

ASCENDANCE OF A BOOKWORM

I'll do anything to
become a librarian!

Part 5 Avatar of a Goddess
Vol.9

Author: **Miya Kazuki**

Illustrator: **You Shiina**



ASCENDANCE OF A BOOKWORM

I'll do anything to
become a librarian!

Part 5 Avatar of a Goddess
Vol.9

Author: **Miya Kazuki**

Illustrator: **You Shiina**







Cast of Characters

Summary of Part Four:

At the Royal Academy, Rozemyne has become both a problem child and a top-ranking student. She took ownership of the library's magic tools through a blessing, played ditter against a greater duchy, advised royalty on matters of romance, defeated a Darkness feybeast, and healed the Ehrenfest gathering spot, among so many other things. Meanwhile, at the guidance of the Sovereign knight commander, who knows that Ferdinand is a seed of Adalgisa, the king orders Ferdinand to leave Ehrenfest and marry into another duchy. Now, Ferdinand must endure a new life in Ahrensbach.



Wilfried

Sylvester's son, Rozemyne's older brother, and a fourth-year.



Rozemyne

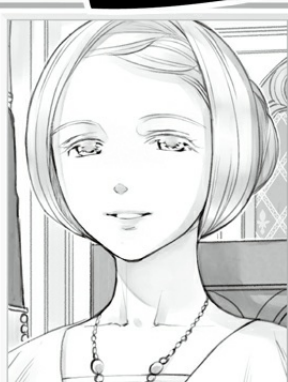
The protagonist. Divine intervention means she now looks old enough to have come of age, but she's the same on the inside and will do anything to read books. A fourth-year.

Ehrenfest's Archducal Family



Sylvester

The archduke of Ehrenfest. He adopted Rozemyne, making him her adoptive father.



Florencia

Sylvester's wife and the mother of his three children. Rozemyne's adoptive mother.

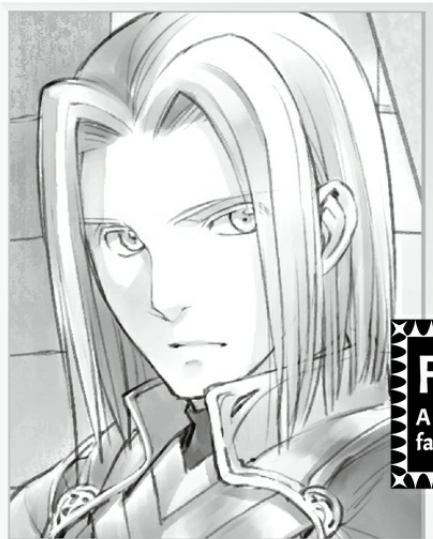


Charlotte

Sylvester's daughter, Rozemyne's little sister, and a third-year.

Melchior

Sylvester's son. Rozemyne's little brother.



Bonifatius

Sylvester's uncle, Karstedt's father, and Rozemyne's grandfather.

Ferdinand

A member of the Ehrenfest archducal family. Sent to Ahrensbach by royal decree.

**Ottilie**

Head attendant.
Hartmut's mother.

**Bertilde**

A first-year apprentice
archattendant.
Brunhilde's little sister.

**Lieseleta**

Angelica's little sister
and a medattendant.

**Gretia**

A fifth-year apprentice
medattendant. Gave her
name.

**Hartmut**

An archscholar and
the new High Priest.
Ottilie's son.

**Clarissa**

An archscholar.
Engaged to Hartmut.

**Roderick**

A fourth-year apprentice
medscholar. Gave his
name.

**Philine**

A fourth-year apprentice
layscholar.

**Cornelius**

Karstedt's son and an
archknight.

**Leonore**

An archknight.
Engaged to Cornelius.

**Angelica**

Lieseleta's older sister
and a medknight.

**Matthias**

A medknight. Gave his
name.

**Laurenz**

A fifth-year apprentice
medknight. Gave his
name.

**Judithe**

A fifth-year apprentice
medknight.

**Damuel**

A layknight.

Rozemyne's Retainers

Ehrenfest's Nobility

Brunhilde

.....Rozemyne's former retainer and Sylvester's fiancée.

Rihyarda

.....Sylvester's archattendant.

Karstedt

.....Ehrenfest's knight commander. Rozemyne's noble father.

Elvira

.....Karstedt's first wife. Rozemyne's noble mother.

Eckhart

.....Ferdinand's guard knight. Karstedt's son.

Justus

.....Ferdinand's attendant and scholar. Rihyarda's son.

Lasfam

.....Ferdinand's layattendant.

Leberecht

.....Florenzia's archscholar. Hartmut's father.

Barthold

.....Wilfried's name-sworn medscholar.

Cassandra

.....Charlotte's name-sworn medattendant.

Muriella

.....Elvira's name-sworn medscholar.

Veronica

.....Sylvester's mother. Currently detained.

Ahrensbach's Nobility

Georgine

.....Ahrensbach's first wife. Sylvester's older sister.

Detlinde

.....A member of the Ahrensbach archducal family.
Georgine's daughter.

Letizia

.....A member of the Ahrensbach archducal family.

Strahl

.....Ferdinand's archknight. Formerly the knight commander.

Sergius

.....Ferdinand's attendant.

Raimund

.....A fifth-year apprentice medscholar.

Fairseele

.....Letizia's apprentice archattendant. Strahl's daughter.

Fraularm

.....An archnoble. Formerly a professor of the Royal Academy.

Grausam

.....A scholar who gave his name to Georgine.
Formerly Giebe Gerlach.

Temple Associates

Fran.....In charge of the High Bishop's chambers.

Zahm.....In charge of the High Bishop's chambers.

Monika.....A cook who helps in the High Bishop's chambers.

Nicola.....A cook who helps in the High Bishop's chambers.

Wilma.....In charge of the orphanage.

Others

Gervasio.....The king of Lanzenave.

Leonzio.....An envoy from Lanzenave.

Nobles from Other Duchies

Sigiswald.....The Sovereignty's first prince. The next Zent.

Raublut.....The Sovereign knight commander.

Rauffen.....Dunkelfelger's dormitory supervisor.

Hirschur.....Ehrenfest's dormitory supervisor.

Solange.....A medlibrarian of the Royal Academy.

Schwartz.....A library magic tool.

Weiss.....A library magic tool.

Sieglinde.....Dunkelfelger's first wife.

Hannelore.....A fourth-year archduke candidate from Dunkelfelger.

Heissshitze.....An archknight from Dunkelfelger.

Lower City Associates

Gunther.....Myne's dad.

Tuuli.....Myne's older sister and personal hairpin craftswoman.

Corinna.....A seamstress for the Gilberta Company.

Leckle.....A soldier at the west gate.

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Characters](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Gerlach's Front Line](#)

[Confronting Grausam](#)

[Victory and Return](#)

[Everyone's Tales of Heroism](#)

[Celebratory Feast](#)

[A Sleepless Night](#)

[Late-Night Tea Party](#)

[Fitting](#)

[Following My Heart](#)

[Lunch Meeting](#)

[The Temple and Melchior's Report](#)

[The West Gate and Groundwork](#)

[To Ahrensbach](#)

[Making the Bible](#)

[Dunkelfelger's Request](#)

[Dunkelfelger's Response](#)

[Prayers and the Departure](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[The Defense of Ehrenfest \(Second Half\)](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Map of Ehrenfest Duchy](#)

[Map of Yurgenschmidt](#)

[A Comfy Life with My Family by You Shiina](#)

[Bonus High Resolution Illustrations](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

Prologue

Gong... Gong...

Inside his canopied wagon, Grausam grimaced at the chimes signaling third bell. Georgine's boat was due to arrive in Ehrenfest at any moment, but he was running late; Gerlach's summer estate was just coming into view.

"Lord Bonifatius certainly likes to interfere..." Grausam muttered, recalling the events that had put him behind schedule in the first place. He had stashed several magic tools within the province's management cabins, which the giebe and their family used during their patrols. But when he had gone to confirm that his tools were still there, he had discovered numerous traps lying in wait. Dismantling them had delayed him, and amid his frustrations, he had theorized who was responsible.

I managed to retrieve some useful traps and hidden magic tools, but now there's so much pressure on me. Am I going to make it in time?

As for how Bonifatius had known where the cabins were, Grausam knew without a shadow of a doubt that his son Matthias was to blame. He had told the boy about only a few of his hiding spots, and every single one of them had been raided. Moreover, Matthias was the only one who had missed the winter purge due to attending the Royal Academy. Rather than being swiftly executed as a traitor by association, he must have escaped punishment by leaking intelligence to the archduke.

"I will need to be somewhat wary of that..." Grausam added.

Matthias had not been of age at the time of the purge, nor had he sworn his name to Georgine. For those reasons, he hadn't been told anything important—and as he'd only ever met the woman once, Grausam doubted the boy knew anything of consequence. Under normal circumstances, that would have been enough to assuage his fears, but now Bonifatius was involved. The man had an uncanny talent for discovering the truth through instinct alone, so who knew what he might unveil with Matthias by his side?

“For days, we have kept Lord Bonifatius running around Illgner and Griebel. Now we draw him here. I will not allow him to stand in Lady Georgine’s way.”

As he made his declaration, Grausam retrieved a magic tool from his breast pocket. It was paired with another tool elsewhere and served a very simple purpose: one could use mana to change its color, which would cause its counterpart to change color to match. Grausam had created it from the tools children used to practice channeling their mana, and while its function was limited, it was a fine way of conveying the success of an operation when wrapped in silver cloth and unable to rely on ordonnances.

Grausam’s feystone had originally been yellow. Now it was green.

“Lady Georgine met with my contact, then...” Grausam said. The man in question had gained access to the city of Ehrenfest since winter, so it was good to know they were together.

To help her remain undetected, Georgine had elected to travel with no more than two coconspirators: her attendant, Seltier; and a merchant with the Devouring. She was too vulnerable to resist capture, so her signal meant she must not have been detected. Their various ploys had worked, including their decision to employ two ships arriving at third and fourth bell, respectively.

Grausam removed the silver cloth he was wearing and channeled mana into his magic tool, returning its color to yellow. This would convey both that he had received her signal and that he had yet to reach the Gerlach estate.

“Well, now that Lady Georgine has arrived, I suppose I should get to work...”

Arrangements had already been made for knights of Old Werkestock to attack Giebe Gerlach’s estate; they were merely awaiting the arrival of a pre-written confirmation. The giebe would inform the aub that he, like Illgner and Griebel, was under attack, making for the perfect distraction. Ehrenfest wouldn’t expect Georgine to target their foundation through their temple, of all places.

“Hmm... They can follow instructions, at least...”

Grausam watched the knights flying out of the giebe’s estate. Highbeasts took to the sky in short order, each going as fast as their rider could make them. It

was only natural that they were in such a hurry—from up above, they would see an army sporting Ahrensbach capes marching straight toward them.

“Take a right,” Grausam instructed his driver—a Devouring soldier bound to him by a submission contract. They were inside a wagon delivering food to the estate, hoping to take advantage of a secret entrance around the back.

So they did assign guards...

Grausam spotted three men stationed near the hidden entrance: a knight and two servants, from the look of things. They had presumably been tasked with checking anyone who approached the back of the estate.

“Stop!” the knight called—entirely as expected. “Your wagon must now be inspected.”

At once, the trio got to work; the knight asked the driver what store he belonged to while the two servants started inspecting their luggage. The knight seemed entirely unaware that there was an army approaching the estate and that his compatriots had just departed. He must not have been able to see them from where he was stationed.

The war started days ago, yet this is the best they can do...?

The new Giebe Gerlach—Grausam’s replacement—evidently knew nothing of warfare. There were plenty of openings to be exploited as a result, but even then, Grausam couldn’t stand the thought of someone looking down on him.

Poison should do the trick.

Grausam couldn’t risk the knight sending out an ordonnanz before he had a chance to attack. He exchanged a look with his driver, then quickly flexed his index finger, spurring the man to pull the string attached to one end of a silver tube. There was a small *pop* as a cloud of white dust shot into the air.

“Ngh...!”

For a few moments, the knight groaned and grunted, clearly in pain. Then he turned into a feystone.

Grausam’s eyes widened in surprise; to his knowledge, the poison should have worked instantly. Had it taken so long because of the cloth covering the

man's mouth, or had the powder simply dissipated in the outside air? He regretted that he hadn't had much time to experiment with the poison during his stay at Georgine's villa in Ahrensbach.

"H-How on...?"

"He vanished into thin air!"

The servants cried out in shock; from their perspective, the knight had simply disappeared. Grausam killed one of them while his driver dispatched the other—an easy enough task, considering their targets were commoners, but now they would need to dispose of the bodies. They couldn't risk someone discovering them before their attack on the estate was complete.

Commoners are rarely useful.

Turning his attention away from the dead servants, Grausam took the late knight's feystone in his prosthetic black hand and started to drain it. The man must have drunk a rejuvenation potion in preparation for the coming battle; his stone was practically full of mana.

Grausam continued to empty the feystone until there was no more mana for him to take, then crushed the worthless vessel in his hand. As he brushed away the fragments of stone that clung to his fingers, he turned to his Devouring soldier, who was quietly awaiting his next command.

"You will not be able to pass the barrier beyond this point. Get rid of the corpses, then come back and stay here until you receive further orders."

Grausam watched the driver move the bodies into the wagon and leave, then went to the hidden entrance with his bag of magic tools and potions. There was a magic barrier not far into said hidden entrance. Under normal circumstances, only the giebe, his blood relatives, and members of the archducal family would be able to enter, but Grausam slipped through using his silver cloth. Suffice to say, Lanzenave's invention had a variety of useful applications.

Once he'd made it through the barrier, the rest was trivial. Grausam made his way into the giebe's estate without anyone seeing him.

"No obstacles of note, I see..."

Grausam's estate would normally have been reconstructed following his removal as Giebe Gerlach, but Aub Ehrenfest must not have had the mana to spare. The layout was exactly the same, which made reaching the estate's foundation a very simple task.

It was a known fact that only an estate's giebe could enter the room containing its foundation, but again, Lanzenave's silver cloth made short work of the problem. Grausam stepped inside, removed the cloth, and started channeling mana into the foundation. He was following the instructions Georgine had given him to reclaim ownership of the estate.

Once the foundation was his again, Grausam made the barrier protecting the estate as strong as it could get. This would prevent anyone but him, his relatives, and the archducal family from entering. The knights, attendants, and servants of Gerlach would have no trouble *leaving* the estate, but once they were outside the barrier, they wouldn't be able to pass back through it.

Now we await Lord Bonifatius, who should make his way here upon learning of the assault on Gerlach.

Nobody in the estate posed a threat to Grausam. The knights had all taken to the air, and even when Bonifatius arrived, the barrier would prevent his troops from entering with him. He nodded, satisfied with the great step he had just taken toward victory. Then he took out his communication magic tool and checked its color. The feystone had turned red.

"Hmm... Lady Georgine has infiltrated the temple. I shall inform her of my status in turn."

He changed the color back to green, indicating that he had gained access to the estate and stolen its foundation.

Now I just need to buy her time by distracting Ehrenfest's Order.

Keeping his current objectives in mind, Grausam left the room containing his foundation. He used secret paths to traverse the estate, then paused outside an exit connected to the giebe's office. Snippets of a male voice leaked through the door.

"Reinforcements from... are arriving this afternoon. Gerlach's knights...

endure.”

The voice must have belonged to the new giebe. He had called for—and was evidently expecting to receive—reinforcements of some kind, though Grausam couldn’t make out how many or where they were coming from.

I would assume he means Lord Bonifatius, who must be making his way here from Illgner.

Grausam placed his right hand on the door, which he unlocked with his mana and opened ever so slightly. The new giebe hadn’t even replaced the decoration covering it, from what he could tell; the same tapestry was visible through the crack.

“The knights are putting their all into protecting Gerlach,” the giebe continued, his voice much clearer now. “I want you all to evacuate the servants. I shall remain here and wait patiently.”

“But if we leave you on your own—”

“This room has hidden passages that can be used only by the giebe and their family. It is better that I remain here alone so that I can use them to escape if necessary.”

Grausam heard the patter of hesitant footsteps as the attendants and scholars ordered to evacuate took their leave. They faded into the distance, leaving the room in complete silence.

How many are still inside, I wonder...?

If the giebe was with others, using instant-death poison would prevent them from summoning reinforcements. But if the giebe was alone, Grausam wanted to keep him alive. Letting the man die would cause any ordonnanzes meant for him to fail, which would only arouse suspicion.

Now, which is it?

Grausam held poison in one hand and rope in the other. He was ready to react to either situation... but for now, he waited.

The giebe heaved a heavy sigh. “But when in the afternoon did they mean...? If our reinforcements don’t arrive soon, our knights won’t live to see them...”

A ruling noble would never speak so honestly or show weakness in the presence of others, which meant he must have been alone. Grausam stealthily opened the secret door, and the air that flowed through it caused the tapestry to move.

“Hm?”

A few quiet footfalls revealed the man’s suspicions. He must have been approaching the tapestry—and that was when Grausam struck. He leapt into the room at once, beating down and immediately restraining his target.

“Huh?! Y-You... How did you get there?!” the giebe cried, his eyes wide with terror.

Grausam said nothing in response; he grabbed the man’s jaw, wrenched it open, and poured a potion down his throat.

“Ngh! Gah...!”

Even while restrained, the man flailed about in agony. The potion had eaten away at his throat to the point that he could no longer speak.

“You wish to know how I used the estate’s hidden passageways?” Grausam said at last. “I simply stole its foundation. Good work keeping this place running while I was gone.”

The man was now a giebe in name only. His mouth opened and closed as he tried to speak, but the most that came out was a faint, strained whistle.

Paying his captive no mind, Grausam took out the magic letters he had prepared in advance and sent them on their way. They were addressed to the Werkestock giebes lying in wait in the forest and provided a brief summary of the situation: he had conquered the Gerlach estate and needed them to start draining the province’s mana into their chalices.

This should be enough to lure Lord Bonifatius.

Bonifatius had almost certainly realized that the knights and giebes attacking Illgner and Griebel were mere fodder meant to thin out Ehrenfest’s forces. It was good, then, that he took his duties as an archducal family member so seriously. He would never abandon a province on the verge of collapse, so there

was no reason to believe he would ignore Gerlach's call for aid.

I will need to be cautious, though. He has a tendency to act in the most incomprehensible ways.

According to field reports, Bonifatius had appeared in Illgner within a day of receiving word of the invasion there. He was like an omnipresent specter capable of materializing anywhere at any time. No matter how quickly he moved, however, there was no chance of him making it back to the city of Ehrenfest in time to stop Georgine; he had rushed to Illgner that morning and would surely devote his attention to liberating Gerlach.

I will not allow that nuisance to keep getting in our way.

Grausam clenched the black prosthesis replacing his left hand, which he had ended up losing that accursed winter. He had devoted so much time to making it specifically so that he could take down Bonifatius.

Georgine had driven the previous Aub Ahrensbach up the towering stairway and abused a royal decree to drag Ferdinand away from Ehrenfest. She had used the death of her husband as an excuse to hide away in her villa, securing herself the time and privacy she had needed to execute her plans. But then, on the day she had intended to use the key to the High Bishop's bible to obtain Ehrenfest's foundation, Bonifatius had suddenly raided Grausam's estate. The man's instincts, initiative, and combat potential made him the most formidable opponent one could ask for.

But he wasn't the only threat we had to be wary of.

On countless occasions since Georgine had discovered that Ehrenfest's foundation was hidden within its temple, Grausam and his accomplices had attempted to sneak inside. But with Rozemyne, the archduke's adopted daughter, as the High Bishop and Ferdinand, another of Grausam's unbearable adversaries, having returned to the archducal family without giving up his role as the High Priest, this had not been easy by any means. The pair had kept their guard knights with them at all times, and only a select few nobles had received permission to enter the temple.

In the past, gaining access to the High Bishop's chambers would have been as simple as expressing an interest in flower offerings, but Ferdinand had made

them one of his duties as the High Priest. In his words, there was no good reason for a mere child to oversee requests of such an unsavory nature. Even when the printing industry had required scholars to start visiting the temple, Ferdinand and the Leisegangs had gone to great lengths to vet the participating nobles, ensuring that nobody from Grausam's circles was granted access. To make matters worse, the blue priests living in the temple had needed to get the High Priest's approval for everything. There really hadn't been any openings to exploit.

There is still time, however.

Ehrenfest must not have noticed that the key to the bible would open the way to their duchy's foundation. If they had, they would never have made a commoner child their High Bishop. Thus, Grausam's group had waited for a moment when both Rozemyne and Ferdinand were absent from the temple. Then they had infiltrated the temple, replaced the High Bishop's bible and its key with duplicates to keep their theft from being noticed, and swiftly dealt with the gray priests who had seen them.

And yet, somehow, Ferdinand had deduced that someone had invaded the High Bishop's chambers, that the bible had been replaced, and even that Gloria had played a hand in it all. Most shocking of all, he had barged into the Dahldolf estate and discovered the bible that had been moved to the castle.

How is one supposed to plan around that?

They had managed to deliver the key to Georgine but failed to pin the theft of the bible on Ferdinand, which would have allowed them to drive Sylvester into a corner. Even when Ferdinand was living in Ahrensbach, they hadn't succeeded in any of their attempts to coax him into inaction or get him under Georgine's control.

But with Lady Letizia's poison, we were finally able to dispose of him. His interference will trouble us no longer.

Ferdinand was dead, and Bonifatius had been lured to the southernmost provinces. All relevant threats had therefore been accounted for.

Georgine's plan was advancing unhindered... yet Grausam struggled to relax. He couldn't shake the feeling he was missing something of critical importance.

When he looked back, every single one of their past plans had proceeded without issue, only to fail out of nowhere as the result of unforeseen and sometimes even incomprehensible obstructions.

I gain nothing by fretting. Instead, I should come up with countermeasures.

Grausam stepped out of the giebe's office with his bag of tools in hand and started setting up traps around the stairs, ensuring that nobody would be able to reach him. They were the same traps used to protect the cabins in the forest; he would receive a warning if any of them were activated or disarmed, meaning he wouldn't need to worry about ambushes.

"You there! What are y—? Ngh!"

The occasional servant or attendant spotted Grausam, but he merely eliminated them before returning to his work. He had expected to encounter more trouble, but there were fewer people in the estate than he'd anticipated. They must have evacuated as per the old giebe's instructions.

Good.

