t mind listening” I guess... She’s never very direct about these things...

We sat together on the edge of the bed where we’d decided to sleep together that night. I’d been listening to Seras talk about her past since dinner, and it was likely that most of the camp was asleep outside.

It’s getting to that time, after all.

“I apologize... I don’t expect that my stories were very interesting, but... Just having you listen to me speak like this, I feel as if a weight has been lifted from my shoulders.”

“I always said you could talk to me any time you felt like it. And hey, it wasn’t boring—I was happy to hear your stories.”

“Happy?”

“Glad to get to know you better.”

“I see.”

Perhaps Seras is a bit different now from when she was Captain of the Holy Knights of Neah. She blushes easier. Didn't Makia say something, back at the White Citadel of Protection, about how little emotion Seras used to show?

“Ahem, I...” Her cheeks red, Seras looked down at her exposed lap.

“Someday I...I'd like to ask you about your past too, Sir Too-ka...”

“Sure. I'll tell you anything you want to know, Seras.”

“A-anything...?”

“What are you thinking about asking me? What are you imagining I've done?”

“I-I'm sorry.” The former Captain of the Holy Knights of Neah shrank a little, drawing in her shoulders.

“You apologize too much, I've said it before. Even in your stories you're saying sorry.”

I took her by the shoulders and drew her closer.

“Ah!” Seras's eyes widened a little, then she smiled at me and closed her eyes. I felt her shoulders relax.

“I'm sorry... Ah... Heh heh, I did it again, didn't I...”

She leaned in against me, her head resting on my chest. I looked down to see her eyes upturned a little, her head facing my right shoulder. I kept her held close.

“You've always been amazing, even back then.”

“...I am honored that you compliment me so.”

The old Seras—the one before she met me... All I know about her is what she's told me, her own subjective opinions. I'm sure the people around her had all kinds of thoughts and emotions of their own... Especially Cattlea, the princess. I've got no way of knowing what was really going on inside of her head.

“But... You really do push yourself too hard to help other people.”

“Do I?”

“It’s weird, but it’s like... You told me your story, but you’re not a character in it. That’s how it seemed.”

“Not a character...”

“I told you back at Erika’s place, didn’t I? You should be more selfish.”

“I could? That would be okay?”

“Sure it would.”

“Ahem... But now, I...” Seras shifted, placing her hand on my chest and moving her body in closer to mine. Her face was now in front of mine, blushing—her pupils faintly trembling.

“Eh?”

“I think I am selfish now... More than I used to be.”

“You think?”

“Y-yes...”

“Do you remember what I told you in that cave, when we were sheltering from the rain after the fight against Ashint? Since you’re coming along on this journey of revenge, I said I’d do you a favor, right?”

“Y-yes... But I asked that we save the princess at the White Citadel of Protection, and you agreed...”

“What? You figured that one thing made us even?”

“Y-yes, that was my intent. I-in any case...you also granted me the favor of listening to my stories...”

“The former I did for the princess, not for you. And I *wanted* to hear your stories. That wasn’t you being selfish. I don’t think so, at least.”

“Is that so...? I feel as if those were both requests of mine...” Seras looked up

at me, a dubious look in her eyes.

“I said neither of them counted, so they didn’t count.”

“Then—what should I do?”

I couldn’t help but laugh at that. “I told you, anything you want from me. So long as it’s something I’m capable of doing.”

“But you’ve already done so much for me, Sir Too-ka...”

“I did all that because I wanted to, of my own volition. You didn’t ask me for any of it.”

“Y-you really are cornering me now... *Impressive*, my master...”

Seras looked troubled—she lowered her head and thought for a few moments.

“Ah, then—Gah!”

She raised her head so fast it collided with my chin.

“Oof!”

“Wa-ah! I’m sorry, Sir Too-ka!”

I rubbed my jaw.

“It’s fine—so what’s the favor? You think of something?”

“Ahem... When your journey of revenge is over...”

“Yeah?”

“Might I change the way I address you...?”

“What, my name? I feel like we’ve tried this once before...”

“I could switch from calling you Sir Too-ka to—well? Err...”

“Just Too-ka’s fine.”

“N-no! That’s too much! Well... How about...Mr. Too-ka?”

“Look—I think you might be getting *more* formal there. I guess Lis used to call

me that, so it's not too reserved, but still..."

"Th-th-this is hard, isn't it."

"Anyway, I won't allow it."

"Eh?"

"You can't use your favor on changing what you call me. That's not special enough."

"It is special to me, though."

"Nope."

"..."

Seras was still looking down, the top of her head pressed against my chest. For a while she just thought in silence.

"Th-then..."

"Yeah?"

Sounds like she's thought of something.

"M—"

"M?"

"Marry me."

First and foremost, Seras's voice was incredible—thin as a mosquito's drone.

Marriage, huh?

"Ahem... It can last from when our fight is over...until the moment that you return to your old world, Sir Too-ka. ...Just for a while."

I guess she's forgotten that time back in Mira when I said I'd be by her side until the very end, huh?

"Sure."

"Of course not... I mean, this is all so sudden... I'm so sorry for asking. Please,

forget I said anyth—" Seras's eyes shot up to mine, though she didn't collide with my chin this time. "Eh?!"

"I'm fine with that. If it's what you want, Seras."

"Huh—ehm, m-marr..."

"Marriage? Anyway..."

I smiled—*from the heart this time, I think.*

"You've finally said something selfish—something just for you."

"Ah...y-yes...I think... I think it's s-selfish of me... Yes..."

"Then it's settled, right?"

Seras brought herself in closer, her eyes wide with all the emotions rushing through her. Her nose was almost touching mine.