Gerlach was Grausam's home. A few deaths were certainly necessary to wrest control of the province from Aub Ehrenfest and the Leisegangs, but he wanted to keep casualties to a minimum.

From there, Grausam returned to the giebe's office. He was inspecting his remaining tools when an ordonnanz flew into the room and perched on the tied-up man now slumped in the corner.

"This is the knight commander. The invading force is larger than what Illgner and Griebel described. I cannot guarantee we will survive long enough to see the reinforcements... but we will do everything in our power to endure. If you send any ordonnanzes beyond this point, I doubt I will have the leeway to respond to them. May Angriff guide us both."

The ordonnanz repeated its message twice more before turning back into a yellow feystone, which Grausam then crushed with his prosthetic hand; the knight commander wouldn't need to worry about a response. The bound man merely stared at the shattered remains with frustrated tears in his eyes.

"Hm. Well, if you aren't going to receive any more ordonnanzes, I see no

reason to keep you alive.”

Grausam took out his sword and stabbed the man several times, aiming for spots that wouldn't be immediately fatal; he considered it a waste to use instant-death poison on someone who could neither move nor call out for help. His target whimpered and struggled to escape, overcome with fear, but it was no use. There was nowhere for him to go.

Satisfied, Grausam nodded. If the Lanzenavians were to be believed, this man would turn into an exceptionally high-quality and mana-rich feystone.

The time has finally come.

Grausam turned away from the bleeding man and approached the nearby balcony. Outside, he could see the backs of the knights fighting to protect the estate, all unaware that a new giebe had taken control. A wave of light-violet capes was descending upon them, boasting such a great numerical advantage that the outcome was easy to predict.

The question, then, is how long the defenders will manage to survive.

Grausam smirked—and at that moment, he saw beyond the light-violet capes a much starker blue.

Gerlach's Front Line

As our highbeasts approached the battlefield, a mass of Ahrensbach capes came into view. They weren't marked with blue and yellow, which meant the nobles wearing them were loyal to Georgine. The only things stopping them from invading Giebe Gerlach's estate were the barrier around it and the ocher-caped knights of the province's Order.

"I would normally advise a pincer attack, but Gerlach's knights will not last long enough for us to get in position," Ferdinand said. "We must join forces with them at once."

Indeed, the disparity between the two armies was immense. Even someone as inexperienced with combat as I could see that Gerlach was about to crumble. The knights were driven entirely by their determination to survive until reinforcements came.

"Rozemyne, heal Ehrenfest's knights as soon as we break through," Ferdinand instructed.

"Right."

"I will take the vanguard. Rozemyne, Lady Hannelore—forge ahead no matter what happens to the knights around you. Do not slow down for anything or anyone until we are clear of our enemies."

Ferdinand took his guards to the front of our group. Meanwhile, Dunkelfelger's knights started surrounding Hannelore and me, moving into a formation designed to break through enemy forces. In no time at all, my view was limited at best; my own knights aside, the most I could see were the capes of those around me. Not even Ferdinand or Eckhart stood out among the vast swathe of blue.

"Cornelius, Leonore—have Matthias and Laurenz returned yet?" I asked. Trying to spot their capes wasn't an option, and when I tried to peek above the crowd, I saw only a sea of indistinguishable helmets.

“Not yet,” Cornelius replied at length.

“We do not know the locations of the cabins they went to check, but they will most likely reunite with the tail of our group when we reach the other side of the enemy’s forces,” Leonore added.

I turned around on instinct. There were blue-capes behind us as well.

“Lady Rozemyne, Lady Hannelore,” one knight said, “once we have made it through the enemy knights, move as close to the summer estate as you can.”

“Guard knights! Protect your charges with your lives!” cried another. Then he held out his schtappe and chanted, “*Geteilt!*”

Hannelore and I nodded in response, then tried to match the speed of our escort as we pressed onward. I didn’t have a clue where we were in relation to the estate; my vision was a mess of blue capes and knights holding up their shields. It was precisely because I couldn’t see my surroundings or the enemy that I started to feel extremely tense. My hands began to tremble as I squeezed my steering wheel, and it took me all the restraint I could muster not to slam my foot down on the accelerator.

“Eep?!”

Bright flashes appeared all around me, each one accompanied by a loud popping sound. We must have entered our enemies’ attack range, prompting a barrage of magic that our knights were managing to block. My vision was still painfully limited, so I couldn’t even begin to guess how far away we were, but the chaos made my heart leap into my throat.

Th-This is sooo scary...

Our knights were managing to block the attacks when a volley of arrows joined the mix. The rational part of my brain told me not to worry—that my mana was too strong for any of the projectiles to breach my highbeast—but the rest of me was overcome with fear. I continued to grip my steering wheel as tightly as I could, feeling a rush of emotion as tears welled from my eyes.

That was when I still had the leeway to be afraid.

Out of nowhere, I witnessed a rainbow flash so bright that the knights in front

of me became mere shadows. It was evidence of an attack containing a tremendous amount of mana—but had it come from us or the enemy? I could only squeeze my eyes shut in anticipation of the worst.

“Rozemyne! Keep up!” Cornelius barked.

Against my better judgment, I returned to looking at my surroundings. As it turned out, the attack had been one of ours. On more than one occasion, something shot past us and obscured the light, but our knights always shielded me from the subsequent shockwaves.

“HRAAAH!”

The knights roared as if caught up in the heat of the moment and slowly accelerated. I sped up at the same time, desperately worried that they might leave me behind.

“Keep going!” came a shout. “Do not hesitate! Follow Lord Ferdinand!”

In an instant, everything changed. The battle cries turned into aggressive roars, and the shriek of clashing weapons and armor rang out all around me. The din was enough to give me a splitting headache.

The sea of blue I’d grown so accustomed to was quickly marred by splashes of red. That was horrifying enough, but then a severed arm slammed into the front of my Pandabus with a dull *thud*. The impact sent a shudder through my highbeast, and moments later, the arm vanished somewhere behind me. I wanted to believe it had just been my imagination, but the red splatter across my windshield told me otherwise. My teeth chattered violently as I stomped down on the accelerator, feeling entirely as though I’d just run someone over.

“Eep!”

A knight in front of me must have been struck by a heavy attack of some kind; he was thrown from his highbeast and ended up directly in the path of my Pandabus.

Brake! BRAKE!

“KEEP GOING!” Cornelius roared at me before I could even attempt to slow down. “If you stop now, the rear guard will all die!”

My foot hovered above the brake. Was accelerating really my only option? I was about to concede and plow straight through the man, but then one of my knights—Angelica, from what I could tell—rushed ahead of me and thrust him out of the way. I was so petrified that I couldn't even speak.

Parts of our formation started to crumble as our enemies continued their onslaught. More knights fell in front of me, but these ones weren't so fortunate—they bounced off the front of my highbeast before disappearing somewhere behind me. I couldn't even check on them; the moment I tried to turn my head, someone yelled at me.

“Don't look back, Lady Rozemyne!”

I gritted my teeth and endured the impact of each collision, doing my best to keep forging ahead—and that was when somebody's feystone struck the front of my Pandabus. The stone made such a loud clatter as it bounced around, but I was so terrified of lagging behind the others that I didn't even acknowledge it.

“We're through!” a voice called, bright and confident. “Turn around and attack!”

Dunkelfelger's knights turned their highbeasts on a dime.

“Lady Rozemyne! Lady Hannelore! Keep going! Continue until you pass their rear guard!”

Immediately upon hearing those orders, I remembered what Ferdinand had said to me. “Go on ahead,” I told Hannelore. “I need a moment to heal everyone.”

I took my knights high up in the air, stuck my hand out the window, and then said, “*Streitkolben*” as I turned around. I wasn't sure I had enough mana to heal all of Ehrenfest's and Dunkelfelger's knights without giving a proper prayer, so I thrust Flutrane's staff as high as I could.

“O Goddess of Healing Heilschmerz, of the Goddess of Water Flutrane's exalted twelve...”

Knights from Old Werkestock launched spells in an attempt to interrupt my chant, but the Dunkelfelger knights now supporting our front line blocked them without issue. My knights likewise had their shields at the ready. I continued

the prayer, speaking a little faster than usual.

“Hear my prayers. Lend me your divine power and grant me the power to heal those who have been hurt. Play the divine melody and cast the blissful ripples of your pure divine protection.”

Green light flowed from the staff’s feystone and rained down on the knights below, eliciting cheers from the heavily wounded among Gerlach’s Order. I could practically feel the rise in their morale, and the knowledge that I was helping made me feel more at ease.

“Please leave the rest to the knights,” Leonore instructed me.

I nodded. Healing the knights had concluded my role in the battle for now; I would need to give my mana time to regenerate so that I could do whatever Ferdinand needed of me next. I made my way over to Hannelore, landed beside her, and then downed a mana-focused rejuvenation potion inside my highbeast.

“Perhaps because they are using highbeasts, the knights of Old Werkestock are neither wearing silver cloth nor wielding silver weapons,” Hannelore observed with a smile. “That makes this a traditional battle—not something my duchy’s knights will concede easily.”

As I reveled in yet more confirmation that Hannelore was a reliable gal pal, two knights wearing Ehrenfest capes approached us. The slender leopard-like cat with wings was Matthias’s highbeast, whereas the larger but similarly shaped tiger belonged to Laurenz.

“Matthias, Laurenz, I am glad to see you both safe,” I said when they reached us.

“Lady Rozemyne.”

Just as Leonore had predicted, the pair had reunited with the tail of our group as we broke through the enemy line. I was sincerely relieved to see my knights all together again.

“I thought to use an ordonnanz to pin down Grausam’s location, but not a single one took flight,” Matthias informed me.

“Is that to say he’s already dead...?” I asked, having seen far too many ordonnanzes refuse to fly in Ahrensbach. It was a surefire sign that the intended recipient had climbed the towering stairway.

“Perhaps he got caught up in a battle somewhere and died then, but I doubt a man skilled enough to see through Lord Bonifatius’s traps would meet such a simple end...” Laurenz said, his expression stern. “He is more likely engaged in some clandestine operation that prevents ordonnanzes from reaching him.”

Leonore gazed upon the Gerlach estate with sharply narrowed eyes. “The Ahrensbach knights mentioned earlier that those dressed in silver cannot receive ordonnanzes. The bird simply refuses to fly. And this was where the silver cloth was first discovered, was it not?”

The knights of Old Werkestock might not have been using silver clothes or weapons, but there was no reason to believe the same was true for Grausam. On second thought, it wasn’t particularly strange that ordonnanzes couldn’t reach him.

“In his eyes, these knights must be mere pawns to be disposed of...” Leonore continued.

Those from Old Werkestock hadn’t been given silver cloth or weapons, nor had they received any critical intelligence. Georgine certainly hadn’t told them they could reach their duchy’s foundation through their temple or that she was having them steal Ehrenfest’s mana for her own convenience. If she did succeed in her plans, her loyal vassals *would* replace our purged nobles, but I saw no reason to believe their lives meant anything to her.

“Lady Rozemyne, the commander of Gerlach’s knights wants to thank you,” Angelica said, having brought over a man wearing an Ehrenfest cape. “Please stay in your highbeast.”

The man in question had removed his helmet, allowing me to see his face. Heilschmerz’s healing had closed up his wounds, but he was still covered with blood, and there was a lifeless pallor to his skin. He wavered as he approached me but didn’t make it very far before collapsing into what could only loosely be described as a kneeling stance.

“Lady Rozemyne, your healing has given us a much-needed advantage in this

battle,” he said. “I wished to thank you, even if only for this brief moment...”

“It was unnecessary for you to come all this way when you do not even have the strength to reach me,” I said. “Please rest and recover.”

Heilschmerz’s healing closed wounds and treated burns, but it didn’t put lost blood back inside the body. There wasn’t a doubt in my mind that the commander had been fighting on the front line to keep his Order’s formation strong even while his injuries had wreaked utter havoc on him.

“Ah, I simply thought it most polite to keep my distance, given my somewhat dirtied countenance...” he replied. Not once during any of my etiquette training had such a rule been mentioned, but I decided to roll with his excuse; an immobile commander would weaken even the strongest Knight’s Order.

The man continued, “These reinforcements and your blessing have allowed us to avoid the worst-case scenario of our summer estate being stolen. I thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

Dunkelfelger’s knights really had done a lot to turn the tide of the battle. Their presence on the front line meant Gerlach’s Order could retreat to drink potions or even return to the estate to resupply.

“I struggled to believe my ears when the aub contacted us at noon, announcing that a mixed unit containing Dunkelfelger knights was coming to help us and that we would need to stand our ground until they arrived. The magic tools we had prepared ran out before we knew it, and with the invading army so much larger than our own, we deemed it safest to leave the giebe alone in his estate while the rest of us charged into battle.”

Gerlach’s knights had put everything on the line during this battle. As the enemies’ onslaught had continued, some had started to wonder whether the reinforcements would come at all—but then Ferdinand, Eckhart, and Heisshitze had carved a path through the invaders. The commander looked openly relieved as he recounted their arrival.

As we spoke, one of the knights tasked with entering the estate approached us on highbeast. “Commander—please excuse my interruption.”

The commander asked me for permission to stand up before addressing the

knight. “Is something wrong?”

“We cannot get inside.”

“Excuse me?” The commander turned to look... just as *something* shot out of the estate.

“Um...”

It arced through the air as it approached the heart of the battlefield, moving fast enough that I could guess someone had launched it, not thrown it. A whistling sound repeated three times—then the projectile exploded with a tremendous *bang*.

“What the—?!”

A powdery white substance floated through the air. Those closest to it immediately disappeared, but not those who caught only the edge of the cloud—some of them vanished after a pause, others fell from their highbeasts, and still others began to move sluggishly. From what I could tell, there were more casualties among Old Werkestock than among our own troops. My knights and I were barely impacted, since we were so far away from the point of the explosion.

“*Waschen!*” cried a voice.

Before any of us could grasp what was going on, a huge wave of water swallowed us. Even my Pandabus got drenched and cleansed.

“I have washed away the poison!” Ferdinand roared again. “Drink your jureves at once!” It must have been the same kind of poison that had almost cost him his life in Ahrensbach’s Mana Replenishment hall.

But why did it come from the giebe’s estate...?

Overcome with unease, I started to scan the building from the bottom up. There was a strange figure standing on the second floor’s balcony—someone who hadn’t been there a moment ago.

“The poison was no less effective, but it produced fewer casualties than expected...” the person remarked, sounding as detached as a scientist performing an experiment. “Perhaps the wind really is to blame. It spreads the

powder too thin.”

A chill ran down my spine. I recognized the man’s voice—he was the reason I’d ended up in a jureve all those years ago.

“You! What are you doing up there?!” the commander shouted. “You aren’t the giebe!” He leapt onto his highbeast and tried to apprehend the man, only to disappear as the result of another explosion.

As I stood in a daze, staring up at where the commander had once been, a feystone dropped down to the ground. My knights groaned, cast waschen without a second thought, and started to drink their potions.

“You fool,” the bony figure on the balcony spat. “Now that I’ve dyed this estate’s foundation, I *am* Giebe Gerlach. This province is mine once again.” On closer inspection, I noticed what appeared to be a single gauntlet on his left hand. He was also wearing a dirty ocher cape with silver on the inside.

“Grausam...” Matthias choked, having finished drinking his jureve. He knelt before my highbeast and said, “At its full strength, the barrier will prevent anyone except the giebe, his relatives, those with his permission, and members of the archducal family from entering the estate. The knights weren’t able to get in, but Grausam is my father; the barrier should accept me. Please let me go in their stead.”

“Matthias, wait. That’s...”

“It has to be me,” Matthias said, his cool blue eyes moving from me to the estate. He crossed his arms in front of his chest, then stood up and sprang into action.

“Wai— Eek!” Before I could even attempt to stop him, a golden net fell on me from above.

“Lady Rozemyne!” Matthias cried, having turned around to check on me. He rushed to help me, his schtappe drawn, as the bone-chilling voice rang out once again.

“Ah, I recognize that uniquely hideous highbeast. I can’t say I expected *you* to be here...”

A wave of awful memories came to mind unbidden. This wasn't the first time Lessy had gotten caught in one of Grausam's nets. In the past, this vile man had poured poison down my throat, requiring me to use a jureve. He had bested me before, but that wouldn't happen again; this time, I just needed to stay inside my highbeast and trust that my guard knights would save me. I gripped Lessy's steering wheel as tightly as I could, determined not to be flung out into the open.

"Rozemyne!" Cornelius shouted, his voice brimming with anger.

A moment later, the force pulling Lessy vanished; Angelica was dashing back and forth with Stenluke in hand, slicing the net into pieces.

"I recognize this trap..." Cornelius said, fixing the man above us with a stony frown. "So it's you, Grausam."

"I've heard about you through my master. How nice that I now have the opportunity to defeat you," Angelica added with a smile, a vicious fire blazing in her blue eyes. She had gone from being dainty and ditzy to terrifyingly bloodthirsty.

Matthias reached me a moment later, only to recoil when he noticed the murderous aura radiating from his fellow retainers. "Lady Rozemyne, what in the world happened...?" he asked, looking more timid than usual.

"It would seem Grausam was responsible for the attack during the feast all those years ago," I said. "The one that required me to use a jureve."

"What?!" Matthias's mouth hung open in disbelief. "He was summoned as a suspect at the time of the incident, but wasn't he deemed to be innocent?"

Damuel had testified to seeing a Devouring soldier's ring at the scene of the crime, but a plethora of witnesses had claimed that Grausam was in the grand hall the entire time. I didn't want to burden Matthias with the knowledge of his father's crimes, but this wasn't something I could afford to keep from him.

"Back then, we didn't have enough evidence to be sure—but there isn't a doubt in my mind anymore," I declared. "Still... It's strange. I don't remember hearing this voice when I visited the Gerlach estate as a shrine maiden for Spring Prayer."

“He had at least three body doubles. I can’t believe it...” Matthias said, his voice pained and his eyes swirling with violent emotion. “And on top of that, *he* was the one who hurt you...?” He gripped his schtappe-made sword as he glared up at the balcony—but Cornelius and Angelica were already on the attack.

“Die, Grausam!”

Cornelius cried out as his and Angelica’s attacks fused together and shot toward their target. Grausam held up his left hand as if trying to protect his face. As a scholar, he was surely doomed...

But then the mana rushed into his hand and disappeared.

He absorbed the attack?!

Grausam lowered his hand and mockingly laughed at Cornelius and Angelica, who were both stunned. Then he swung his right hand, causing blue spheres made of powerful mana to shoot out. They targeted not only Cornelius and Angelica, but also the knights who had yet to recover from their jureves.

“O Schutzaria, Goddess of Wind...”

“Geteilt!”

Before I could finish the prayer to form Schutzaria’s shield, several knights shouted the abbreviated spell, charged toward Grausam, and deflected the incoming attacks. At the same time, a great white lion descended on the balcony.

“Lord Ferdinand!” the recovering knights called out, relieved. Then they began forming their own shields.

“Those of you still recuperating—get far away from the estate!” Ferdinand barked, maintaining several protective barriers of his own.

Many of the knights held up their shields and started to retreat. Those who were unable to move on their own—the poison had caused dense mana clumps to form in their bodies—had to be carried away by their comrades.

“You’re *alive?!* ” Grausam shouted at Ferdinand, shaking his head in disbelief. “But we were so painfully thorough in our preparations! Could it be that Lady

Georgine received a false report of our plan's success? From her own daughter, no less? Such outrageous incompetence is simply unforgivable."

Detlinde must have told Georgine that Ferdinand was dead. I suspected that Georgine and Grausam had enacted their secret mission not a moment later—and as they must have set out wearing silver cloth, no further ordonnances had managed to reach them. Grausam hadn't known a thing about my rescue operation.

"Still," he continued, a smile returning to his face, "what's done is done. My own mission remains unchanged. I shall buy Lady Georgine enough time to claim Ehrenfest's foundation, steal mana from its land to make the process easier, weaken its forces so that her control is absolute, and eliminate as many troublesome nobles as I physically can."

The madness in Grausam's gray eyes was terrifying. Even at a glance, I could tell that nothing in the world would convince him to stop.

"Lord Ferdinand," he said, "*you* are one such troublesome noble. I must eliminate you here."

"How can a scholar hope to eliminate me?" Ferdinand replied. "Your poison will work no longer."

Eckhart stepped forward, his weapon at the ready.

"Oh, we scholars have our own ways of doing battle..." Grausam said. "And there is no longer any need to avoid ordonnances." He grabbed the brooch fastened to his cape, then removed it and gripped something I couldn't quite see. A storm of blue flames erupted all around him.

"What?!"

"Fire?!"

As we stared at the flames, struggling to process what was going on, a group charged Grausam all at once. It was Hannelore's detachment. They launched mana at their target, even piercing the inferno with several arrows, but he blocked the lethal strikes with his left hand.

In the end, the knights' attacks only strengthened Grausam's flames. They

raged even more intensely than before, yet their master didn't seem at all bothered; he merely smirked at us from within the inferno. Then he swung his fire-covered right hand and sent what looked like creatures made of the same blue flames at Hannelore.

"Geteilt!"

Hannelore created her shield without the slightest hesitation, ready to block the attack... but she never felt its impact; Ferdinand had made his own shield at the same time and moved to intercept the flames. Her face went pure white as she stared up at him in shock.

Grausam cackled. "Aah, yes. With this much mana, I shouldn't have any trouble at all. You have my sincerest gratitude, Dunkelfelger girl."



Glaring at the blue flames all the while, Ferdinand sent out several ordonnanzes: one to Heisshitze on the front line; another to Strahl, who had returned from delivering our prisoners to Bindewald; and another to me.

“Rozemyne, you and Matthias are the only ones who can enter the estate,” my bird said in a quick, quiet voice. “I will draw Grausam’s attention here; we do not want him to use any hidden passages. The two of you must hurry inside and sneak up on him from behind. His prosthesis absorbs mana, so use black weaponry of your own when you attack him. Do not leave your highbeast under any circumstances—not even if Matthias dies.”

Matthias and I exchanged looks; I certainly hadn’t thought Ferdinand would order us to infiltrate the estate. The situation must have been dire.

“Let us hurry, Matthias. Do you know where we need to go?”

“I do. We can reach him from the giebe’s office.”

“Lady Rozemyne, wait,” Leonore interjected, having heard the ordonnanz as well. “This is much too dangerous.”

She was right—this *was* going to be dangerous—but we didn’t have much of a choice. Matthias and I were the only ones who could enter the estate—as Grausam’s blood relative and a member of the archducal family, respectively. And to add to the pressure, Ferdinand would only be able to distract Grausam for so long.

“I understand the danger, but the barrier surrounding the estate means I can’t bring any more guards with me,” I replied. “Moreover, only the aub can appoint a new giebe. I must go, as it falls to me as a member of the archducal family to detain those who would steal another’s foundation of their own accord.”

“But...” Leonore’s mouth hung open for a moment; then she closed it again and balled her hands into tight fists. “As a guard knight, I consider it disgraceful that I must leave the true battle to the archducal family. Please, may Angriff guide you.”

“Do what you can to keep Grausam on the balcony until we return.”

“As you will.”

Leonore climbed onto her highbeast and joined the fight against Grausam. Meanwhile, I sneaked into the estate with Matthias in tow.

Confronting Grausam

No sooner had we entered the giebe's estate than Matthias charged ahead of me. Keeping up with him was tough even in my highbeast; this place had once been his home, so there wasn't any hesitation in his footsteps. On more than one occasion, we passed a corpse slumped against the side of the hallway—servants unfortunate enough to have crossed paths with Grausam, I suspected.

Still running full tilt, Matthias turned his schtappe into a sword and then enchanted it with Darkness, as was taught in the Knight's Order. I formed my schtappe, turned it into a water gun, and said the relevant prayer.

"O mighty and supreme God of Darkness, who rules the endless skies; O mighty Father who created the world and all things. Please hear my prayer and lend your divine strength; bless my weapon with the power to steal mana, all the mana which is yours by right; grant me your divine protection to purge the unnatural fey."

"Lady Rozemyne," Matthias said when he saw my black water gun, "please refrain from attacking. Instead, focus on blocking the door."

"Matthias...?"

"I doubt Grausam knows what kind of weapons you use or which divine instruments you can make. If we plan to win this war, then we would do well to conceal such information for the perfect moment. Until then, I shall fight him alone."

Matthias's eyes were brimming with resolve, but they narrowed when he saw the staircase ahead of us. "There are traps on those stairs. Disarming them will take some ti—"

"Can we not simply fly over them? Get in. We don't have time to waste with traps."

I made Lessy large enough for two people and patted the passenger seat. Matthias glanced between the stairs and my Pandabus, then let out a small

chuckle and climbed inside.

“Is something funny...?” I asked.

“Not exactly. I expected Grausam to put detection traps on this particular staircase, since there are no other paths to reach him. Knowing we can simply fly over them is just...”

The stairs in this estate weren’t broad enough for a highbeast to flourish its wings; my idea was only feasible because of my Pandabus’s unique shape and design. Matthias found it amusing that, because using a highbeast indoors was such an unusual concept, Grausam had never even considered what we were about to do.

“You always act outside of everyone’s expectations, Lady Rozemyne. I was speechless when you shattered the walls between factions in the Ehrenfest Dormitory and when you spared even the pre-baptismal children from the purge. Looking back, I am relieved that I get to serve someone who always does so much to save people instead of Lady Georgine, who would order a man to invade and subsequently destroy his own home.”

We flew over the stairs and soon arrived outside our destination: a room on the estate’s second floor. Matthias climbed out of my highbeast, his expression tight, and placed one hand on the door. Then he took a deep breath and—

“*Now.*”

His resolve steeled, Matthias rushed into the room. I did the same, violently slammed the door shut behind me with Lessy’s tail, and enlarged my Pandabus so that it completely blocked the entryway.

“So some of you *were* still able to pass through the barrier...” Grausam said as he turned around to face us. Blue flames coiled around him like a suit of armor. He swung his fire-infused right hand at those attacking him outside, then came in from the balcony.

I spotted someone slumped on the ground—the man assigned to replace Grausam as Giebe Gerlach, no doubt. Blood was still pooling beneath him.

“Healing—”

“It won’t work,” Matthias said, interrupting me. “He’s already turning into a feystone.” He then stepped in front of me, his black sword raised, and carefully stared down our opponent.

Grausam grimaced at the sight of my Pandabus and me, then approached us with his gleaming black prosthesis raised. “Are you not ashamed to be serving a commoner, Matthias? I realize your hands were tied, but still...”

“I consider it far more shameful to serve an invader,” Matthias replied, his voice calm but cold as ice. “Not only have you brought harm to your own duchy’s archduke candidates, but you’ve also turned your back on your home and its people.”

Grausam’s brow twitched; this must have been the first time one of his sons had spoken back to him. “Lady Georgine is an Ehrenfest archduke candidate, *not* an invader. Say it. *Now.*”

“No, she *was* an Ehrenfest archduke candidate until she became a member of Ahrensbach’s archducal family. And now that Lady Rozemyne has taken its foundation, she isn’t even that anymore.”

Grausam gave me a cruel smile. “I no longer care who holds the position of Aub Ahrensbach. *Ehrenfest* is Lady Georgine’s true prize.”

“She brings only chaos and destruction wherever she goes!” Matthias shouted, holding up his blade. “I will *not* allow her to become aub!”

Eyeing his son without the slightest trace of emotion, Grausam slowly raised his flame-covered right hand. “One must destroy the old to make room for the new. To think even that much was beyond your understanding... Of all my sons, why did the most useless and incompetent have to survive?”

For just a moment, Matthias pressed his lips together. Grausam was giving him a cold, disparaging look completely devoid of any fatherly love.

“I am now registered as an Ahrensbach noble, which means you are a son of mine no longer,” Grausam continued. “Cease wasting my time and die already. I will not allow you to stand in Lady Georgine’s way!”

He swung his right hand, and the blue flames leapt at Matthias as though they had a mind of their own. Matthias chopped them apart with his black sword...

creating an opening large enough for Grausam to dart over and kick him in the stomach.

“Ngh!”

Matthias grunted in response to the blow. It was hard to believe that a scholar could fight at such a tremendous speed; Grausam’s movements were comparable to those of a physically enhanced knight, bringing even Angelica to mind. Matthias held up his sword again and took a step back in preparation for the next attack.

“Hmph. You were so arrogant before, yet *this* is the best you can do?” Grausam asked, oozing confidence. “Knights train their bodies, whereas scholars make complex magic tools. Let us see which is stronger.”

He crossed his flaming right hand with his black prosthesis, and in mere moments, the entire room was torn apart. The reception desk exploded and turned to ash, while the chair beside it split cleanly in two. We could see Laurenz at the balcony window trying to rush to our aid, but an invisible wall was blocking him.

Matthias was facing Grausam alone; he couldn’t rely on anyone coming to his rescue. An attack from his foe’s prosthesis would drain his mana, whereas an attack from his foe’s other hand would cause severe burns. And then there were the blue flames still darting about the room.

As his first move, Matthias desperately attempted to block Grausam’s right hand with his black sword. He was stuck on the defensive, unable to do much else against such an intimidating adversary.

“I designed these magic tools to vanquish Lord Bonifatius; someone of your level could never hope to compete with them,” Grausam sneered. He and Georgine had expected the former knight commander to arrive with his own troops and join the fray while Karstedt stayed put to defend the castle and the Noble’s Quarter. “That man’s instincts, initiative, and combat potential are all deserving of the greatest caution. *He* was the one who interfered that winter night when I planned to secure that commoner.”

As far as Grausam was concerned, luring Bonifatius away from the Noble’s Quarter had been the most crucial step in helping Georgine steal our

foundation. Bonifatius was unpredictable. He had a talent for crushing schemes that neither Sylvester nor Karstedt shared.

And these magic tools were for taking him down, hmm?

I didn't know what magic tools Grausam had made, and it was impossible to ignore how immensely strong they had made him. That didn't mean he was going to win, though. He was only so arrogant because he hadn't factored *me* into this fight.

Think, Rozemyne... How have you participated in battles before now?

I glanced at my Darkness-blessed water gun, which I was keeping concealed for the time being. As far as I could remember, other people usually did my fighting for me; I seldom took down opponents on my own. My accuracy was poor, and while I could channel more mana into my water gun to guarantee a hit, the resultant blast would wound Matthias as well.

There are some things I know anyone could do if they knew about them, but right now, I'm the only one.

I channeled mana into my ring. If Grausam was going all out with his magic tools, then I would do the same with my blessings. Not a single part of me questioned this decision; my restraint had fallen by the wayside long ago.

"O Steifebrise the Goddess of the Gale, Duldsetzen the Goddess of Endurance, subordinates to Schutzaria the Goddess of Wind—grant Matthias your protection."

Gentle yellow light rained down on Matthias, who managed to dodge Grausam's next kick. He would only continue to improve as he got used to the blessing.

"Hmph. A meager speed boost won't aid you in the slightest," Grausam said.

Now I was *really* ticked off. I could easily have granted more blessings, but it was better to start small so that the recipient could get used to them. Too many blessings could end up being a curse, as we had seen during our time at the Royal Academy.

Still, I'll show you what happens when I get serious.

“O Angriff the God of War, Schlagziel the God of Hunting, subordinates to Leidenschaft the God of Fire—grant Matthias your protection.”

This time, blue light rained down on Matthias. It was supposed to improve both his accuracy and the strength of his blows—and indeed, as I watched the battle play out, I noticed that his swordplay had improved significantly. Grausam was actually having to dodge his attacks.

However, perhaps because of the wounds he had sustained thus far, Matthias wasn’t moving as freely as usual. He needed to be healed.

“O Heilschmerz the Goddess of Healing, Verdrenna the Goddess of Thunder, and Greifechan the Goddess of Luck, subordinates to Flutrane the Goddess of Water—grant Matthias your protection.”

The next blessing was green. Matthias would receive not only Heilschmerz’s healing but also the momentum of Verdrenna, who could repel even Ewigeliebe with her power. And of course, some extra fortune wasn’t going to hurt our chances.

As I’d hoped, Matthias gained an astounding burst of speed. He used his sword to block Grausam, who had reached out his black hand in an attempt to steal mana, and grinned.

“What madness is this?” Grausam asked, cheek twitching as his dominant streak crumbled into pieces. “Enough of your games...”

“Games? These are nothing of the sort,” Matthias retorted. “Just as scholars support themselves with magic tools, Lady Rozemyne supports her knights with blessings. As someone with the gods’ favor and plenty of experience with temple ceremonies, this is how she does battle.”

“I see you have gone mad since last we met, Matthias.”

Grausam was landing hits, but now Matthias was too; my stream of blessings must have put them on an equal footing. The smile on my retainer’s face was getting broader.

“O Verdraeos the God of Deliverance, subordinate to the God of Darkness. O Unheilschneide the Goddess of Purification, subordinate to the Goddess of Light. Grant your protection to Matthias.”

As I prayed for Matthias to cut down misfortune and forge ahead on whatever path he chose, black and golden light spread throughout the room. I appreciated that one could simplify a prayer by praying to subordinates of the two supreme gods at once.

That should do for now, though. The God of Life's subordinates are fickle; one wrong move could end up dispelling the other gods' blessings.

I was satisfied with my work, but Grausam's face contorted with rage as he continued to attack. He swung his black hand at his opponent, knocking him back. Matthias's pained gasp was barely even audible over the sound of the impact.

Grausam finally addressed me, "I would never have thought blessings could transform a basic knight like Matthias into someone able to fight me equally. I intended to drain every last drop of the mana that brought about your adoption, but this necessitates a change of plans. I shall ensure that you die here."

Our opponent swung his right hand, throwing more blue flames in our direction. Matthias caught some with his sword and absorbed them, but those he missed came straight toward my Pandabus. They slammed into its windshield, and the mana I was using to maintain Lessy's form drained out of me through the steering wheel.

I gulped, now painfully aware that I wasn't as safe as I'd thought. It hadn't even crossed my mind that I might lose this much mana while sitting inside my highbeast.

He's so strong!

Grausam had made his magic tools to counter Bonifatius, so seeing them in action made me wonder how inhuman the former knight commander's strength must have been.

Matthias got between Grausam and me, readying his sword once again. "Complain that Lady Rozemyne is a commoner all you want, but there is nobody I would rather serve," he said with a provocative smile. "Tell me, has Lady Georgine ever blessed you?"

“Silence,” Grausam retorted, knocking the blade aside with his prosthesis before responding with a gout of blue fire.

Matthias dodged the attack and continued, “Has she ever used her mana for your sake? Or does she only ever take yours? Has she ever saved your life? Your pride? *Your home*? Has she ever defended you?”

“Silence!”

As if unable to think of a single time Georgine had done any of those things, Grausam furiously knocked Matthias aside and turned to look at me. His gray eyes were ablaze with pure rage.

“I’ll take that as a no, then!”

“You arrogant half-wit!” Grausam snapped, his face so red that not even his flames could mask it. “You don’t have the slightest idea what you’re on about! One’s loyalties shouldn’t be driven by the expectation of rewards! I work so that my lady’s wishes can be granted, and as much as I want to follow her on her path, I would never expect anything in return! Do *not* undermine my devotion with your nonsense!”

Grausam thrust his fist into Matthias’s flank, sending him flying into the wall. The one person standing between us was now gone, allowing Grausam to look straight at me. His eyes were multicolored and rich with mana, betraying the anger that must have been eating away at him.

“Come out of that creature, commoner!” he roared. “I will reduce you to ashes! Feel my strength!”

“Not today!”

Just as Grausam swiped at me, Matthias leapt between us and swung his sword. A loud clatter rang out, like the sound of metal striking stone, and the flames covering our foe waned just enough to reveal a blue feystone. Matthias’s black sword must have stolen too much mana for the fire to stay active. Grausam’s movements also seemed considerably more sluggish than before.

Matthias tore into the flames with a series of attacks. Each swipe stole more of their mana, causing them to shrink and gradually reveal bare skin and more

blue feystones.

“I suppose this is my limit...” Grausam muttered as the flames around him disappeared, retreating back into the feystones.

“What?!”

Once the fire was gone, Matthias and I realized that Grausam wasn’t just wearing feystone armor; large chunks of his body had actually transformed. It was a sickening sight to behold—some of the stones dug into his flesh, while others seemed crammed beneath his skin. He didn’t even look human anymore.

Matthias’s face contorted as well.

“How foolish you both look...” Grausam said dismissively. “Even the greatest simpleton would understand that operating this many magic tools this aggressively requires an absurd amount of mana.”

“How? *Why?*” Matthias asked. “Why are you going to such extreme lengths for Lady Georgine...?”

“My explanation would mean nothing to you.”

Grausam averted his gaze, seemingly not wanting to look Matthias in the eye. Then, the next moment, he put all of his remaining mana into enhancing his speed and charged straight at my retainer. The noise of glass shattering filled the room as Matthias was flung out onto the balcony.

“Matthias!” I cried reflexively.

Grausam didn’t even pause to check the result of his throw; he sprinted over to the dead giebe and thrust his prosthesis straight through the man’s chest. He dug around as if searching for the man’s heart, and a moment later, his blue flames burst back into existence. The corpse was likewise swallowed up before disappearing.

“You. Commoner girl,” Grausam said, a harsh glint in his eyes as he turned to look at me.

My breath caught in my throat. Stealing mana and a feystone from a dead man was bad enough, but the tenacity and almost insane dedication to Georgine that had driven him to such a horrid act were what terrified me most.

“You cannot be allowed to live,” Grausam said plainly. Then he lunged at me, ready to tear Lessy apart with his black hand.

There was no longer anyone in the room who could protect me... nor was there anyone I needed to protect. The risk of accidentally wounding one of my allies had disappeared completely. I stuck my water gun out the window of my Pandabus and pulled the trigger. My mana shot out the end as a black arrow, which then broke apart into many tiny arrows that all pierced their target.

“Gah!”

Grausam roared and covered his face, which had taken the most abuse, before toppling over. Even as he fell, however, he managed to scrape Lessy’s front with his prosthesis. Stealing mana from a highbeast was easy enough, and the flames around him increased in intensity.

“Eep!”

“Haha... Aaahaha! Excellent. Give me *all* of your mana!”

Grausam sprang back up like a doll on strings and once again swung his black hand at me. Perhaps because of the arrows, even his face had mostly turned into a feystone. The gray eyes peeking out from among harsh stone and raging blue flames were a worrying sight indeed.

Aah!

A shiver ran down my spine. Far from being impenetrable, my highbeast was feeding Grausam’s strength. I squeezed my steering wheel, frantic, and poured even more mana into Lessy.

“Stay away!”

“All of your mana shall be mine!”

To ensure my safety no matter how much of my mana was stolen, I enlarged my Pandabus and made it rear up at Grausam. He was thrust back against the window but reached out just in time to stab Lessy’s stomach with his black hand. An immense amount of my mana was sucked out through my steering wheel.

“Eek!”

As unfortunate as it was, I didn't have any fighting experience whatsoever. Grausam would eliminate me the moment I ran out of mana to keep my highbeast formed.

But I won't lose to him!

I gripped the steering wheel and flooded it with far more mana than my opponent could drain. Lessy continued to grow larger and larger.

"What...?" Grausam muttered. "My hand is... turning into gold dust...?" My tactic was saturating his body with mana, causing his fingers to crack and crumble away.

So, basically... as long as I continue to pour mana into him, I might actually win?

I'd found a glimmer of hope—and not a moment later, Ferdinand shouted, "Now!"

"Hyaaaah!"

The barrier surrounding the estate must have been deactivated or destroyed; my knights flooded in from the balcony and stabbed Grausam with their black weapons. Some of them stabbed my Pandabus by mistake, but I could forgive them in these circumstances.

Grausam had already been in shock about his mana-stealing black hand turning to dust, but this ambush didn't elicit a reaction at all. He merely broke apart like a shattered feystone, leaving behind only shards and gold dust.

Victory and Return

“I see you both kept busy while I was overwriting the Giebe’s foundation...” Ferdinand said in a cold voice. “Tell me, how did things end up like this?”

I sat bolt upright and my Pandabus quickly deflated down to its usual size. I’d been too caught up in the battle to notice before, but during my attempt to intimidate Grausam, Lessy’s head and front legs had burst right through the roof of the estate, creating a massive hole. As I stared up at the blue sky—and at Ferdinand, who was looming over me—I desperately tried to think of an excuse.

“Grausam’s black hand was breaking Lessy apart. I mean, look at his face! He’s hurt! Fire was shooting all over the place, and, well... I *needed* to make my Pandabus bigger! It was the only way to keep me safe—or at least, that was what I thought, but—”

I was trying to plead my case when I suddenly realized the true severity of our situation. Giebe estates were made by the aub through the use of an *entwickeln*, and they were constructed out of pure-white ivory. The people of Hasse had been accused of treason simply for attacking a monastery, so this... This was *very* bad.

“Um, Ferdinand... Am I going to be charged with treason?”

“You are the current Aub Ahrensbach,” Ferdinand said dryly. “Rather than an act of treason, this could be considered a declaration of war.”

The blood drained from my face. “Noooooooo! That wasn’t my intention! Not in the slightest! Please, Ferdinand, apologize to Sylvester for me! Maybe I could give him the gold dust he needs for the *entwickeln* and pay for any further repairs. Would that be enough to smooth things over?”

“I would not know.”

“Please! I need your help now more than ever!”

Ferdinand gave an amused chuckle, then held out a hand to me. “Perhaps we

should embrace the inevitable scolding. It would seem that the situation in Ehrenfest has likewise been resolved.”

Accepting his encouragement, I stepped out of my highbeast and looked around. My knights were caught up in a lively debate over who had dealt the killing blow to Grausam, but I ignored them and stared up at Ferdinand.

“Is the fighting really over?” I asked.

“I would gain nothing from lying to you. An ordonnanz from the archduke arrived not too long ago; Grausam and Georgine were acting in perfect sync.”

As it turned out, they really had planned thoroughly. Grausam had conquered the estate and Old Werkestock’s giebels had started stealing mana at the same time that Georgine had arrived in Ehrenfest to begin her own battle.

“Sylvester was on his way to the foundation’s hall when we sent him our ordonnanz. He was pleased to hear of our safe arrival, it seems.”

“Was anyone in the temple or lower city wounded...?” I asked, cutting right to the chase. Sylvester had told us the battle was over, but what did that mean? Had Georgine made it all the way to the foundation, or had they captured her while she was still en route?

“As you can expect, the report was not detailed enough for me to answer that.”

Sylvester had told us only that our war with Georgine was over. In truth, his vague summary of the situation made me want to return to Ehrenfest at once; I was dying to see if everyone was okay. Would we make it there by nighttime if we left right away?

“Well, let’s head to Ehrenfest,” I said.

“Hold on,” Ferdinand interjected. “You must settle matters here first. Under no circumstances can you just leave them as they are.”

I wavered. Truth be told, now that the threat of Old Werkestock was no more, I wanted to leave everything else to the locals and go home.

“Well, what do I need to do?” I asked. “And when can I return to Ehrenfest?”

“It would not be wrong of you to leave Gerlach to the remaining knights and

nobles until the aub gives his final verdict. However, do not forget your role as Aub Ahrensbach. You must instruct your duchy and, above all else, conclude the situation with Dunkelfelger.”

“I’m not sure what you mean...” I certainly didn’t want to disrespect the knights who had done so much for our sake, but why couldn’t we bring them back to Ehrenfest with us? Then the aub would be able to thank them personally.

“First, announce our victory. As *you* invited Dunkelfelger’s knights to this game of true ditte, it will not end until *you* declare the outcome. If you leave now, they will need to come with you. And need I remind you that Ehrenfest has *just* endured a battle against intruders?”

I placed a hand on my cheek and cocked my head, unsure why Ferdinand was so opposed to us taking Dunkelfelger’s knights into the city. “Is there a problem with that? They’ve done so much to assist us that I would expect Sylvester to thank or even reward them. It’s the perfect excuse for us to leave now and take them with us.”

“At the cost of Ehrenfest’s food and alcohol,” Ferdinand said with a sigh and a shake of his head.

This was news to me, since I’d been asleep at the time, but Dunkelfelger’s knights had used the delay in their departure to hold nonstop feasts loosely disguised as “meetings.” In a single day, they had consumed nearly all the food and wine in Ahrensbach’s castle. Bringing these same knights to Ehrenfest, which had spent the past month preparing for war, would deal a huge blow to an already exhausted city.

My knights, who were listening with flat expressions, all nodded in agreement. Ferdinand must have had every right to be concerned.

“But we can’t send them home empty-handed, can we?” I asked.