"Y-yes—it's settled."

We haven't actually admitted to each other that we're in a relationship yet. I feel like we're skipping over a bunch of steps here... But hey, looking back, I figure it'd be hard to argue we're not in a relationship.



I know she likes me, and I like her—we've been over that so many times now.

"Ah—" Seras finally seemed to notice how close our faces were to each other.
"I-I'm sorr—"

"Don't be."

I pulled her toward me as she tried to draw away—and pressed my lips to hers. I felt the tension in her body relax, offering me the chance to take the lead.

"..."

As Seras's lips met mine—I realized something too.

There's a rational part of me that's still in here... Telling me that my journey of revenge isn't over yet. Calling to me, clear-eyed and focused. He's never going away—not until I finish this and get my vengeance.

Yeah, that's right.

...Damn it. We're right before the showdown. What am I doing getting soft? But hey... Seras has finally been selfish with me—said it of her own volition, too. That should be enough for one day.

It was the next morning—our clash with the eucharist army was fast approaching. Preparations for the fight to come were going on all throughout the camp and while the army had been packed and ready to do battle the day before, there were still many soldiers hurrying this way and that.

"Good morning, Lord of the Flies."

"Oh, it's you. Morning."

I was greeted by Cattlea Straumms, mounted atop her horse. I wasn't wearing my mask.

"Are you looking for Seras? I think she's..."

“No, I spoke with her earlier this morning,” Cattlea interrupted me. “I am here to speak with you now.”

“With me?”

“I wish to thank you, Too-ka Mimori.”

“For what reason? I can think of a few”

“Heh heh, you are quite the interesting gentleman. I don’t believe I have ever had anyone of your temperament by my side.”

“Thanks, I guess.”

“I wish to thank you for Seras.” She sounded sincere. “I believe that thanks to your help, she has finally been able to find herself.”

Cattlea’s eyes narrowed, and she looked off into the distance.

I suppose she’s seeing the past.

“I am the one who always stood in the way of her finding herself... I also believe her mother must have had some hand in that, too. But as someone who used Seras for their own ends—I am very much to blame.”

Sounds like Seras has talked to her a bit about her time in Hylings now that her memories have come back. I see... Maybe the way her parents raised her has a lot to do with the way she is now.

“I intend on continuing to atone for my actions. I will. But I fear that if she had never met you—or if she had met anybody else—she would never have become who she is today.”

The two of us looked off in the same direction.

“...You might have used Seras for your own purposes at some point, that much is true. But everything you did was to protect her, right?” I said.

“Hm.”

“You didn’t have any choice, did you... Am I wrong?”

“...But still, I...”

“I should be the one thanking you.”

This princess—she wanted to protect her... The new little sister she came across one day in that winter forest. The sister she’d always wanted.

“You did so well to protect Seras—thank you, Cattlea Straumms, from the bottom of my heart.”

“Y-you...”

As emotion overwhelmed her, the words seemed to stick in Cattlea’s throat. I stayed silent, not looking over at her. Someone came to call for me but sensed that the time wasn’t right and left in silence. After a time, Cattlea stopped faintly sniffing and spoke again.

“I feel as if you have lifted some of the burden from my shoulders.” She sounded almost cheerful.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Goodbye then, Too-ka Mimori.” Cattlea turned her mount to leave.

“Sure.”

“I’m looking forward to seeing the children you two will have together, you know?”

Then she was gone.

“...”

Seras.

She didn’t tell the princess about what happened last night, did she?

“The eucharist army is approaching.”

The reports spread through our camp like waves, ripples of unease among the

ranks.

“Sir Too-ka.”

It finally begins.

“I will continue to serve as your knight until this war is done—please, do not worry about that.”

“Sure. I’ll be counting on you.”

Together—

“Let’s go, Seras.”

To this journey’s end.

“I will accompany you,” said the Princess Knight, her voice clear. “My master.”



Afterword

I'VE BEEN THINKING for a long time about how to handle the story of Seras's past. But as I wrote in the author's note for the previous volume, if this print version of the story is going to be the "Tale of Too-ka and Seras," then I knew I should write about it at some point. For those reasons, I'm happy to be able to get this book out into the world.

Right then, you might call this story a tale of how Seras Ashrain regained her ability to be "selfish," I suppose. With a whole volume's space to work with, I also got to add color to lots of other scenes too—Seras's banishment from the high elf nation of Hylings, her time as a Holy Knight of Neah in the middle, and so on.

This book's main story has also been interspersed with conversations with Too-ka, and we ultimately return to his perspective in the epilogue right at the end. And well... It looks like Too-ka and Seras have made a promise to each other. I hope you'll continue to watch over them until the very end of their story.

I'd like to make some acknowledgments now. Thank you to my editor O-sama for all of your work—I know how busy (truly, incredibly busy) you are. KWKM-sama, thank you for all of the many and varied Seras illustrations in this volume (Cattlea and Makia look wonderful too). Uchiuchi Keyaki-sama, Uyoshi Sho-sama, I am always motivated by receiving your drafts for chapters of the manga edition of this story. I'd also like to take this opportunity to thank everyone else who has helped to get this present work into print.

Thank you to all of my online readers, who have continued to support me during this period of infrequent updates—I hope you have enjoyed this Seras side story. It is also thanks to all of you who have continued buying these books that this work is going to be getting an anime adaption. It is more luck than I deserve, and I am unbelievably happy that this is happening. I hope that we will

meet again in the next volume, when we truly launch ourselves into the final showdown between Too-ka and the goddess.

—Kaoru Shinozaki



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