“We will discuss the matter of payment with Aub Dunkelfelger, but there is no need for us to rush. Go briefly to Bindewald and use the teleportation circle to return the knights to their duchy’s border gate. We may need to repay them for their magic tools, but we are under no obligation to fund their feasting.”

“Surely that’s a bit...”

I paused mid-sentence. Dunkelfelger had sortied in the dead of night, rescued Ferdinand, dealt with Lanzenave, and then come all the way to Gerlach; shoosing them away now that we were done with them seemed unfathomably rude.

As I pleaded with Ferdinand, Strahl came to report that the captured Old Werkestock knights had been sent to Bindewald. I took a step back to give him some space.

“Lord Ferdinand, almost all of Old Werkestock’s knights have been captured,” he said. “Dunkelfelger’s are chasing the few giebes who escaped into the forest.”

Thanks to our allies’ assistance, we had captured almost all of Old Werkestock’s knights and giebes. Our focus was now on collecting the scattered feystones.

“I see,” Ferdinand replied. “Continue as you are.”

“Understood!”

Strahl took a step back, allowing me to approach Ferdinand and tug on his sleeve. “See how much they’re helping us? Dunkelfelger’s knights need our gratitude!”

“No, what they *need* is an exorbitant amount of alcohol. I should also note that no preparations have been made for such a sizable feast. You never considered the relevance of provisions precisely because you meant for this to be a brief, decisive battle, no? Do you intend to make food appear out of thin air?”

He was right—I’d told Aub Dunkelfelger that it would take me only two bells to save Ferdinand. I hadn’t considered the cost of feeding an army of this size for days on end, and trying to prepare a feast now would require us to run around nabbing chefs.

“The match has concluded; announce our victory and send the knights home,” Ferdinand said. “That is the best course of action.”

“Lady Rozemyne, Lord Ferdinand,” Cornelius called.

“Yes?” I asked, turning to look at him.

“I believe Lord Strahl has more to say.”

He indicated Strahl, who was kneeling a few steps away from us. The man must not have wanted to interrupt our conversation, so Cornelius had stepped in for him, having most likely deduced that we weren’t going to stop anytime soon.

“What is it, Strahl?” Ferdinand asked.

“There were some details I neglected to mention. The Bindewald summer estate had food and wine prepared to celebrate the return of Old Werkestock’s giebels. Could we not use those supplies to celebrate Dunkelfelger’s achievements?”

That reminded me—Fraulärm and those with her had mentioned something about an arrangement like that.

“Hmm...” Ferdinand gave his temple a few contemplative taps. “Rozemyne, that would allow you to reward the knights as you so wish without bringing them into the city. As for words of gratitude from Aub Ehrenfest, I would advise that Lady Hannelore serve as her duchy’s representative. She can accompany us with her retainers and her fellow commander, Heisshitze.”

“Well said,” I replied. As much as I wanted our nobles to know how much Dunkelfelger had done to protect Ehrenfest, bringing its entire force to see the archduke wouldn’t be necessary.

“If we leave Dunkelfelger’s knights in Bindewald, we can have Sylvester activate the teleporters for us and travel to Ehrenfest in the blink of an eye. That said, the supplies in Bindewald will only last so long, and we will need to return to Ahrensbach tomorrow.”

“In other words, my return to Ehrenfest will only be short?”

“Indeed. We have much to gain from exchanging reports, bringing each other up to speed, and rewarding those who have aided us, but our work is not yet done. Detlinde and Leonzio have gone to the Sovereignty—at least as far as we know—and something must be done about them.”

In truth, I wasn't all that worried about the Sovereignty—the royals had agreed to contact Dunkelfelger if anything happened there, and the other greater duchies were already abreast of the situation. Still, no matter how low it placed on my list of priorities, we couldn't rest until every loose end was taken care of.

"A single day will do, then," I replied with a nod. "Seeing the lower city and the temple with my own eyes should assuage my concerns. Though I might struggle to leave again..."

"Fear not—I shall drag you away if necessary."

"Is it just me, or are you being really mean all of a sudden?!" I cried, glaring up at Ferdinand. It was easy to imagine him literally dragging me out of the city.

"Am I...?" he asked, his head cocked to one side. "Is this not how things have always been between us?"

"Thinking about it... you're completely right. It's so nostalgic I could cry."

"Do so later. For now, send an ordonnanz to the aub. Ask him to prepare guest rooms for our visitors and to use the teleporter to save us some time. I shall instruct those from Ahrensbach."

It was seriously unlikely that *any* knights from Ahrensbach—not even the ones serving Ferdinand—would receive a warm welcome if we brought them with us to Ehrenfest. Instead, they were all instructed to host Dunkelfelger's knights in Bindewald.

Host them, hm...? That sounds like a pretty brutal punishment.

I sent an ordonnanz to Sylvester, informing him that the Battle of Gerlach had concluded, that we intended to return with Hannelore and co, that we needed permission to enter the city and access to some guest rooms, and that we wanted to use the teleporter to save time.

"Aub Ehrenfest sent us an ordonnanz—Ehrenfest's foundation was kept safe from the invaders," I announced, stepping onto the mostly—er, *partially* destroyed balcony. Hannelore, Heisshitze, and Ferdinand stood with me as I addressed the knights gathered in the front garden with a sound-amplifying

magic tool Matthias had retrieved from the estate. “This, coupled with my successful acquisition of Ahrensbach’s foundation, means the outcome of our match is clear. I hereby announce our victory in this game of true ditter!”

“HURRAAAAAAAAAAH!”

Dunkelfelger’s knights took out their schtappe-made weapons and slammed them against the ground in celebration. Then they thrust them high up into the air.

“Ehrenfest was at a numerical disadvantage against Ahrensbach and Old Werkestock, but the participation of you honorable volunteers allowed us to pull through. Your courage and strength are second to none in all of Yurgenschmidt.”

“HURRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

“Though it might pale in comparison to the value of your achievements, a feast will soon await you in the Bindewald estate. We would ask you to go there once business in this province is complete. The knights of Ahrensbach will guide you.”

Upon seeing the intense fervor that had overtaken her knights, Hannelore stepped forward and made Verfuhrremeer’s staff. She then performed Dunkelfelger’s post-ditter victory ritual to curb their excitement.

Huh. I guess it really is an essential part of their culture.

Once calm, the knights began to move. Hannelore let out a relieved sigh, which I took as my cue to mention the rest of our plans.

“Lady Hannelore, Aub Ehrenfest has invited you to Ehrenfest’s castle so that he might express his gratitude in person. I am going there only briefly to report on the war, after which I must return to Ahrensbach, so I realize this is all rather sudden. Nonetheless...”

I went on to detail who was invited and how we would get there. Hannelore thought for a moment, then called over Heisshitze, to whom I gave the same explanation.

“Of course, if you would rather head straight home, I could send you all to the

border gate between Ahrensbach and Dunkelfelger. I simply thought it improper to have you depart so soon.”

“Heisshitze—what do you think?” Hannelore asked. “I am of the opinion that we should accept this invitation.”

Her fellow commander grinned and said, “This is more or less the only opportunity we have to enter Ehrenfest. I say we go.”

“Lady Rozemyne, I thank you ever so much for the invitation. Please allow us to join you.”

I appreciated how adaptive they were being—rather than moaning that our invitation was too abrupt or cleaving to customs, they were viewing our request as an opportunity to be seized. The royals, in contrast, had requested the usual three days when we’d gone to them with news of an extremely urgent emergency. They had so much to learn from the people of Dunkelfelger.

I watched Hannelore’s group leave to inform their knights of our plans.

“Strahl, the rest is in your hands,” Ferdinand said.

“Yes, my lord. I will contact Lady Letizia soon. Can I expect your return tomorrow afternoon?”

“You can. I will go from Ehrenfest to Bindewald, then return to the castle once we have taken Dunkelfelger’s knights to the border gate.”

Ferdinand told Strahl to deliver instructions to Letizia and to help the Dunkelfelgerians staying in Bindewald retrieve feystones and move prisoners. Simply threatening to ban alcohol from the upcoming feast was enough to light a fire under the knights. Just how much did they like to drink? I was both exasperated and in awe of their resilience.

“Lady Rozemyne. I am done,” Hartmut called. I almost couldn’t believe how much hearing his voice put me at ease, but that wasn’t important right now. I turned to him, wrenching my attention away from the feystones gleaming in the sunlight and the knights collecting them.

“Excellent work,” I replied. “You’ve done me a great service. The nobles and commoners of Gerlach can now rest a little easier.”

Hartmut had been tasked with overseeing the small chalices retrieved from the giebess and returning the mana stored within them to the duchy's land. As a former High Priest, he knew how to operate small chalices better than any of the nobles.

"The now empty chalices must be returned to Old Werkestock," I said. "How are its commoners, I wonder...?"

"That problem does not concern you, Lady Rozemyne; it is the duty of the next Aub Werkestock."

Hartmut's opinion was that we could inform the royal family of the temple's keys and push for a new aub to be assigned to Werkestock during the Archduke Conference. He was especially critical of their decision to leave a duchy without an aub in the first place.

"Once our business is done, we will return to the castle to celebrate. You went through an especially treacherous battle as a scholar, Hartmut—do take some time to unwind as well."

"Well, I *do* want to inform all the people of Ehrenfest how you managed to defeat Grausam."

"Would that not reveal that my Pandabus destroyed one of the giebess' estates?" I asked timidly.

Hartmut nodded with a bright smile. "Matthias and you were the only ones who entered the estate. As I prayed for your victory, the light of various blessings shone through the window. Even when your one and only knight was removed from the battle, you continued to fight. And in the end, you destroyed the roof to dispatch Grausam. That enlarged highbeast was a sight to behold; I must describe it to everyone."

"Please, no!"

I was hoping to sneak Sylvester some gold dust to make up for my blunder. The last thing I needed was for someone to start blabbing about it.

"Hartmut, I forbid you from attending the feast!" I declared.

"My lady would never make such a one-sided demand. And in any case..." He

looked at my other guard knights. “I am far from the only one who saw it.”

Cornelius smiled. As my brother, he was best suited to being frank with me. “By the time Lord Ferdinand told us we could charge into the estate, the most I could see were Grausam and the remains of white walls. At first, I wasn’t at all sure what I was looking at. I’m pretty sure you’re the only one in the world who’d try to fight back by making a *giant* version of your highbeast.”

“Cornelius!” I cried in horror.

“You won by using methods that Grausam would never have come up with on his own. Never would he have expected someone to fly over his traps in their highbeast.”

“Matthias!”

As I desperately tried to keep my guard knights from discussing the battle, Ferdinand called out to me. “Rozemyne, the teleportation circle has activated. Come!” He sounded exasperated.

Hannelore giggled. She was already waiting beside the teleporter with everything she needed. “You played a spectacular role in everything from the Purging of Lanzenave to the Battle of Gerlach,” she said to me, having already named our various skirmishes. “I am moved.”

“Oh no, Lady Hannelore—the role you played was far more significant.”

“If that is how you truly feel, Lady Rozemyne, then I appreciate it greatly.”

I mean, how couldn’t it be?

Soon enough, Sylvester appeared on the shining teleporter with three guard knights. He saw us lined up and broke into a grin. “Rozemyne... I don’t even know what to say. Well done. Lady Hannelore, to you and your knights, I extend my deepest thanks. And finally... Welcome home, Ferdinand. Welcome home. Let us return to the castle; we can save the formal greetings for later. Rozemyne, Ferdinand, help us out.”

As instructed, we knelt down and started channeling mana into the teleporter. Sylvester formed his schtappe in the meantime.

“*Nenluessel*. Ehrenfest.”

Black and golden lights twirled through the air, and the world around us faded away.

Everyone's Tales of Heroism

"Welcome back," Charlotte said.

"Thank you for coming, Lady Hannelore," Florencia added. "We appreciate your duchy's assistance from the bottom of our hearts."

My vision finally settled to reveal the knights' training grounds. Charlotte and Florencia were the only ones who had come to welcome us, and they had as few retainers with them as they could get away with. Melchior was likely in the temple, but what about Wilfried and Karstedt? The unusual setup made me nervous.

"Sylvester, I don't see Wilfried or Melchior," I said. "Or my father, for that matter."

"We might have been able to wrap things up here before the fighting in Gerlach concluded, but we haven't had long to gather ourselves. Karstedt is at the Order's command post with Wilfried, who's giving him a hand there. Melchior hasn't yet returned from the temple. Relax. Nobody sustained any serious injuries; they're just busy with the cleanup."

We'd dumped so much of our work on Ahrensbach's knights and Gerlach's nobles, but here in Ehrenfest, there was nobody they could delegate to. As the duchy's highest authority, Sylvester was busy delegating the cleanup to other members of the archducal family. And as the knight commander, Karstedt was especially busy since he hadn't been able to excuse himself from attending the feast. We really were shorthanded.

"How about the temple and the lower city?" I asked. "Was anyone hurt there?"

"As of yet, we haven't received word of any major injuries," Sylvester replied. "Come on, don't look so worried. The soldiers at the gates and the knights stationed at the temple apparently went above and beyond the call of duty. Just ask those retainers of yours who were there."

Dunkelfelger's representatives had yet to receive proper greetings, so I didn't question Sylvester any further. He lined up next to Florencia and Charlotte, then exchanged the usual courtesies with Hannelore. They went on for ages and were packed with the names of gods.

"If not for the assistance of Dunkelfelger's knights," Sylvester said, "I suspect we never would have rescued Ferdinand or protected our foundation. Your support in Gerlach was similarly heartening." He went on to note that my scholars' correspondence about Dunkelfelger's involvement in the Purging of Lanzenave had proven especially useful in the Defense of Ehrenfest.

Good to know Hartmut's and Clarissa's letters helped.

"As abrupt as this invitation must have been, I am so very thankful that you accepted it," Sylvester continued. "If we had missed this opportunity to reward your hard work, we would have struggled to find another. Our victory feast shall begin at sixth bell. It will be only humble in scope, but I hope it still conveys the depth of our gratitude."

He then turned to Florencia and Charlotte. "Take our guests from Dunkelfelger to their rooms. Baths have already been prepared for them. They may relax until the feast."

"Thank you," Hannelore replied with a gentle smile. "I had hoped to bathe before our celebration."

Sylvester smiled in turn, then addressed Ferdinand: "We've prepared a guest room for you as well."

"A guest room...?" Ferdinand blinked a few times in confusion, then glanced at me and said, "Ah, yes..." Despite the warm welcome he'd received from Sylvester, he no longer had a home to return to—not since he'd given his estate to me. I'd wanted to bring him back to Ehrenfest, but now I'd taken his chambers from him. That wouldn't do at all.

"Ferdinand," I said, "use my library."

"But that would be—"

"Please. I will stay in the castle. Your chambers have been kept largely as they were, and you should feel more comfortable staying somewhere you're familiar

with. If you need potions, use the workshop and its ingredients as you please. Just make sure Lasfam sees you are safe.”

Hannelore gave me a strange look. “Lord Ferdinand has chambers in your library?”

“Indeed. My library was once his estate. He gave it to me when he moved to Ahrensbach, and my first course of action was to fill it with books,” I replied, unable to keep from boasting. The books mostly belonged to Ferdinand, but I decided not to mention that.

“Lady Hannelore,” Ferdinand added, “I did not have a wife or any children when I received the royal decree ordering me to leave Ehrenfest. The estate was given to me by my father, so I elected to pass it on to Rozemyne, my charge at the time. That was all. To be frank, I did not think my chambers would still be there.”

I turned sharply to Ferdinand, who looked thoroughly exasperated. “Did I not tell you I wouldn’t touch them? I wanted you to have somewhere to stay whenever you came home to visit.”

“Yes, but that was merely a promise; I assumed it would only last so long. I considered it inevitable that your library would eventually encroach on my chambers.”

“Not enough books have been made for that. I’m doing my best to print more, but...”

That really was a dream of mine—a collection of so many books that my library could barely even contain them. But as I started wondering how to make that happen, Ferdinand sighed.

“I *would* prefer to sleep in my own chambers, assuming they really do still exist, but would you truly be amenable to that?”

“Of course. As I said, I can stay in my chambers in the castle. I shall send an ordonnanz to Lasfam telling him to prepare for your arrival. Then, while we wait, I will check on the temple and the lower city.”

I started pondering all the things I would need to do before returning to the castle—but again, Ferdinand pulled me from my thoughts.

“Hold on—do you really mean to abandon your guests? *You* were the one who invited them here. We can safely assume that the temple and the lower city experienced no major injuries; be content with your retainers’ reports for today and go look tomorrow morning. There is not much time before sixth bell.”

He was right—by the time I’d bathed and received updates from my retainers, it would almost be time for the feast. I sent an ordonnanz to Lasfam asking him to make arrangements for Ferdinand, Eckhart, and Justus, and his response came at once: he had already made them, having heard through Lieseleta that Ferdinand was safe and returning for the feast.

“Lasfam really is an excellent attendant,” I said.

“But of course,” Ferdinand scoffed. “He trained under me.”

“Lieseleta is just as good, though. If not better.”

“Um, Aub Ehrenfest... Are they normally like this?” Hannelore asked Sylvester. She and Heisshitze both looked stunned.

Sylvester let his eyes wander as though searching for the right words, then gave a hushed response: “Yes, most of the time.”

“Welcome back, Lady Rozemyne,” Otilie said upon my return to the castle. “I am glad to see you are safe.”

Lieseleta and Gretia greeted me too; they had received news of my arrival from Charlotte and rushed over from the library to start getting everything ready. Abrupt invitations inconvenienced more than just the recipient—they also troubled the attendants tasked with preparing for their unexpected guests.

“Even with Bertilde’s assistance, Brunhilde had to run all over the place to prepare Dunkelfelger’s guest rooms,” Otilie said. “Let us head there now.”

Only once those formalities were out of the way did Otilie look at her son Hartmut and his fiancée, Clarissa. A smile spread across her face as she told them she had informed the family estate of their return; then she briskly took her leave. As it turned out, she had waited around as long as she was able so that she could confirm everyone was safe.

“Since Lady Rozemyne is about to bathe, the guard knights could return to their dorms in shifts?” Lieseleta suggested to them. “You all will need to change clothes for the feast.”

The knights nodded and got to work deciding the order in which they would get ready. I watched them out of the corner of my eye before heading to the changing room with Gretia. She took out my hair ornaments and started delicately undoing my hair.

“The temple has been contacted,” she said. “Judithe and the others should arrive by the time you have finished bathing.”

“So... How did the war seem from here in Ehrenfest?” I asked. “Was anyone hurt?”

“We were in the library for the most part. Thanks to the magic tool you set up to protect it, we did not even notice the fighting.” They had known when it had started and ended thanks to the arrival of ordonnanzes, but no damage had come to my library.

Gretia continued, “Even before there were signs of a battle, Damuel brought the Gutenbergs and their families to the library in the morning. It was a surprise to see so many commoners arrive all at once.”

“So he kept his promise and protected everyone,” I said. He must have sensed Georgine’s arrival early and moved the Gutenbergs to my library—the safest location, thanks to my magic tools.

“He did. One moment that stood out to me was when your hairpin maker and her family removed their charms and asked him to deliver them to her father. Then they started working on your hair ornaments and clothes, saying that they had to do what they could to help.”

Gretia had just finished undoing my hair and started helping me out of my riding clothes when Lieseleta entered. “Oh, were you discussing today’s events? There were several Gilberta Company seamstresses among those who evacuated. They brought your clothes and hair ornaments with them to the library to ensure their safety. As I recall, they said a fitting would need to be done and wondered when you might be free. We will need to contact them.”

I could picture Tuuli and Corinna both throwing themselves into their work. They would have felt uneasy doing nothing at all, and my approaching departure was a practical concern, but still—the Gutenbergs' decision to keep busy after their evacuation had turned the library into a surprisingly relaxed environment.

“Those of the Plantin Company observed the estate's furnishings and the library as closely as they could, eager to learn anything that might help them with their books and eateries. They already had a good understanding of the books made in Ehrenfest, but they said they had never carefully observed a normal one.”

Philine and Judithe arrived as I was finishing my bath. They both looked well. I wasn't dressed yet, so Roderick was waiting in another room with the male knights.

“So the library was safe, but what about the temple?” I asked. “Did it end up becoming a battlefield...?”

Philine nodded, an uncomfortable look on her face. “But, um, everyone in the orphanage is safe. We received an ordonnanz from Damuel at third bell and evacuated them as per our drills.” That must have been around the same time that the Gutenbergs had made their way to the library.



“The gray priests guarding the temple were replaced with knights, and the shumil magic tools were activated,” Judithe added. She had evacuated the orphans and stayed in contact with Melchior’s retainers. “A short while later, Damuel sent word that threats had appeared at the west gate.”

Wowee. Sounds like he was the real star of the show.

It made sense that Damuel had been the best source of up-to-date information about the attack—he had been tasked with defending the lower city—but hearing his name pop up again and again really showed how much he had done.

“I used my highbeast to get an aerial view of the lower city,” Judithe continued. “There was shouting at the west gate, and the sight of commoners running around when they had been ordered to stay inside told me the battle had truly begun.” She had noticed the knights all rushing to the west gate and wanted to assist them, but her duty had been to defend the temple; the most she could do was watch the clamor. “It was while I was in the air that I noticed a wagon moving strangely.”

Damuel had sent his warning ordonnanz at third bell, and the fighting at the west gate had started before fourth bell. By that time, the main street had been largely devoid of people, and the farmers transporting wagons of vegetables had passed through the gates to their farming towns or to an evacuation camp to the south.

“By fourth bell, the north of the city was nothing but closed shops, but the wagon was headed there anyway. Then it disappeared into the shadows of an alleyway. I suspect that was where it stopped, as a short while later, a group of people appeared at the north gate. They weren’t dressed in silver, but I suspected the west gate might be a diversion, so I sent an ordonnanz to the knights guarding the Noble’s Quarter.”

Judithe sounded proud as ever as she recalled the events of the battle, and for good reason—her gut feeling had proven correct. The figures had formed their highbeasts and turned hostile as soon as they were discovered.

“The thing is, *that* was a diversion too,” she continued. “As ordonnanzes were darting all over the place, the temple’s back gate was blown wide open.” The

small door meant for those traveling on foot had exploded, and the invaders had rushed through while unleashing flash-bangs and instant-death poison. “The reports you sent in the morning had already taught us how to deal with the poison, so we performed waschens instantly and drank our jureves. The knights all survived.”

However, because they had drunk their jureves, they had needed to rely on the shumils to fight for them. Judithe had likewise come into contact with the poison while she was flying above the temple’s gate, but the other knights had acted as per my instructions.

“The shumils were unbelievably strong. One of the five invaders was wearing skintight silver clothes, so the shumils weren’t able to detect them and allowed them to pass. But the other four were almost immediately killed by the blue and pink shumils that came running from the front gate. The shumils moved so tremendously fast and mowed down the intruders with their radiant golden scythes. I already knew they would prioritize speed, since they had only until they ran out of mana, but I still couldn’t believe how suddenly they cut down the threats. They ended up covered in blood, but don’t worry—I cleaned them with a waschen.”

“Th-Thank you, Judithe.” She was wearing a proud smile, but the mental image of shumils soaked red with the blood of their enemies was kind of terrifying.

“I contacted Lord Melchior to report that one silver-clothed invader had made it into the temple. I did not experience the events that followed firsthand, but that person was apparently Lady Georgine. She triggered a bunch of traps before ultimately being teleported to the Ivory Tower.”

Judithe hadn’t seen the events of the book room, then. I would need to ask Melchior and his retainers for more details.

“Oh, also—one of the intruders the shumils killed was Grausam, Matthias’s father.”

“Um... *Grausam*?”

“I shall let you decide if you want to tell Matthias.”

We took Grausam down in Gerlach, didn't we?

I cocked my head at her, and that was when I remembered—Matthias had said something about his father having three body doubles.

Um, body doubles? But which Grausam was the real one? Is the battle actually over?

Unease spread through my chest, and I saw my face pale in the mirror. I wanted to leap up and race straight to the temple and the lower city.

“Lady Rozemyne, are your male retainers allowed to enter?” Lieseleta asked. “Damuel and Roderick are here. Laurenz is currently stationed outside the door, while my sister is guarding it from the inside. The other guard knights seem to have returned to their rooms to change.”

I snapped back to my senses and nodded; Lieseleta and Gretia had at some point finished doing my hair and changing my clothes. “Please do. I would appreciate this chance to hear a report from Damuel.”

“He certainly was a hero,” Lieseleta giggled. She and Gretia then went to fetch him.

It wasn't long before Damuel and Roderick entered. The latter was holding a pen and some paper, ready to take notes. Maybe he had been transcribing Damuel's perspective on the fighting.

“Welcome back, Lady Rozemyne.”

“Thank you, Damuel. I am glad to be back. You were able to protect the Gutenbergs, were you not? And it has come to my attention that your ordonnances were immensely helpful to everyone who received them. I thank you ever so much.”

His eyes wandered as he struggled to find a response; then he finally said, “I am honored to receive your praise.” He was undermining his own achievements, in true Damuel fashion, and the sight caused a smile to play on my lips.

“I am told the west gate was attacked. Please tell me the damages.”

“Very well. Some of the west gate's soldiers were hurt, but none sustained

serious injuries. We can thank Brigitte's ordonnanz, which gave us time to prepare ourselves."

"*Brigitte's ordonnanz...?*" I repeated. As much as I was relieved to hear everyone was safe, that wasn't a name I'd expected to hear.

"Indeed," he replied with a nod. "Any commendations for my warnings should go to her. She had wanted to contact you, but as you, Angelica, and Cornelius were all outside Ehrenfest, her ordonnanzes refused to take flight. She sent one to me as a last resort."

Frustrated, Brigitte had sent Damuel an out-of-the-blue ordonnanz demanding to know why she couldn't reach me during this state of emergency. She had also reported that an Illgner lumber merchant visiting Leisegang had seen a group of strange individuals board a boat. They had called themselves traveling merchants, but their arrogance and flowery language aroused suspicion.

"Everyone could tell they were nobles in disguise, so they kept their distance—which only made the group stand out even more," Damuel continued. "The lumber merchant returned to Illgner just as the giebe's knights were gathering information about any suspicious individuals, and the rest goes without saying."

The knight who had received the merchant's report had attempted to deliver it to the giebe, but he'd never had the chance; he had arrived both on the heels of Old Werkestock's invasion and while the giebe was requesting reinforcements from Sylvester, so he'd simply been turned away.

In the end, the knight hadn't been able to deliver his message to the giebe; the knight commander had been giving his Order a rousing speech about enduring until their reinforcements arrived, rushing everyone to get ready for battle all the while. The other knights had also hurried him, so he'd flown with them to the battlefield, where he'd ultimately reported to Brigitte. I could only imagine the shock she must have felt when her ordonnanz to me had refused to fly.

Sorry, Brigitte...

"I wasted no time consulting Leisegang about these suspicious individuals and asked when the ship in question was expected to arrive at Ehrenfest's west

gate,” Damuel continued. He had passed along a description of the suspected nobles and several other details, like the fact that a lumber merchant from Illgner had made the initial report, and asked that the matter be looked into posthaste. “They began their investigation at once, perhaps because they had already been told the Knight’s Order would contact them. The speed with which they then produced results seems like a testament to how much the group in question stood out.”

Leisegang had responded that the boat would arrive at about fourth bell, weather permitting. Thus, Damuel had sent ordonnances to various locations, warning them to be on their guard, and evacuated the Gutenbergs.

“The lumber merchant’s information proved correct: a boat that arrived immediately before fourth bell was transporting individuals with silver capes and wolfaniels.”

A request for more knights had been sent out, but not even that had prepared them for the coming battle. The invaders had attacked in greater numbers than expected, *and* with wolfaniels. It was then that Damuel sent out ordonnances requesting more backup and announcing the start of the fighting.

Damuel continued, “The knights at the west gate warned the soldiers about the dangers of wolfaniels and entrusted them with an important duty—dumping waste on the invaders to force them to remove any silver clothes.”

The excrement had been dropped on the silver-caped invaders as they had tried to pass through the gate. Of course, the sullied nobles hadn’t been too pleased about “mere commoners” disgracing them, so they had unleashed their wolfaniels and taken out their schtappes. The knights hiding in the shadows to prevent their escape had then burst out all at once and taken them down.

“That reminds me,” Damuel said, “a captain at the west gate, Gunther, truly scared me.”

Hearing that name made my stomach lurch. “Why? What happened...?” Was he seriously hurt? The fact he had given Damuel no more than a fright might have meant he had ended up in danger but managed to escape.

“There weren’t enough knights to contain the wolfaniels, so one of the beasts slipped through and pounced on a soldier. Gunther leapt into action and

punched it with his gauntlet—like this.” Damuel swung at the air a few times to demonstrate.

“Um... A *commoner* started punching a wolfaniel...?” I asked.

“He even let out a shout. Like ‘What’re you doing to my subordinate, you mangy pup?!’”

As heroic as Damuel made it sound, wolfaniels were seriously dangerous and could change size based on their mana quantity. “Are you *sure* nobody received any major injuries at the west gate?!” My face turned ghostly white as I cried, “Don’t tell me you’re being sneaky and omitting any deaths from your count!”

Damuel shook his head with a troubled smile. “There were no deaths at all. The wolfaniel bit Gunther when he punched it, but your charm activated on the spot.”

“Excuse me?”

“The wolfaniel exploded, scattering chunks all over the place. That was when Gunther realized the true strength of the charms he was wearing... and started pushing the boons his family had given him to their absolute limit. I wanted to complain that he was threatening to shatter the promise I made you.”

I couldn’t even begin to describe my embarrassment. I wanted to find a deep hole and dive right into it—or dig my own, if need be.

Um... Sorry my dad was such a menace.

“The attack on the west gate must have been meant as a diversion from the attack on the temple,” Damuel said. “Still, we managed to prevent any more bad actors from getting inside the city. Gunther defeated two wolfaniels in the end, then kicked down Grausam, the former Giebe Gerlach, and finished him with a charm. He put his life on the line, but his results can’t be ignored. Could you ask the aub to consider rewarding the soldiers of the west gate? A request from you should accomplish far more than if I attempted to make one through the Knight’s Order.”

I thought that was a fantastic idea. The soldiers needed commendations—and to be honest, so did Damuel.

Still, another Grausam? And this time, Dad was the one who took him down?

“Hold on!” Judithe cried, shooting Damuel a glare like he was trying to steal her valor. “It was the temple’s shumils that dispatched Grausam—I saw it with my own eyes! You must be mistaken.”

“No, I recognized his face,” Damuel protested. He must not have been too impressed that his observational skills were being called into question.

I clapped my hands a few times and got between them. “Let’s nip this in the bud: according to Matthias, Grausam had *three* body doubles. Before we came here, we defeated our own Grausam in Gerlach.”

“Come again?”

Every one of my retainers who had stayed in Ehrenfest stared at me in shock. Angelica was the only one who looked entirely unfazed. That was when I remembered that although I’d received their reports, I’d yet to give any of my own.

“Um, Lady Rozemyne... Preparing a body double is no easy feat. Not everyone’s mana is the same color, so the idea that he had *three* is...”

“There are ways to make it happen—assuming one does not mind using cruel and costly methods,” I said.

Grausam had formed submission contracts with countless Devouring soldiers. It wouldn’t have been particularly tough for him to dye such people with his mana, since they wouldn’t have received any attributes from their parents. He might even have been able to artificially induce the mark of Ewigeliebe within them, although most would simply have died in the process.

Could it be that Grausam and Count Bindewald targeted me way back when to turn me into another body double?

“In any case,” I said, “we have confirmed the existence of at least three Grausams. It would not surprise me if we discovered that even more were defeated over the course of this invasion. I am more concerned that there might be a second or third Lady Georgine.”

My retainers all tensed up. If the Georgine bested in the temple turned out to

have been an impostor, there was a good chance the real one would rear her head again.

“I will send an ordonnanz to Sylvester,” I declared. “Let us confirm whether Lady Georgine truly was defeated.”

My bird took flight... and soon returned with a response.

“Yes, we got the real Georgine. The one that was teleported to the Ivory Tower was a fake, but the one I dispatched in the foundation’s hall was really her. I also got back what was stolen from us. No matter what lingering forces remain, they won’t reach our foundation.”

The Knight’s Order was on top of the various Grausams and Georgines that had been killed. If nothing else, we wouldn’t need to worry about our foundation being stolen during the feast, especially if we’d retrieved the key to our bible.

The ordonnanz repeated its message twice, then turned into a yellow stone and started to fall in front of me. I’d seen it happen so many times before, but for some reason, I was trembling too much to catch it as it fell. A chill ran down my spine, and my stomach began to ache.

“Is something wrong?” Lieseleta asked, eyeing me curiously as she picked up the stone.

I gazed down at my fingers, smiled, and said that it was nothing. I wasn’t even sure how to describe the unease I was feeling. Staying seated wouldn’t do me much good, so I stood up.

“Is it almost sixth bell?” I asked.

“Not quite, and we won’t leave right away. The hall is going to be busy with all the preparations being made, so we shall wait until we are contacted and then depart leisurely.”

“I see...” I said and sat back down.

I was imagining how busy the hall must be when a small bell chimed. Gretia opened the door, and my dressed retainers entered.

“We apologize for the wait, Lady Rozemyne.”

I stood up again. “Well, with everyone here, there may be something we can do to help out in the hall.” Before I could attempt to leave, however, Lieseleta shook her head.

“Please rest for a little while longer. I am told you collapsed even in Ahrensbach. You must be tired, no?”

“I *am* tired, but it feels impossible to remain still.”

Lieseleta looked at her fellow retainers; then her brow furrowed in concern. “Lady Rozemyne, you played a crucial role in this battle; there are bound to be any number of guests who wish to speak with you. Rather than trying to help with the preparations, I would advise you to rest or devise ways to deal with anyone who wants your attention.”

Deal with them, hmm?

That hadn’t even crossed my mind. I’d assumed all eyes would be on Sylvester for his battle against Georgine, Melchior for defending the temple, or perhaps the knights who had protected the west gate. I decided to consult my retainers, which prompted Clarissa to beam and stick out her chest.

“I can spread tales of your heroism all night. My specialty will be the ritual performed over Ahrensbach’s ocean, which I was able to observe in its entirety.”

Under normal circumstances, I might have tried to convince Clarissa to reconsider... but something told me she would do a better job than I ever could.

“Lady Rozemyne?”

“Yes, very well. I shall entrust this evening’s guests to Hartmut and Clarissa. So much has happened that I’ve yet to fully come to terms with. I doubt I would manage to answer any questions properly.” It was like a thick fog had descended on my mind or a blanket was enveloping my memories. If someone else wanted to explain the events of our battles in my stead, I wasn’t going to stop them.

“You may count on me, then,” Hartmut said, smiling at the convenience. “I shall speak so much that you won’t need to answer a single question.”

As I nodded, Cornelius peered down at me. His dark, panicked eyes betrayed a single question, which he wasted no time putting into words: “Rozemyne, are you sure? I’m pretty sure you’re going to regret this immediately.”

“Oh?” I replied with a chuckle. “You could always distract our guests with tales of your own heroics.”

Cornelius shook his head. “That’s not what I meant. If you let Hartmut and Clarissa say whatever they want—in front of the Dunkelfelgerians, no less, who are going to make whatever tales they hear even taller—then Mother will go absolutely crazy. Do you *want* to be her next victim?”

“Um, Cornelius... I went to *war*. That’s it. Nothing romantic happened whatsoever. Do you really think Mother, of all people, has tired of writing love stories? Do you think she’d try her hand at action-packed tales about knights?” Were that the case, wouldn’t she be drawn to those who had served as Hannelore’s guards? They would have so many more amazing stories to tell.

“Of course not,” Cornelius muttered, hanging his head.

Exactly. It seems to me that her passion for love stories has only increased over the years.

In contrast to Cornelius, who looked exhausted before the feast had even started, Roderick’s brown eyes were sparkling as he showed me his papers. “I want to hear everything there is to hear about your battles. I plan to create some new knight stories and a sequel to *A Ditter Story*, so everyone’s tales of heroism are more than welcome.”

As we all smiled warmly at Roderick’s enthusiasm, Hartmut alone placed a contemplative hand on his chin. “In that case, might we have Roderick stay by Lady Rozemyne’s side and ask the guests about their own heroics? That should distract them.”

“Hartmut, are you surrendering a place by Lady Rozemyne’s side to Roderick...?” Philine asked, worry clear on her face. “Do you have a fever or something of the like?”

Damuel gave a firm nod of agreement—and with that, sixth bell rang.

Celebratory Feast

“As soon as Karstedt received Judithe’s ordonnanz, he ordered me to help regain control of the north gate.”

Our feast had started, and Wilfried was in particularly high spirits as he regaled us all with his tale. Because he was an underage archduke candidate, he had initially been told to stay away from the battle, but the sudden rush of knights to the west gate had made its northern counterpart especially vulnerable when yet another distraction had appeared. Karstedt had also concluded that our enemies might have a great enough mana capacity that someone like Wilfried would be needed to bind them.

“My orders were to capture them, if possible, which was no easy feat,” Wilfried continued. His dark-green eyes sparkled as he described the battle with various chops and punches, dictating to Roderick, who was feverishly transcribing his every word. “I managed to catch a big one, though. Grausam! I got the old Giebe Gerlach! Let me guess—you’re too shocked for words?”

Well, that’s another Grausam for the pile.

Grausam’s name had cropped up during tales of so many battles that I was starting to lose track of them all. Surely this was the last one. Surely there couldn’t be more. Just thinking about it was making me kind of sick.

“I bound Grausam with my schtappe, and—”

“A question, if you would allow me.” Roderick’s pen was hovering over his paper. “Were the decoy troops at the north gate not wearing silver capes?”

“Hm?” Wilfried thought for a moment. “They were, but the capes had normal cloth on the inside. As soon as they turned over, mana worked on them just fine.”

The invaders had apparently blocked about half of our knights’ attacks by holding up their capes, but because they were riding atop highbeasts, they hadn’t been able to fully cover themselves with silver. It had taken quite some

time, but Wilfried ultimately succeeded in capturing “Grausam.”

“I took him to the Knight’s Order and couldn’t believe it when they told me he was the third Grausam to show up in Ehrenfest. Rozemyne, you fought one too, right? How did your battle go?”

“You can ask Hartmut over there for the details,” I said. “He will explain things not even I can remember.”

“Hmm... Hartmut, huh?” Wilfried muttered with a slight grimace, casting an eye on the large group that had gathered. Hartmut was eagerly describing the Battle of Gerlach while Clarissa gleefully recounted the Battle of Ahrensbach. They went into excruciating detail, so exaggerated and overflowing with the names of gods that I wanted to sigh.

“If you would rather avoid Hartmut, might I suggest speaking with Lady Hannelore?” I said. “She commanded three wolfaniels against Lanzenavian soldiers while in Ahrensbach, attacked Grausam the instant he was open, and fought with vigor befitting a Dunkelfelger archduke candidate.”

Hannelore was currently engaged in a lively conversation with Elvira, who gave a sincere thank-you as my mother before switching back into her noble persona. From there, Elvira launched into a broad discussion of the various battles and Dunkelfelger’s accomplishments in them—normal enough, I thought, but then she proposed giving Hannelore an advance copy of *Love Stories of the Gods* by way of thanks. Not even I’d read that book yet, and the gesture moved Hannelore so deeply that tears began to well in her red eyes. It wasn’t long before she was extolling the stories Elvira and her ladies had written, which in turn provided more material for Elvira to draw from.

“Is it not about time for us to separate Mother and Lady Hannelore?” I asked.

“And interrupt their fun?” Wilfried replied. “I mean, I realize it must be a little uncomfortable for you, but...”

“Not just ‘a little.’ Lady Hannelore is speaking about me like I’m a goddess from one of their stories.”

But when I moved to stop Elvira from putting her daughter’s heroics in book form, Hannelore gleefully leaned forward and said, “You would turn *my*

retelling into a story?”

From there, Hannelore began detailing everything she knew about recent events, starting from when we’d arrived at Dunkelfelger’s country gate. Problematically enough, not only was she exaggerating as much as Clarissa, but she was also putting a romantic spin on things that I could tell would drive Elvira crazy.

Ferdinand looks none too pleased.

On a moment-to-moment basis, Hannelore wasn’t saying anything untrue, so there was no room for Ferdinand or me to interject. All we could do was sit quietly as she continued to dig us into a deeper and deeper hole.

“If you’re this bothered about it, then you shouldn’t have gone to Ahrensbach in the first place,” Wilfried remarked.

“Do you really mean that?” I snapped. “Are you saying it would have been better to leave Ferdinand to die?”

“No, I’m saying that you kept declaring how you wouldn’t mind making enemies of the royal family and the gods, so it’s weird that you’re complaining about simple rumors. Just admit you’ve fallen in love with Uncle already.”

Seriously?! I’m not in love with him! How many times do I need to say it?!

No matter how much I protested, the others merely smirked a little.

“Forsernte bestowed upon you her aid when she saw Erwachlehen guide Jugereise to their visitation. You must be troubled by the weight of the rafel you have been given.”

I’d just been hit by so many names that I struggled to parse their meaning. Still, from the others’ tones and expressions, I could guess they were trying to “console” me somehow. The fact they were all ignoring my objections was putting me more and more on edge.

Forget about falling in love—I’ve never even crushed on someone!

“Uncle doesn’t seem that bothered,” Wilfried added with a grin and pointed at Ferdinand.

I glanced over, wanting to see what he meant, and then immediately looked

away again. Ferdinand was wearing the same dazzling smile he put on whenever he was in the absolute worst mood—the smile he'd worn when facing Georgine and throughout his engagement to Detlinde.

"How can you say that when he's making his extremely displeased face?" I asked. "Seeing it scares me so much that I'm too afraid to even approach him."

"That's his displeased face? I should probably take my leave, then."

And with that, Wilfried beat a hasty retreat, muttering something about how hard Ferdinand was to understand. I wanted to flee with him.

"Sister," Melchior said not even a moment later. It was like he'd actively been waiting for Wilfried to leave.

Just a few moments ago, Melchior and his guard knights had been smiling and telling everyone about the traps fake Georgine had run into. She had been covered in silver cloth to the point that not even her face had been visible, and she'd sprinted into so many traps while fleeing from the knights inside the temple that I couldn't help but laugh. It almost sounded comical.

The fake Georgine had charged into the book room, slipped on the bead-size feystones covering the floor, and collapsed in a loud, cartoonish manner. Melchior and his guard knights had known the room was filled with traps, so they'd waited outside and watched, their bows drawn, as the traps had activated one by one.

For several moments, the fake Georgine had remained on the floor, seemingly at a loss. Then she'd tried to get up... only to fall down again and again in an increasingly humorous fashion as she'd struggled to navigate the feystones. Her struggles hadn't ended there, though; the next part of the room had been slathered with a particularly strong adhesive. Her silver gloves and shoes had stuck to it, and the instant she'd pulled out her hands, the archers had started shooting at her newly exposed skin.

The fake Georgine had twisted her body to avoid the arrows, then succeeded in getting out of her shoes and escaping the adhesive. Beyond it, however, we had placed invisible teleporters. She had touched one with a bare hand and vanished, leaving only her clothes behind. Apparently, she had reappeared inside the Ivory Tower in her undergarments.

“Your group certainly is popular, Melchior. Everyone really seems to enjoy the stories you’ve told.”

“The traps you and Hartmut set are what makes them so amusing, Sister.”

“That said... did we truly find the real Lady Georgine?” I asked quietly.

“Grausam had so many body doubles. It worries me to no end that there might be more we simply haven’t found.”

Melchior shook his head. “The one who appeared in the foundation’s hall was the real one. There can be no mistaking it. I’m told several of our prisoners died one after another when Father dealt with her.”

“I see,” I said with a relieved sigh.

Melchior lowered his voice a little. “Mother captured a Lady Georgine as well, apparently.”

“Florenca did...?”

“Yes. I’m told she caught her at the exit of the castle’s hidden passageways.”

Sylvester had realized that Georgine knew all of the castle’s secret passages thanks to the incident that had put me in a jureve. Thus, he had stealthily remade them and told no one, ensuring that every single older path led to the same place. The fake Georgine hadn’t noticed the alterations and ended up right where Florenca was waiting for her.

I didn’t know she was part of the fighting too.

“Her retainer Leberecht prepared all sorts of traps and magic tools for her, it would seem.”

“Well, he *is* Hartmut’s father; it stands to reason that he’s good with those kinds of things.”

Florenca had clapped schtappe-sealing bracelets on the fake Georgine’s wrists. Then she’d ordered for the woman to be taken to the Ivory Tower, where the impostor teleported from the book room had suddenly fallen from the ceiling.

“Father was in the foundation’s hall at the time, so he had no way of knowing what was going on outside,” Melchior said. “He came out when Mother sent

word of Lady Georgine's capture, intending to head to the Ivory Tower and see her with his own eyes—but when the other Lady Georgine appeared, Mother sent him another ordonnanz telling him to return to the foundation."

Florencia had discovered that Georgine was using body doubles right after Sylvester had sent Ferdinand an ordonnanz announcing their enemy's capture.

"And the real Georgine also entered through the temple?" I asked, my head cocked.

"She did," Melchior whispered, his shoulders slumped. "I was ordered not to join the battles outside, so I was in my room when I received the news that the woman we thought was Lady Georgine triggered all of our traps. We were lulled into a false sense of security. The knights not reporting to me went to check on the fighting by the gate, leaving the book room unattended. That was when Lady Georgine—the real one—got inside."

"And nobody saw her? There were plenty of knights at the gates, weren't there?"

There were three gates leading into the temple, each of which had its own guard shumil. As I understood it, the shumil positioned at the gate for carriages *had* moved at some point, but the pedestrian gate was so close by that I didn't consider it an issue. I also found it hard to believe that Judithe and the others wouldn't have noticed the carriage gate opening and responded instantly. My concerns didn't end there, though. The temple was a fairly large place; how had Georgine reached the book room without running into a single person?

"She used another, more unusual entrance. I guess you likewise didn't consider it, Sister."

"Hmm?"

"During the *entwickeln*, we added a waterway to the temple, remember? To aid the creation of paper in the workshop."

Indeed, we had made a passage connecting the temple and the river. It wasn't being used yet, as we still needed to set up a way to purify the water and such.

"The real Lady Georgine used that waterway as a secret passage," Melchior explained. "She must not have been able to *waschen* while wearing her silver

clothes, as we found her footprints near the exit by the boys' building. From there, she entered the noble's section from the west side of the basement, which the servants and those bringing food from the lower city use. Then she waited in one of the blue priests' quarters until the book room wasn't being watched. We assume the priest who accommodated her and their attendant made the arrangements."

The real Georgine—the one Sylvester had dispatched—had apparently been dressed in gray robes. It made sense that nobody had paid any attention to her, especially when another "Georgine" had just blundered into a bunch of traps.

"Were they—?"

"Lady Rozemyne," Heisshitze called out just as I was beginning to calm down. He approached me with a smile, bringing along an attendant carrying a plate piled with delicacies.

"How do you like the food?" I asked.

Heisshitze shot his plate a very satisfied grin. "It's delicious, and there's so much variety. I've enjoyed this food plenty of times during the Archduke Conference, but it tastes so much sweeter when you've just seized a victory. That said... your plate is largely empty."

"I am having my attendant retrieve the occasional portion of my favorite dishes. And in any case, I suspect the amount I normally eat would seem paltry to a knight. I take only a few bites, but I savor each and every one. This is the only season we can serve vargel with cream sauce, so do try some while you can."

As a host, I was almost obligated to share in the food we were serving to our guests. I ate some with a smile, but I couldn't taste it at all, maybe because I wasn't really hungry.

"Tell me, is the alcohol to your tastes as a Dunkelfelgerian?"

"But of course!" Heisshitze declared. "It is much stronger than the vize we normally enjoy, but the flavor is excellent." He held up his full cup with a pleased grin, evidently relieved to have something new to drink.

I think that's hard liquor, though. Should you really be downing so much of it?

Ferdinand had been right to worry—if we’d invited all of Dunkelfelger’s volunteers, Ehrenfest’s entire supply of alcohol would have vanished overnight.

“Um, Lord Heisshitze... may I ask a question?” Roderick said, his excitement clear on his face.

Heisshitze gave a generous nod and roared, “Ask away, boy!” The alcohol was making him especially boisterous.

“Is it true that Dunkelfelger suffered not a single fatality? You fought so many tough battles back-to-back that I can hardly believe it... Please tell me the secret to your strength!”

By the end of the Battle of Gerlach, there had been ten rows of ten Dunkelfelger knights ready to hear the declaration of victory. Hannelore and Heisshitze had been on the balcony with me as their commanders. In other words, there hadn’t been a single person unaccounted for.

“We managed it only because of Lord Ferdinand and Lady Rozemyne,” Heisshitze said, his expression turning more serious. “We were warned in advance to cover our mouths and keep our jureves with us. More than ten of our knights ended up with serious mana clots from that poison bomb Grausam launched, but none died instantly. It did far more damage to the enemy forces and Gerlach’s knights, since they did not know the peculiarities of the attack. Many of them turned into feystones in merely a moment.”

At once, the sight of all those gleaming feystones littering the ground resurfaced in my mind. Goose bumps rose on my skin, and the food that I’d eaten pushed up against my throat. I covered my mouth and swallowed it back down; the last thing I wanted to do was embarrass myself.

“Rozemyne,” Ferdinand said from somewhere out of my sight. I turned around just as the door to the hall was thrown open.

“Rozemyne, are you out of harm’s way?! I’ve come to save you!”

It was Bonifatius, fully armored. He barreled in like a bull in a china shop and surprised me so thoroughly that my nausea instantly vanished. Everyone was staring at him in a complete daze, but he ignored them all as he looked me up and down, confirming I was okay.

“There is not a single scratch on me, Grandfather. Thanks to you, I am doing fine.” That last part wasn’t totally a lie; he had just saved me from making a very embarrassing scene.

“I see,” he replied with a relieved nod—and then rounded on Sylvester. “WHAT’S THIS ABOUT YOU STARTING THE FEAST WITHOUT ME?! You charged up the teleporter without a second thought for Ferdinand, but what about me?! It wasn’t easy having to rush all the way here from Illgner!”

“We don’t have the mana to spare,” Sylvester shot back. “The only reason we could fuel the teleporter for Ferdinand and Rozemyne was because they helped supply it. Besides, look—I was right that you’d still make it here in time.”

Sylvester must have refused to activate the teleporters for Bonifatius alone. I thought that was reasonable enough, especially when our main focus right now was sharing intelligence with Dunkelfelger, but there was no reason for me to weigh in.

“Rozemyne, tell Bonifatius you want to hear about Illgner,” Ferdinand whispered, having at some point moved to stand behind me. “Use the opportunity to convince him to get changed.”

I nodded and approached our loud new arrival. “Grandfather, we have guests from Dunkelfelger here at the moment. Why not get changed and tell me tales of your heroics? As I understand it, Brigitte sent an ordonnanz bearing critical intelligence when the fighting was already underway. I am curious to know how things were in Illgner.”

Bonifatius nodded, now grinning from ear to ear. “Alright. You got it. Just wait right there; I’ll tell you everything.” He turned to leave without another word—and with that, I gained one more feather in my cap.

To make sure people weren’t restricted in whom they could speak with, nobody at the feast had a designated seat; those who wished to sit down could take any chair at any of the tables set up along the outer edges of the hall. This had been Ehrenfest’s solution to the sudden nature of the feast and the fact they hadn’t known how many of Dunkelfelger’s knights were going to attend.

Once he was changed, Bonifatius came over to where I was seated and got his

attendant to fetch him some food. Sylvester sat next to him, ready to hear his report, while Karstedt stood behind them, having finally secured a free moment to attend. Ferdinand was sitting in the last remaining seat as though it were only natural.

“Now, as you know, Illgner’s a long way away from here...”

Bonifatius wasn’t exaggerating—the province in question was located at Ehrenfest’s southwesternmost corner. He explained that flying there would have taken his knights an entire day because they would have needed to match the speed of the laynobles among them. Going any faster than that would most likely have exhausted them, and what use would they have been if they were too tired to fight?

“If we’d given ourselves the usual amount of time to get there,” he continued, “we’d have arrived to find Illgner in ruins. Ahrensbach is a greater duchy—their knights and Old Werkestock’s nobles are far too much for a mednoble’s province to fight back alone.”

Illgner’s population was slowly on the rise, but it was still a mountainous, forest-covered territory with few nobles or commoners to speak of. And it wasn’t like Illgner could devote resources to defending it; they had a lot of land to protect, and very few protectors. I suspected that they would have crumbled in the face of an attack from a greater duchy.

“Thus, the aub used teleportation circles to transport us to Illgner’s summer estate. It seemed a waste not to utilize them when we knew they were there.”

Ehrenfest’s teleporters weren’t to be used carelessly—only the aub could activate them, and the process of transporting a person, let alone an entire group, required *a ton* of mana. The only reason we’d used them at the beginning was because the fighting hadn’t yet reached the city of Ehrenfest, meaning those stationed there had time to drink rejuvenation potions and recover their mana.

“As soon as I arrived in Illgner, I realized the attack was merely a diversion meant to lure away the Knight’s Order,” Bonifatius said.

“How did you know?” I asked.

“There were fewer invaders than expected, and their goal didn’t seem to be to conquer the giebe’s estate.”

The enemy had sent enough knights that Illgner wouldn’t be able to endure on their own, avoided combat, and made zero attempts to claim the province before the reinforcements from Ehrenfest had arrived. On top of that, they had made the unusual decisions to devote some of their forces to Griebel and to steal mana from the land they were invading. They hadn’t been particularly challenging foes for Bonifatius, but they *had* proven to be annoying.

Bonifatius gave a proud snort, then burst into laughter. “That said, they likely intended to stick around and fight for two or three days. You should have seen their faces after we traveled there by teleporter.”

Under normal circumstances, a giebe’s call for reinforcements wouldn’t have been answered right away—plenty of time would have been spent deciding which knights would sortie and preparing them for battle before they even started their journey by highbeast. It would have taken days for Bonifatius and the others to reach Illgner, but because we’d already anticipated the attack and gathered the information we’d needed about our teleportation circles, they’d managed to get there in the blink of an eye.

“You make it sound trivial, but I really broke my back getting that circle to work...” Sylvester grumbled.

“It was during our fight this morning that we found out Gerlach was under attack too,” Bonifatius continued, completely ignoring his nephew. “They said there were so many troops that this *had* to be the main invasion and requested reinforcements as quickly as we could provide them. I wanted to head straight there, but for us to fight unburdened, we had to wrap things up in Illgner first.”

Bonifatius had rallied his troops. Then, under Brigitte’s guidance, they had flown all throughout the province, tearing their enemies to shreds.

“Father, why did you feel the need to go to Gerlach?” Karstedt asked. I could guess from his businesslike expression that he was speaking as the knight commander.

Bonifatius likewise became more serious, no longer exuding the aura of a man bragging to his granddaughter. “Gerlach had a more dangerous scent to it. I

could feel that I needed to get there as soon as possible.”

“‘A dangerous scent’?”

“Right. I sensed there was a mighty foe there—one that even I would struggle against.”

“You... sensed it?”

Bonifatius really was... *animalistic*. He had a sharp nose and acted on pure instinct. I could see why Grausam had devoted so much of his plan to countering him.

“Brigitte wasn’t hurt, was she?” I asked. “She used to be my guard knight, so I can’t help worrying about her. She even sent us valuable intelligence in the midst of the fighting...”

“I see,” Bonifatius replied, looking conflicted. “Brigitte might have left, but she’s still your retainer at heart. The information she sent should have gone to the Knight’s Order, but instead, she insisted on it going to you, even when her ordonnances kept failing. That’s the thought process of a retainer who wishes to add more prestige to her lady’s name.”

It hadn’t occurred to me that Brigitte’s actions were so significant. She hadn’t just wanted to warn me of the coming danger—she was still trying to prop me up as her lady despite having left my service years ago. Knowing that made joy spread through my entire body.

“It warms my heart to know she feels that way even now that we are so far apart,” I replied sincerely.

Bonifatius nodded. “You have good vassals, Rozemyne.”

“So... how *was* Brigitte?”

“Hmm... Her skills as a knight have dulled a little. It’s to be expected—marriage and a pregnancy will stop anyone from training—but I still consider it a shame.”

I’d meant how she was doing as a person, not what she was like in battle, but I supposed that I shouldn’t have expected anything else from Bonifatius. His evaluation told me that Brigitte was doing well, at least.

“Besides, rusty or not, she performed admirably as a knight defending her province,” Bonifatius noted. “She fought hard to protect the mountains’ forests, since your workshops need them to make paper. She carried out her duty as the giebe’s younger sister and protected both her home and its people.”

Subsequently, the two of them had captured the invading giebes of Old Werkestock.

“I was dumbfounded when an ordonnanz showed up midway through our battle saying that you and Ferdinand were leading Dunkelfelger knights into Gerlach. I mean, I remembered how confident you were before you left, but I never thought you’d actually manage to save Ferdinand and get back to Ehrenfest so soon... Well done, Rozemyne. Well done.”

“I thank you ever so much, Grandfather,” I replied as a warm feeling spread through my chest. His words meant a lot to me, especially considering that he’d told me to give up on the rescue operation entirely.

“You protected a great many things, if you ask me. There I was, praying that Gerlach would hold out until my arrival, when I was suddenly told you’d put a stop to the fighting. I actually smacked the ordonnanz that delivered the news on instinct, since I was sure it had to be broken.”

You smacked it?! If the poor thing wasn’t broken before, I think that must have done it!

“Dunkelfelger’s knights fought exceptionally hard for us during the Battle of Gerlach,” I said. Then I pointed at Hannelore, who was joyously speaking with some of the other noblewomen. “Including my friend over there.”

“Still—you led them, did you not?”

“Not quite. Ferdinand was the one who took the knights to Gerlach. He roused them by saying that stealing Ahrensbach’s foundation wasn’t enough to mark the end of our ditler match. I was bedridden in Ahrensbach’s castle when he and the troops departed.”

Despite having had only a few moments to rest since almost succumbing to poison, Ferdinand had taken the initiative to lead the charge into Gerlach. I made sure to emphasize how amazing that was, which must have made

Bonifatius a little jealous; he looked at Ferdinand and huffed.

Bonifatius continued, “Once the situation in Gerlach was dealt with, I petitioned the aub to reactivate the teleporters so we could return to Ehrenfest. He refused and told us to make our own way back, since he was already using the circles to transport you, Ferdinand, and your Dunkelfelger guests.”

“Guests from a greater duchy clearly take priority over returning troops,” Sylvester said. “Not to mention, ‘Rozemyne’s calling for me!’ isn’t a good enough excuse to use a teleporter. No aub would allow that.”

The invasion had wreaked absolute havoc on Ehrenfest’s stock of rejuvenation potions, and the diversionary battles being fought all over the place had exhausted the knights. On top of that, the scholars and attendants had been up to their necks in work preparing for the celebratory feast. There simply hadn’t been any leeway to use the teleporter for Bonifatius’s sake.

Plus, I’m pretty sure I didn’t call for him.

Bonifatius claimed otherwise. He’d charged straight to Ehrenfest, leaving his knights behind. That must have been why he’d roared that he was here to save me, I thought—but his behavior was so instinctual that it was hard to say for sure. He actually seemed a little more scary than reliable. At this point, I fully understood why Grausam had devoted so much time and effort to countering him; Bonifatius was someone I’d never want to make an enemy of.

“So, how were things here?” Bonifatius asked.

Sylvester shrugged and shook his head; he had spent most of today listening to others’ reports, trying not to discuss his own side of the story when he could avoid it. “It started with the ordonnanz Damuel sent to the Knight’s Order—relaying Brigitte’s message, as it turns out. That was around third bell, I think...”

The Knight’s Order had mobilized upon hearing that threats were likely about to arrive at the west gate. Ordonnanzes had flown all over, and everyone had moved to their preplanned stations. They hadn’t known when exactly the threats would appear or when the battle would commence. Meanwhile, Sylvester had gone straight to the foundation’s hall, since its theft was the absolute worst-case scenario.

“I stood there and waited,” he told us. “There wasn’t anything for me to do, but I didn’t have any other choice. I simply waited around and received ordonnanzes through a hole in the wall opened just for that purpose.”

As it turned out, there was a warp hole connecting the hall and the archduke’s office, allowing the aub to receive correspondence even while attending to the foundation. Sylvester had spent his time waiting for an ordonnanz to stick its beak through, speak its report, and then return.

“So,” he continued, “with nothing else to do, I started setting up traps I’d devised with Rozemyne.”

Sylvester had gotten so bored that, prior to the start of the fighting at the west gate, he had sent ordonnanzes to his attendants asking them to deliver him the tools he would need to set up his own traps.

“Is it really acceptable for the aub to do that kind of work?” I asked.

“Well, it wasn’t like I could delegate. I was the only one there.”

In the process of killing time, Sylvester had put glue on the stairs and set up nets and washtubs to fall on any intruders. Back in Japan, washtubs were made of very light metal, so dropping one on a person’s head was more of a gag than anything else, like watching someone slip on a banana peel. Here in Yurgenschmidt, however, they were commonly made of thick, heavy wood.

I don’t even want to imagine how much that would hurt. What if Georgine had died from it? I wouldn’t even know how to feel.

Maybe it was my fault for not having explained things properly, but I’d never expected Sylvester to use a *wooden* washtub, not a metal one.

“Ordonnanzes came even as I was setting up more traps. One told me Bonifatius was leading Illgner to victory. Then I received a request for reinforcements from Gerlach.”

Sylvester had ordered the giebes near Gerlach to mobilize their knights and assist the province in need. Then he’d probed to see whether Bonifatius would also be able to head there. In the case of the giebes, the responses he’d received hadn’t given him much hope; they had declared that they couldn’t risk sending troops to Gerlach when there was a serious chance that their own

provinces might be invaded next. That seemed reasonable enough to me—a giebe who was unable to protect their land because they'd sent their knights elsewhere would be considered an absolute failure of a ruler.

Mustering reinforcements for Illgner hadn't been an issue, but the circumstances had changed since then. Sending the knights tasked with protecting the Noble's Quarter hadn't been an option—not when there were threats approaching the city. And on top of that, Sylvester, the one person required to activate the duchy's teleportation circles, had been stuck in the foundation's hall.

“Giebe Gerlach sent more ordonnanzes, each one reporting that his situation was getting worse. Things got so bad that I decided to use the teleporters to send as many knights as I could—but as I went to leave the hall, one of my scholars told me we'd received a message from Ferdinand.”

Ferdinand had announced that I'd stolen Ahrensbach's foundation and that he was bringing Dunkelfelger's volunteers to the border gate between our duchies. Once there, he would contain the rogue knights and nobles acting under Georgine's influence.

“That shocked me more than anything. Never in my life have I felt the gods' intervention so clearly.”

“Glucklitat really must love you,” I said.

Sylvester had ordered a scholar to contact Ferdinand and tell him to head to Gerlach at once. An ordonnanz wouldn't have reached him or me while we were in Ahrensbach, so he'd needed to send a physical letter to the border gate. Around the same time, he'd contacted Giebe Gerlach using an ordonnanz to explain that Ferdinand and I were on our way with Dunkelfelger troops and that he needed only to hold out until our arrival.

“The attack on the west gate began during that exchange, then the fighting at the north gate and the temple with it. Florencia sent word that someone was moving through the secret passageways. Everyone was putting their necks on the line... while I was stuck waiting with the foundation.”

And while Sylvester had waited, fighting back the urge to run out and join the fight, Florencia had sent word that she'd captured Georgine.

“I thought the battle had come and gone before I could do anything of use,” Sylvester said. That must have been discouraging for him, but still—our victory was what mattered most.

Sylvester had then left the foundation, having decided to go to the Ivory Tower, and started informing the provinces that Georgine had been captured. He was stopped in his tracks, however, by the arrival of another ordonnanz.

“A second Lady Georgine has appeared,” the bird had said in Florencia’s voice, her panic unmistakable. “She fell from the ceiling, so I suspect she was teleported from the temple. There may be other decoys. Please stay with the foundation until the real Lady Georgine has been found.”

“I did as she instructed without a second thought,” Sylvester told us. “Georgine was exactly the kind of person to stack one devious plot on top of another. I went back to the aub’s chambers in the castle and teleported to the foundation’s hall... only to be caught up in a torrent of water.”

“Wha...?”

“The moment I stepped through that iridescent screen, I was stuck in a whirlpool and gasping for air.”

The real Georgine had already been attacking the foundation. The blood had drained from Sylvester’s face when he’d realized that if not for Florencia’s second ordonnanz, the duchy would have been stolen right under his nose.

“The whirlpool eventually disappeared, dropping me to the ground. The washtub I’d set up came crashing down too.”

“Wait, what? The washtub?” I asked.

“The traps I’d placed were caught up with me. I managed to avoid the washtub, but only by a hair. It nearly knocked me right out.”

Flooding a room with waschen wouldn’t just sweep away the people inside—I’d experienced that personally when casting the spell for the first time. *Everything* would float, and anything the caster saw as filth would be cleansed.

“The glue I’d put on the stairs disappeared, and the other traps I’d set were moved from where I’d placed them,” Sylvester explained. “It was as the

washtub came down at my feet that I spotted a hand sticking out from another entrance, and a shiver ran down my spine.”

The hand, which had appeared to be severed at the wrist, had apparently been wielding a schtappe. Georgine had likely used a lethal attack without even looking into the room—and with that realization, the horror eating away at Sylvester had grown even more intense.

“I think a floating hand would scare anyone,” I said.

Sylvester had also taken out his schtappe, and Georgine had sauntered into the room barely a moment later. Despite being dressed in the robes of a gray shrine maiden, she had acted entirely like a queen.

“Georgine’s eyes widened in disbelief when she saw me,” Sylvester continued.

“That makes no sense,” Ferdinand said. “At a time when the city is facing countless diversions, anyone would expect the aub to be protecting the foundation.”

Sylvester’s brow furrowed in discomfort. “It was precisely because Georgine knew I was going to be in the foundation’s hall that she filled it with instant-death poison.”

“Excuse me...?”

Outside, instant-death poison powder didn’t work very well; it carried on the wind and dissipated easily. In a cramped space like the hall, however, its gruesome potential would have been fully realized. Georgine had unlocked the foundation, thrown in some poison bombs, and then cleansed the room with a waschen so that she could enter. Under any other circumstances, her plan would have allowed her to dye or destroy the foundation without anyone interfering.

“If not for my decision to leave the foundation after Florencia’s first ordonnanz, I wouldn’t even be here right now,” Sylvester said.

“You truly have received Glucklita’s divine protection...”

“To be honest, I think it’s more likely that my opponent had no protections at

all...”

I could only imagine how Georgine must have felt when her carefully devised plans had been foiled purely by her enemy getting lucky.

“So, how did you capture Georgine from there?”

“I was already holding my schtappe, so of course, I attacked without hesitation.” To account for the distance between them, Sylvester had created a bow and shot arrows of mana at Georgine. “One was turned away by a charm she had with her, and another she blocked with geteilt. My next move was to advance on her. She threw some metallic needles at me in response, but one of my charms deflected them. It wasn’t a tough fight, by any means; she’d needed to remove her silver clothes to enter the foundation’s hall, so mana attacks worked on her just fine.”

The battle had gone overwhelmingly in Sylvester’s favor. That didn’t surprise me, really—as a man who had undergone physical training since his youth, he had possessed far more strength, stamina, and combat experience than Georgine, who, as a woman, had spent her life mainly focused on socializing. Sylvester had also been compressing his mana and was armed with the strength of new divine protections, to say nothing of how much younger than her he was; there was no way he would have lost a head-on encounter.

“Still...” he muttered, “I can’t believe a person could grow to hate someone so intensely.”

Sylvester didn’t reveal what Georgine had said to him, but the look on his face made it clear that her words had cut him deep.

“But as I was saying... she told me there were plenty of people still name-sworn to her. She declared that those bound to her by submission contracts would carry on her will, and that she would destroy Ehrenfest.”

“And the threat of her name-sworn was too great to ignore...” Ferdinand said.

“Yep. I didn’t know how many of them we’d missed during the winter purge or what they might do when given that kind of order. Would they all go berserk and join the fighting? Would they spread that poison everywhere? I needed to stop her before even more people got hurt, so... I dealt with her then and

there.”

Sylvester gazed down at his hands. He had taken the life of his own sister, and that fact weighed so heavily on his heart. There was a pause... and then a dull *clunk* as he set something on the table. It was a large, beautiful feystone that seemed both red and blue depending on the light. It took me a second to process what I was looking at, but when the pieces fell into place, my breath caught in my throat.

Um, what?

My breathing became ragged, and my entire body started to tremble. I tried to stand up—my every instinct was screaming at me to get away from the feystone—but I’d neglected to warn my attendants, so they hadn’t pulled my chair back for me. My knees banged against the table, and my seat toppled over backward with a loud clatter.

In an instant, all eyes were on me. I couldn’t see my attendants, as they were standing behind me, but I could sense that even they were staring holes through the back of my head.

This isn’t good. I need to smooth this over somehow.

As I gazed around the hall, frantically searching for an excuse to get away from the feystone, I saw Florencia and Charlotte.

“I, um... I suddenly remembered something I must discuss with Charlotte and my adoptive mother,” I said. “I must ask them to gather their seamstresses for my fitting. Isn’t that right, Lieseleta?”

“That *is* urgent, but this is neither the time nor place to discuss it,” Lieseleta replied. She placed a hand on my shoulder and gently urged me to sit back down, but I wouldn’t survive another moment at this table. Even as my vision blurred, I couldn’t stop staring at the feystone. My entire body was pleading with me to get away.

“But I must return to Ahrensbach tomorrow afternoon, and I’ve grown so much that I no longer have clothes to wear when meeting with the royal family. The fitting will need to be done in the morning.”

“The seamstresses will not be able to gather in time—not even if we send a

messenger first thing tomorrow. Moreover, the castle is in no state to accept merchants. The fitting can wait until you have returned from Ahrens—”

“Rozemyne,” Ferdinand said, interrupting Lieseleta.

“Yes?” I asked. Turning to look at him removed the feystone from my sight and eased the tension in my shoulders. He had spent the conversation thus far wearing a fake smile to hide his displeasure, but now he’d returned to his usual emotionless expression.

“We have something to discuss,” he said, then indicated a relatively empty section of the room.

We were about to leave when Bonifatius raised a hand. “Hold it, Ferdinand. Can that not wait too? Look at the state of the feast.”

“I agree,” Leonore added. “Please do wait until we are done here. The situation right now is quite complex.”

I placed a hand on my cheek, unsure what either of them meant. My confusion must have been obvious because Leonore and Lieseleta elaborated.

To save ourselves time, we had used Kirnberger’s country gate as part of our charge to Ahrensbach. The province’s knights had seen me activate it, as had Sylvester’s retainers, and the whole thing had eventually led to Ehrenfest’s higher-ups discovering that I possessed the Grutrissheit and that the archduke had given me a courting magic tool from the royal family.

And it took only three days for that information to spread through the Noble’s Quarter, huh?

Leonore continued, “The moment the aub handed the royal magic tool to you, he demonstrated his intention to approve the royal courtship. The nobles now consider the cancellation of your engagement to Lord Wilfried a foregone conclusion. Many have also been discussing the unreasonable lengths you went to in order to save Lord Ferdinand.”

Ehrenfest’s nobles now thought I was engaged to a royal. That was fair enough, but they were *also* under the impression that I was spending the short while before the next Archduke Conference, when the news was going to be announced, bemoaning my doomed feelings for Ferdinand. *That* was why the

noblewomen were all wearing such warm smiles and going on about the beauty of “love unfulfilled.”

Ngh... The real tragedy here is that everyone's pitying me for losing my first love. I've never even been in love!

“We've benefited from the romanticization of your trip to Ahrensbach,” Leonore noted. “That said, with your move to the Sovereignty right around the corner, we do not want to chance any more scandals.”

Our situation would be much easier to manage if everyone believed my “feelings” for Ferdinand were one-sided and would end with my marriage into the royal family. For that reason, it was important that he keep his distance from me.

Ferdinand cast his eyes across the table, my retainers, and the other guests casually looking in our direction, then crossed his arms and sighed. “I consider Rozemyne's health more urgent and important than public opinion. However, if you would all rather prioritize gossip and rumors, I will respect that.”

“Good,” Bonifatius said.

Everyone seemed relieved that Ferdinand was pulling back, but it made me uneasy. I turned to look at him.

“It has been a year and a half since my departure,” Ferdinand said. “Rozemyne must have a new primary doctor by now, and it would not be right of me to encroach on their duties. Unless you mean to tell me a new doctor has *still* not been assigned to her.”

Sylvester and Karstedt immediately averted their eyes. Ferdinand glared at them both and then slowly began to stand up again, muttering that I should call him if ever I needed help.

“No, she should call *me*!” Bonifatius protested.

Ferdinand stared down at him, clearly annoyed, before turning around and leaving. A strange sense of panic spread through me as he got farther away. If nothing else, I didn't have another doctor to rely on, and my body clearly wasn't acting right.

“Leonore, I...”

“Wait until the feast is over. There are too many eyes here,” Leonore whispered while urging me to sit back down. “You may not be aware, but you are drawing more than enough attention simply because of your growth spurt. Cornelius has left to gather intelligence, and Lord Ferdinand just went to speak with Hartmut. Please refrain from acting openly.”

She was advising me as a guard knight, but I still shook my head; I didn’t want to stay here. I stood up and took my leave, using the excuse of needing to speak with Charlotte, Florencia, and Elvira. Only once I was away from the feystone was I finally able to breathe again.

I put on a fake smile and tried to force my way through the rest of the feast. Ferdinand must have given out all sorts of orders, as his retainers were rushing around the room as busily as ever.

“Oh, on that note... where might he be?” I asked.

“Ferdinand returned to your library quite some time ago. It is too late to call on him now. Could you wait until tomorrow?”

I’d intended to stick around until the end of the feast, but there was no helping it without Ferdinand. I couldn’t even justify calling him back; I wasn’t feeling too bad now that I was away from the feystone, so my condition couldn’t have been urgent. There was nothing for me to do but return to my chambers.

A Sleepless Night

I was back at the Battle of Gerlach. Blue-caped knights surrounded me on all sides with their shields raised, blocking so much of my view that I couldn't tell where we were or where we were going. Explosions nearly blinded me, shouts drowned out all other noise, and arrows whizzed through the air as I pressed on in my highbeast.

My heart pounded in my chest, and my ears rang. It was hard to breathe, and despite the overwhelming fear that gripped me and made me want to flee, my hands refused to leave my steering wheel. I couldn't move, entirely as though I'd turned into a feystone.

I saw a dazzling flash of rainbow light; then all sorts of things started shooting toward me. The clashing of metal and even more shouts reached my ears before sprays of red entered my vision. A severed arm struck my Pandabus; then a knight who had fallen from his highbeast dropped in front of me. I plowed right through him, causing him to bounce up into the air and out of sight. All the while, feystones continued to strike the windshield; the force of each impact reverberated through my steering wheel.

My body turned cold as ice, and my teeth chattered violently. It hurt to breathe. Tears welled from my eyes and rolled down my cheeks all on their own.

The portions of the fight when my emotions had shut down now seemed so very clear to me, as though a thick fog had suddenly lifted. They repeated over and over again, refusing to fade from my memory. A man thanked me profusely for coming to his rescue. Then, a moment later, he fell from the sky as a feystone.

I drove into the room ahead of me and saw the giebe collapsed on the floor, already in the process of turning into a feystone. My stomach dropped, and as I clenched my teeth, an awful sensation spread through my mouth as though I were chewing sand. Cold sweat covered me from head to toe.

And then there was Grausam, laughing derisively as he absorbed every attack thrown at him with the mass of black feystones that was his arm. His ear-piercing cackle repeated again and again, starting out fast and agonizingly high-pitched before slowly warping into a low drone. He swung his fire-engulfed arm, burning everything in sight.

The flames faded away, revealing that half of his body had turned into a sickening mass of feystones. Some seemed to dig into his flesh, while others merely rested atop it. He was well and truly monstrous.

In the blink of an eye, Grausam charged toward me, reaching out his prosthesis. I fired my water gun at him, hoping to stop his advance, but that only made the rest of his face turn into feystones. Even then, I could see the murderous hatred in his expression and the madness gleaming in his gray eyes.

Everywhere I looked, there were feystones, feystones, feystones... I screamed at the top of my lungs as they all closed in on me.

“Stay away!”

I leapt up... and realized that I was back in bed. My entire body was so damp with sweat that my bedclothes clung to me and my hair stuck to my skin. A chill seeped into my bones as the cold air pricked my bare neck; the nights were frigid even now that we were approaching the height of spring.

My heart pounded, and each breath felt more labored than the last. The contents of my dream spun through my mind as I lay motionless in bed. Every now and then, I saw what could only have been the glimmer of a feystone fall through the darkness. I pressed one hand over my mouth, trying not to vomit, and rested the other on my chest, hoping to calm my nerves.

“I feel sick...”

Each time I tried to remember the battle before the feast, my mind returned a cloudy mess of memories. Maybe it was a defense mechanism.

“I need to speak with Ferdinand about this...” I muttered. But as I reached for my bedside table, wanting to send an ordonnanz, I paused. Even the thought of touching its yellow feystone made my stomach turn.

At last, I steeled my nerves and yanked open the drawer. The magic tool was

sitting inside, and at once, the feystones that had tormented me in my dreams all came to mind. It suddenly became hard to breathe, like there was something heavy weighing on my chest. Even knowing the tool was just an ordonnanz, I couldn't muster the courage to grab it. I squeezed my hand shut and let my arm fall to my side.

What should I do...? I won't be able to call for help like this...

As an unknown fear assaulted my senses, I couldn't help but tremble. I wrapped my arms around my chest and squeezed, desperate for even the smallest trace of comfort.

It was then that I heard footsteps on the other side of my bed-curtain. I shot bolt upright and drew my schtappe, ready to fight whatever threat awaited me.

"Lady Rozemyne, can we join you?"

"She's in bed, Judithe... Mind your phrasing..."

Those voices... They belonged to Judithe and Gretia. I remembered they were on night watch, then rushed to dispel my schtappe and wipe away the sweat beading on my neck.

"Lords Hartmut and Ferdinand warned us this might happen..." Judithe told me through the curtain. "Even trained knights can become emotionally unstable after an intense battle, so we were told to keep a very close eye on you and Lady Hannelore tonight. I was scared too when I saw what the poison did to those knights. Let me sit with you awhile."

She drew my bed-curtains and moved to join me. Gretia went to do the same, but when she saw how drenched with sweat my bedclothes were, she decided to fetch me something to change into.

"Under normal circumstances, only adult knights would have participated in such a gruesome battle," Judithe said, speaking into the darkness. "We apprentices were only sent out because the enemy had so many more troops than we did..."

I'd assumed she was going to ask me all sorts of uncomfortable questions, but her tone made it clear that she wasn't expecting me to respond. Relieved, I merely lay there in silence, listening.

“Almost every single one of the apprentices is staying in the knights’ dormitory tonight, since they’re expected to struggle with the day’s events. The higher-ups are speaking with them, and they’re having sessions with doctors. *Flowers* are even available for anyone who requests them. I thought you might want some as well, Lady Rozemyne, which was why I asked Lady Florencia to let you visit one of the greenhouses. A trip there should calm you down in an instant.”

Judithe stuck out her chest, pleased with her solution to my worries. Little did she know, the knights were enjoying flowers of another kind.

“You could gaze upon the flowers while drinking some nice, fragrant tea. How does that sound, Lady Rozemyne?”

“Would it really be acceptable for me to go outside this late at night...?” I asked. To my knowledge, the knights who had accompanied me to Ahrensbach had all returned to their estates. Even if we asked Damuel to leave his post by the door to join me, I wouldn’t have an adequate number of guards.

“As it stands, the castle is packed with knights, so we are free to head out as long as we inform the Order. I spoke with them before coming here, so the arrangements have already been made.”

Oh... I guess they couldn’t bring themselves to clear up Judithe’s misunderstanding.

She had gone to the trouble of arranging this trip to the greenhouse, and not a single person had intervened. I elected to bite my tongue as well and simply appreciate her kind gesture.

“I thank you ever so much, Judithe. I look forward to our outing.”

“Let me go tell the others,” she said with a joyful smile and took her leave. Gretia returned just in time to replace her, looking worried.

“Are you sure about doing this, Lady Rozemyne? Judithe might be invested in the idea, but would it not be better for you to spend the night in bed, relaxing at your leisure?”

“Truth be told, I’d just awoken from an unpleasant dream when you arrived. I doubt Schlaftraum’s blessings are going to reach me tonight, and a chance to

stretch my legs does sound nice. Not to mention... as far as my image is concerned, it would make more sense for me to spend this sleepless night in the greenhouse rather than with Ferdinand, don't you think? Otherwise, such an elaborate scheme would never have been concocted."

In the past, any concerns to do with my well-being would have been dumped entirely on Ferdinand. A trip to the greenhouse wouldn't even have been humored.

Gretia's brow furrowed, her eyes tinged with sadness. "I apologize that I am unable to grant your desires, Lady Rozemyne."

"There is no need to worry. Such is the nature of noble society."

Gretia turned on a light, brought in a small tub filled with hot water, and fetched me some clothes to wear outside my room. Then, once she had everything she needed, she stripped me down and started dabbing the sweat from my body with a tightly wrung towel.

"Growing up has its downsides..." she muttered. "The way everyone looks at you changes. You stop being able to do things that once seemed so normal to you, and in the end, I think you actually lose more freedoms than you gain. I matured earlier than most, so there were many times when I was denied something that others my age were able to do freely. I found that completely unreasonable."

I didn't think Gretia had changed all that much on the inside, but her growth spurt had caused a tremendous shift in how everyone treated her. We'd gone through more or less the same experience, so she could relate to my struggles being told to reconsider my relationship with Ferdinand and needing to put up with everyone speculating about my every move.

"I always thought I would enjoy catching up to everyone else..." I said. "But indeed, maturing has its ups and downs."

"A lot of things become more troublesome than not until your heart catches up with your body..." Gretia added quietly. "Especially relationships with men."

In silence, I cast my eyes over the girl who had given her name to me to escape her family. I could only imagine all the "troublesome" events she had

gone through.

“I’m back,” Judithe announced, sounding as merry as ever. “Lady Hannelore is also having a hard time getting to sleep. According to her night watch attendant, she wishes to go out on the balcony and get some air. Perhaps you could invite her to the greenhouse. Knights tend to speak openly with their peers; maybe now is a good time for you to interact with her like that.”

Judithe was adamant that Hannelore and I would understand each other. As authority figures, we archduke candidates weren’t allowed to join the knights in their dormitory while they were recovering from the terrors of the battlefield.

Hannelore had seemed used to fighting as an archduke candidate of Dunkelfelger, but maybe that hadn’t actually been the case. Maybe this was her first time experiencing death on the battlefield. Had she spent the night thus far feeling as nauseated as I was?

“Please invite Lady Hannelore through her night watch attendant,” I told Judithe. “Take care not to be too forceful.”

“Understood.”

Speaking with Judithe and Gretia had eased my worries a little, but the discomfort from my dream lingered. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw feystones of all sorts of colors. I was fleeing to the greenhouse to avoid more nightmares.

I wish I could fall into such a deep sleep that I wouldn’t dream at all.

As that thought floated through my mind, Hannelore sent me an ordonnanz stating her desire to accompany me on my nighttime wander. The bird spoke its message three times... then turned into a yellow feystone. I couldn’t bear to catch it, so it clattered down by my feet. Goose bumps rose on my skin as memories of the battlefield came rushing back to me.

Late-Night Tea Party

Gretia went to the greenhouse ahead of us to prepare some tea. The building was used quite regularly during the blizzard-heavy winter when everyone gathered to socialize. My retainers had advised me to leave later than I normally would to account for the time Hannelore would need to get changed.

“Let us go, Lady Rozemyne,” Damuel said as I exited my room. He and Judithe were going to be guarding me. “Are you not going to use your highbeast?”

I reached down to grab my feystone, as I normally would... then stopped.

“Is something the matter?” Judithe asked, looking at me curiously. Her eyes widened when I explained the fear I’d developed since the battle.

“Please inform your attendants when you are in such a state,” Damuel said with a grim frown. “Lieseleta expressed her concern earlier when she saw you drop an ordonnanz feystone. Leaving her to guess the cause was entirely unreasonable.”

“Damuel! We weren’t going to tell her yet, remember?! What happened to letting her get a good night’s rest?!”

“There is a clear distinction between someone who simply needs to rest and someone in an abnormal state of mind who requires special attention. If we want our lady to tell us these things, we should make that clear to her, should we not?”

My knights were in an argument of some kind. From what I could gather, they’d intended to delay a report meant for me, but Damuel thought it was best for me to hear it now.

“Please tell me, Damuel,” I said. I was traveling to the greenhouse on foot, since I was too afraid to form my highbeast; we weren’t going to arrive anytime soon.

“Although you did so upon Lord Ferdinand’s prompting, the fact is that you were the one to invite Lord Bonifatius to share his tales of heroics. Are you

aware that this made you the host of the table?”

I was not.

In my eyes, I’d simply taken advantage of the feast to contain Bonifatius’s rampage. The others had appreciated my actions at the time, but reporting to the archduke should have come first. Bonifatius’s attendants and my own had colluded and, out of sheer desperation, invited Sylvester to sit with us, thereby allowing a facsimile of order to be maintained even as Bonifatius gave his report first.

“Lord Bonifatius regaled us all with his tales of the conflict,” Damuel said. “Then, after an evening spent in silence, the aub finally spoke about his own battle. To all those observing the conversation, things were proceeding as smoothly as one could hope—until you interrupted the aub, rose from your seat, and started rambling about your fitting.”

My sudden anxiety attack had made me want to get as far away from Georgine’s feystone as possible, but the others at the feast hadn’t known that. As far as they were concerned, I’d randomly stood up and tried to leave, not even bothering to signal my attendants or give those sitting with me the courtesy of a farewell. I’d seemed so upset about my new clothes that I’d started criticizing attendants even at the cost of disrespecting the archduke.

No way... I couldn’t have been more rude!

It was tragic, but it wasn’t like I’d possessed the emotional leeway to consider the politics of my situation. No matter how they interpreted it, what everyone had seen was my best attempt to keep up appearances.

“Lord Ferdinand implied that the cause was something other than exhaustion, which allowed us to deduce the truth of the matter,” Damuel explained. “But it was already too late. If you had simply told us that feystones were the cause of your distress, Lord Ferdinand would not have asked Lord Bonifatius about his battle, and Lieseleta would not have approached the situation as she did. In the absence of a report, it did not even cross our minds that you might have been uncomfortable. You experienced ditter at the Royal Academy on many occasions and even led the first battle after inviting Dunkelfelger to join the fray.”

I could have pretended to pass out, thereby creating an excuse for my retainers to carry me out of the room, but no—instead, I’d chosen the nuclear option of going to Florencia and Charlotte to discuss my fitting. Only with the most forced smiles had we all made it through.

“You have gotten so good at disguising your emotions that the aub’s and Lord Bonifatius’s retainers interpreted your abrupt departure as the height of rudeness.”

Lieseleta had desperately tried to smooth things over with Bonifatius and his retainers, but they had responded only with criticisms: “You and your fellow retainers must be doing such a poor job arranging Lady Rozemyne’s clothes if she felt the need to bring it up before the aub during a feast.”

I can’t believe that happened...

“Lord Karstedt and the aub held Lord Bonifatius’s group back, saying that you must have had other reasons for your actions. After all, even Lord Ferdinand was worried about you. Please take care moving forward and inform us ahead of time if something is wrong.”

I wanted to protest that my feelings hadn’t been clear enough for me to have noticed them before the feast, but that wouldn’t do much to appease my retainers who had already faced the consequences. I’d been so focused on my own worries that I hadn’t stopped to think about Sylvester or Bonifatius. It hadn’t even occurred to me how much the retainers I’d abandoned in the moment might have struggled. I really was a failure of a lady.

“I will need to apologize to Lieseleta...”

“Um, Lady Rozemyne...” Judithe interjected, “might I suggest praising her? While I was making the arrangements for this trip to the greenhouse, she was negotiating with Lord Ferdinand about holding the fitting in your estate, seeing as the castle was out of the question. She even went ahead and contacted the Gilberta Company. But of course, we weren’t supposed to tell you any of this until tomorrow morning...”

“It was brought to our attention that you shouldn’t use the same estate as Lord Ferdinand, and we were advised to invite Lady Hannelore and Lord Heisshitze under the guise of awarding them a hairpin.”

Tarnishing my reputation would have severe long-term consequences, especially considering my engagement to the royal family. It was an annoying situation, to say the least.

“It was because of our inexperience that we didn’t notice something was wrong... but a lot of the blame should also lie with Hartmut,” Judithe complained, her lips pursed. “He *did* notice the problems but elected not to tell anyone, since he didn’t have evidence to bolster his suspicions. He spoke to Ferdinand in secret, leaving the rest of us out of the conversation.”

The greenhouse soon came into view. It was wondrous—like something out of a fantasy book. Massive windows designed to receive copious amounts of sunlight now let in radiant moonbeams, which made the ivory building look as though it were glowing. Small lamp-like magic tools added a bit more light, in which multicolor flowers blossomed and gleamed.

“How beautiful...” I murmured.

“Over here, Lady Rozemyne,” Gretia said, then led me to a neatly arranged table. Because noblewomen frequently used the greenhouse as a gathering spot, there was plenty of space for tables and chairs. “Lady Hannelore is on her way. The guest rooms are only in the main building, so she shouldn’t be long.”

Gretia then took me through the tea she had prepared and what I should do with Hannelore when she arrived. That time came even sooner than I’d expected.

“Lady Hannelore. Good evening.”

“I thank you ever so much for the invitation, Lady Rozemyne. It came as a boon for me on this sleepless night.” Her eyes crinkled in a smile as she admired the plants. “This greenhouse really is a wonderful place.”

I asked our guest, who looked somewhat drained, if she would care to wander around with me. Gretia had advised me to do this, as she would use our short absence to ask Hannelore’s attendants what tea their lady would prefer from the available ingredients.

Hannelore accepted my request, and the two of us leisurely browsed the greenhouse. We appreciated the flowers and took deep breaths of the fresh,

pleasantly scented air. Our guard knights followed a short distance behind us.

“In truth, this is my first time visiting this greenhouse,” I said. “Women frequent it during winter socializing... but as I’ve always spent my winters in the playroom or at the Royal Academy, I’ve never had a chance to join them. The flowers must look so proud and vibrant against the falling snow.”

“The thought alone sets my heart aflutter. What a shame I will never see it.”

As she continued to admire the flowers, Hannelore noted that most of them couldn’t be found in Dunkelfelger. The climates of our two duchies must have differed quite considerably.

“Did you enjoy the feast?” I asked.

“Indeed, though I was shocked to learn that your mother wrote *Royal Academy Love Stories*. She gave me the newest installment, and we discussed her work in great detail. I had a truly wonderful time.”

Hannelore was positively brimming with excitement as she told me everything she and Elvira had spoken about. Her mood was so infectious that I ended up smiling along with her.

“Lady Elvira even told me she plans to incorporate my experiences into one of her upcoming books. She wishes to write a love story about you and Lord Ferdinand.”

I waved away that statement without a second thought. “That is not something I ever want to see published. I shall ask that she abandon the idea at once.”

Hannelore slumped her shoulders. “Lady Elvira came across to me as a very strong mother. She said you should at least find joy in the world of stories, for a tale of romance can provide a wonderful escape from the harsh reality of one’s situation.”

Wait... Didn’t I say something like that? Back when Ferdinand was first ordered to move to Ahrensbach, maybe.

We continued our leisurely stroll through the greenhouse, chatting about meaningless topics, until Gretia and Hannelore’s attendant called out to us.

“Please enjoy this brew,” Gretia said. “It should keep you both warm on this cold night.”

I took a sip of what turned out to be herbal tea; Gretia must have brewed it specially to help us sleep. She’d even added some honey to help it go down smoothly. I took a massive gulp and enjoyed the warmth of the drink flowing through me. I must have been colder than I’d thought.

“Lady Hannelore, if you would...”

I didn’t want our retainers to hear what I was going to say next, so I arranged the preparation of a sound-blocker. Once my conversation partner had accepted it, I wasted no time getting to the heart of the matter.

“I truly am sorry about this.”

“Lady Rozemyne?” Hannelore asked, blinking at me.

“I told Aub Dunkelfelger this would take only two bells, but three days have now passed... On top of that, the initial plan was simply to rescue Lord Ferdinand; I did not intend for your volunteers to be dragged into the Purge of Lanzenave or today’s battle. It brings me nothing but sorrow to think that I troubled you so deeply that you cannot even sleep tonight.”

“But, um... Lady Rozemyne...” Hannelore said nervously. “It was Lord Ferdinand who rallied the knights. Then I decided they should continue to fight, since they were so dissatisfied with Lanzenave’s showing. There is no reason for you to apologize.”

I shook my head. “It was entirely through your goodwill that we obtained victory. In public, we must express our gratitude for your duchy’s assistance... but we cannot apologize for the trouble we put you through. I wish to use this opportunity to make amends—to some degree, at least.”

Hannelore had even gone as far as to help defend Gerlach. If she was struggling to sleep, of course I needed to apologize.

“It was thanks to your forces that we managed to win the Battle of Gerlach,” I said. “There may not have been any casualties on your side, but many of your knights were gravely wounded, were they not? To think I put people from another duchy in such grave danger...”

I'd managed to heal everyone in time, meaning nobody had died, but still—some of our combatants were seriously hurt or enduring the neutered but still dangerous effects of the instant-death poison.

“Lady Rozemyne—as I said, we *chose* to involve ourselves in those battles. Please stop acting as though it were a one-sided decision. There is not a single knight in Dunkelfelger who would agree to a dinner match without having the resolve to see it through. If anything...” Hannelore exhaled, and tears welled from her eyes. “I should apologize. To you and to Ehrenfest.”

I merely stared at Hannelore in surprise. I'd thought she would scold me; it had never even crossed my mind that she might apologize in turn.

“I caused everyone so much trouble during the Battle of Gerlach,” she continued. “My attempt at a surprise attack strengthened the enemy... and so many Ehrenfest knights died as a direct result of my actions. I agreed to participate to make up for the shame of that past dinner game, but I was no help at all. That is why my heart aches so... I cannot apologize enough to the knights who lost their lives—not that I will ever have the opportunity...”

I'd gone straight into the Giebe's estate with Matthias, so I hadn't known that Grausam had used the mana from Hannelore's surprise attack to launch an explosive offensive. Hannelore had watched several Gerlach knights die as a result, which was why she couldn't sleep. As someone who couldn't bear to even look at feystones anymore, I understood exactly how she must have been feeling.

“It was because of you that our knights were saved,” she said. “You granted us your large-scale healing immediately after we broke through the enemy's ranks, meaning we did not need to drink rejuvenation potions and could keep our antidote-soaked cloth over our mouths.”

At the time, we had devoted ourselves to giving the Giebe's knights time to heal, since they had already been a broken mess when we'd reached them. My blessing hadn't worked to replenish their mana, so they had fallen back while Dunkelfelger's knights held the front line with Heilschmerz's healing. They had needed to move the cloth from their mouths to drink their rejuvenation potions, so several of them had died when the poison had struck.

“As an Ehrenfest archduke candidate, you should have prioritized your own knights. Instead, ours were the only ones who emerged unscathed. You protected us at the expense of your own troops, and... I just feel terrible.”

I shook my head. It would have been ideal if nobody had died, but in a battle waged on such a large scale, such a convenient outcome would never have been possible. The fact that Dunkelfelger had made it through without any casualties was nothing short of a miracle in my eyes, especially when they hadn't needed to fight for us in the first place.

“If not for your knights, I would never have been able to rescue Ferdinand,” I said. “The Purge of Lanzenave would not have received such a favorable name, and our victory in the Battle of Gerlach would have come at a much greater cost. So please do not beat yourself up over what happened. Your involvement in this operation saved not just Ehrenfest but me as well. I am grateful to you from the bottom of my heart.”

Tears ran down Hannelore's cheeks, and she wrapped her fingers together in prayer. I placed my hands over hers.

“Let us mourn the dead together. We can pray for them as they climb the towering stairway to the distant heights to join the supreme gods at daybreak.”

Hannelore gazed up at me in surprise. “Pray for them...? I was raised not to feel sad about the deaths of our knights. They sacrificed themselves to protect their home, their lords, their families, their friends, and their ideals. It falls to their loved ones to mourn them. I, as an archduke candidate, must instead ensure that their legacy lives on. I need to praise their heroism and give ample compensation to their families. Would it be right of me to pray for the deceased when they barely even knew me?”

“I cannot speak for your duchy's customs, but this is Ehrenfest. I see no issue with it as long as your feelings of mourning are genuine.”

I exchanged a few words with my knights, then went from the greenhouse to a balcony on the building's second floor. There, I formed my schtappe amid the cold night air. The sky was starting to brighten, but before dawn came, I taught Hannelore the prayer for the dead.

“O mighty King and Queen of the endless skies...” I began, spurring first

Hannelore then our retainers to take out their schtappes and join me. “May our prayers reach those climbing to the towering heights. We perform our song of mourning so that you might protect those who can no longer return to us.”

Light and Darkness flew out of my schtappe and soared up into the sky. Similar lights shot from the schtappes of Hannelore and her retainers.



“Lady Rozemyne... do you think our prayers reached Gerlach?” Hannelore asked.

“I do.”

“Even though I was praying for their sake, it feels like I was blessed as well...”
The smile on Hannelore’s face told me the sorrow clouding her heart had dissipated.

First bell rang in Ehrenfest, signifying the start of a new morning.

Fitting

“Lady Hannelore, it would seem that Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time is weaving exceptionally well today. We will travel to Ahrensbach this afternoon, whereupon I will return you to Dunkelfelger. Please rest in your room until then.”

“Was I not invited to order a hairpin today?” Hannelore asked, confused. Our prayer for the dead must have done wonders to soothe her, as she looked more relaxed and a little bit sleepy.

I smiled and shook my head. “The order can be placed at any time. Your health is more important, so I would advise you to get some rest.”

“I appreciate and intend to take you up on that suggestion... but I was rather looking forward to ordering from your very own hairpin maker,” Hannelore said with an impish smile. She then retired to her guest room with her retainers, noting before she went that Dregarnuhr would weave our threads together again at third bell.

I was about to return to my chambers when Damuel suddenly took out his schtappe and adopted a defensive stance. Judithe did the same. I strengthened my eyes and peered in the direction they were facing to find a white lion approaching us with several more highbeasts in tow.

“Oh, Ferdinand,” I said when he reached us. “Good morning. You’re here early.”

He landed on the balcony with an intense grimace, then dismounted and eyed us all carefully. “I detected an immense burst of mana and thought it might be an ambush at dawn, when the night watch would be most exhausted. But I suppose *you* were the cause.”

“I was grieving the dead with Lady Hannelore. Those who gave their lives in Illgner, Gerlach, and the city of Ehrenfest are climbing the stairway to the supreme gods as we speak. I, um... did not intend to wake you. Sorry.”

Ferdinand needed to rest more than anyone, but his fear of an ambush had made him feel obliged to rush over. My knights had informed the Order of our plans but must not have deemed it necessary to send an ordonnanz all the way to my library.

“You need not apologize; I planned to come here anyway to restock the potions I used. Hmm... Would you care for a few? I can give you some that will induce a slumber so sound that you would think you were dead. You will not even dream. They are fairly valuable for when one does not have time to rest properly.”

“A dreamless sleep *does* sound appealing... but considering the very legitimate risk that I might spend another two days unconscious, I am strangely hesitant to try.”

I wanted a quick and easy way to recharge so that I could check up on the lower city and temple, but I couldn't shake the memory of everyone leaving me behind in Ahrensbach. The thought of drinking another such potion put me on edge.

“You will wake up whether you want to or not,” Ferdinand assured me. “Do not forget you have a meeting with the Gilberta Company at third bell. Do you really intend to greet the seamstresses in your library while looking so blatantly exhausted...?”

I pressed my hands against my cheeks. The city of Ehrenfest had endured its own battle. Tuuli was probably worried about Dad, who had gone to such extreme lengths while stationed at the west gate. The last thing I wanted was for her or anyone else in my family to start worrying about me too.

It wasn't my intention to start being as dependent on potions as Ferdinand, but I elected to make use of the sleep-inducing ones he treasured so dearly.

“Rozemyne, are you really feeling okay? There are... Ah, I suppose it was not my place to discuss such matters.”

“We were planning to consult you, Lord Ferdinand, but Lady Rozemyne is having some trouble at the moment,” Damuel explained. He had seen my reluctance to answer and elected to speak in my stead. “It would seem that she associates feystones with the recent battles and now feels too traumatized to

even form her highbeast.”

“This is worse than I thought,” Ferdinand muttered with a frown. “It is impossible to say what kind of an impact that phobia might have on her everyday life. As it stands, we have yet to finish disarming the traps set by Melchior’s retainers, so the temple is far from at its safest. If you must go there, I would advise you to wait until the afternoon, when the cleaning is complete. Delaying the departure should allay any concerns you might have.”

I gazed up at him, my head cocked to one side. “Have you inspected the temple already?”

“No. My knowledge of the situation there comes entirely from reports.”

Justus had apparently seen Philine and Hartmut consult Melchior and his retainers about this very subject. He hadn’t been able to hear a word of their conversation, but in true Justus fashion, he *had* managed to read their lips.

“Well, if the traps haven’t yet been disarmed and there’s cleaning to be done, I will not make a fuss,” I said. “Still, I want to see the temple with my own eyes when they’re finished.”

“Damuel,” Ferdinand said, “ask Melchior’s retainers to retrieve the traps at once.”

“Understood.”

My conversation with Ferdinand did wonders to ease my concerns. I drank the potion he gave me and went straight to sleep. As he’d assured me, my head was clear for exactly one bell... and then an awful nightmare caused me to leap up out of bed. It suddenly made sense why he’d seemed so certain I would wake up on time. I was glad to have slept a little, but still...

“Is something the matter?” Otilie asked and pushed aside the bed-curtains. She had swapped places with Gretia come dawn and must have heard me wake from my nightmare.

“I was woken up quite terribly... Ferdinand told me he treasured these potions for when he had very little time to rest, but I cannot imagine drinking them on a regular basis.”

As far as I was concerned, he deserved a good scolding... but everyone was telling me to stay away from him for the sake of preserving my reputation.

Geez... Being a noble is the height of tedium.

Ottilie insisted that I should sleep more, but I sent her to prepare breakfast. In the meantime, Bertilde dressed me and reported on her experiences during the recent battle. She had worked with Brunhilde and Charlotte, who had devoted themselves to back-line support, and explained that her greatest struggle was preparing the guest rooms at the time of the feast.

And the aub ordered for food to be sent alongside the knights being teleported out, apparently...

Over breakfast, Ottilie explained what my retainers were currently occupied with.

“According to Hartmut when he came back from the feast, Lord Ferdinand ordered that preparations be made for you to spend several days in Ahrensbach. It is necessary for you to return there at least once, he said. To think you need to head back into danger so soon after coming home...”

Everyone who had accompanied me to Ahrensbach before would join me once again, with the addition of Gretia and Lieseleta, who would serve as my attendants.

“I will prepare for your departure with Bertilde, with the intention of getting everything ready before this afternoon,” Ottilie continued. “The others are going to be busy with their own preparations.”

Bertilde held out the newest Ehrenfest books. “Please read these while we arrange a carriage to take you to your library. Gretia and Lieseleta prepared a book you have yet to read, while Lady Elvira said she would make as many as possible before you are wed.”

There were two books, both of which had been printed while I was gone for the winter. I’d spent so much of my time preparing for battle that I’d yet to read them, so I gave Bertilde my thanks and got straight to work rectifying that. A good story was the best way to escape terrifying thoughts.

“Ah, there you are. Your visitors from the Gilberta Company are waiting.”

At third bell, I climbed into a carriage with Hannelore and Heisshitze, and we made our way to my library. Carriages were always used when visiting a noble's estate unless one didn't want to be noticed or was very close friends with the noble in question. We had guests with us, which was why we had elected not to use our highbeasts.

“Let us go, Heisshitze,” Ferdinand said upon our arrival.

“Right! If you will excuse us, Lady Hannelore. Have fun shopping!”

Having escorted us to our destination, Heisshitze went with Ferdinand to the knights' training grounds. They weren't the only ones who had to take their leave; not even the men among my knights were allowed inside my library. An unmarried woman could never entertain male company while her clothes were being fitted... or so I was told.

Ferdinand, his retainers, and the Dunkelfelger men climbed back into the carriages we had ridden here and returned to the castle.

“Even Lasfam went with them...” I said. “Does he intend to train with the knights?”

“I very much doubt it. He will most likely be preparing tea and such for our guests,” Leonore said with a giggle. Then she gestured me into the library.

“Lady Rozemyne, Lady Hannelore... Welcome.”

Lieseleta and Gretia started guiding us at once. The seamstresses were gathered and awaiting our arrival; the estate's parlor was full of cloth, and several women were kneeling inside. Tuuli was among them. I already knew she'd evacuated to the library before the fighting had started, but seeing that she was safe still came as a huge relief.

“I am here today with Lady Hannelore, an archduke candidate from Dunkelfelger and a very dear friend of mine,” I said. “If not for her duchy's support, Ehrenfest might have lost its battles. I realize this will not be enough to express the true depth of our gratitude, but I wish to give her a hairpin of the very best quality. Tuuli, I must ask that you make it for her.”

“As you wish, Lady Rozemyne,” Tuuli replied. Her expression brightened when she met my eye. She must have been glad that I was safe too.

“Do you recall the previous order you took for Dunkelfelger? That hairpin was for Lady Hannelore’s older brother.”

“I remember it well. The design was a sight to behold.”

Back then, Lestilaut had provided a sketch of a rare flower. Tuuli thought back to it, but only for a moment; then she started asking Hannelore detailed questions about her tastes.

“I suppose I should request the divine colors of winter so that I can wear it at the Royal Academy...” Hannelore mused. “As for the design, this is quite the bind... The hairpin my brother gave his fiancée was wonderful, but so is the one Lady Rozemyne tends to wear.”

“As you are such good friends with Lady Rozemyne, might I suggest a hairpin similar to hers?” Tuuli said. “Then the two of you can match. Of course, it will not be exactly the same—we will use differently colored thread and such—but...”

“Oh, what a wonderful idea! I’ve always wanted something like that!” Hannelore clapped, her red eyes sparkling with enthusiasm. Then she seemed to remember her situation and nervously turned to look at me. “That is, um, unless you disapprove, Lady Rozemyne.”

“Perish the thought; I am entirely on board with that idea. Tuuli already knows what hairpins suit me well. You should speak with her to iron out the details for yours.”

Having entrusted the hairpin to Tuuli, I went over to the enthused seamstresses. Gretia and Lieseleta removed my clothes, leaving me in my underwear.

“We must have everything done in time for the Archduke Conference, but please be aware that Lady Rozemyne is still very tired,” Lieseleta warned the others.

“We will strive to finish as quickly as we can,” Corinna replied.

The seamstresses dressed me in unfinished clothes, made a few adjustments, then swapped out the garments and repeated the process. This continued for some time until Corinna spoke again.

“The seamstresses of the archducal family who could not be here today asked us to perform their fitting for them. It would seem that other clothes are going to be made with these as a base.”

For obvious reasons, we hadn’t been able to call the archducal seamstresses here at such short notice. Moreover, while the Gilberta Company was taking care of today’s fittings, some of these outfits were being made in other workshops. My sudden, unexpected growth spurt had put them all in such a bind, and now my return to Ahrensbach had given them even less time to work with. It saddened me to think I was causing the seamstresses so much trouble, but considering that the alternative was not having any clothes to wear, I wanted them to continue working hard.

“I must be troubling everyone with how little time I can stay here in Ehrenfest...” I said.

“You need not worry about that,” Corinna replied. “We are to be paid extra for the urgency of your orders.” There was a merchantlike glint in her eye that reminded me of Benno and immediately brought a smile to my face.

“Please be sure to make them as exceptional as you can. After all, I am going to be wearing them in the presence of royalty.”

“Understood. We will make them the greatest you have ever seen,” Corinna said. Her silvery eyes were normally so calm and gentle, but now they held the determination of someone with a clear goal in mind. She really was Benno’s younger sister.

As the fitting continued, I couldn’t help but wish that Benno, Lutz, and the others were here. I turned to check on Hannelore and saw she was looking right at me. Tuuli was busy searching through the thread she had brought, trying to decide which would suit her new customer best.

“Have you placed your order, Lady Hannelore?” I asked.

“Indeed. That said... You certainly are ordering a lot of clothes at once. Many

of them are of a style I do not even recognize.”

“Yes, we are combining cloth dyed in Ehrenfest’s new fashion with a much thinner variety from Ahrensbach that Ferdinand sent me.” I pinched up one of my skirts to show some of the thin cloth I was referring to. “Veils are not commonly worn here in Ehrenfest.”

Hannelore placed a hand on her cheek and gave me a curious look. “Um, Lady Rozemyne... There is something on my mind that has been bothering me greatly. I wish to ask you a question—but if you consider it improper or rude, I will not pressure you to answer. May I?”

“Of course.”

“As it stands, it seems to me that you have several options for your future: an Ehrenfest archduke candidate, the next Aub Ahrensbach, or even a Zent candidate. Do you know which path you intend to choose?”

In truth, it wasn’t something I’d really considered. I paused in thought, then said, “Lady Hannelore... I do not have any options at all.”

I’d dyed Ahrensbach’s foundation, but that didn’t mean I was a true aub. I was underage, first of all, and the king had yet to give me his approval. As for being a Zent candidate, my Book of Mestionora was too incomplete for me to deserve the position. By the process of elimination, I was an Ehrenfest archduke candidate and nothing else.

“I have always looked up to you,” Hannelore told me. “You had to endure so much at the Royal Academy because of your young appearance, but you did not let it hold you back. You flatly refused my brother’s demands despite his status as a greater duchy’s archduke candidate, expressed yourself clearly to Prince Anastasius, and forged a path according to your own wishes. I sincerely mean it when I say that you dazzled me with your brilliance.” To someone who had spent so much of her time at the Academy warily observing others and trying not to be scolded, I’d come across as quite the heroine.

As an archduke candidate through and through, Hannelore must not have been paying any attention to the commoner seamstresses... but I could see that Tuuli was listening. She and the rest of the Gilberta Company were family to me, and it concerned me to think how they might react to what was being said.

Um, Lady Hannelore... It's fine for you to be curious, but this really isn't a good time...

Of course, my silent pleas did nothing to stop her. She continued to discuss my antics without a care in the world.

"You shone like a future Zent when you invited Dunkelfelger to true ditler and appeared at our country gate," Hannelore continued. "Then you dyed Ahrensbach's foundation and fought to save its nobles from Lanzenave, even when it would have been so easy for you to abandon them. Here in Ehrenfest, however, you have merely accepted your engagement and the distance it will put between you and Lord Ferdinand. It seems strange, does it not? You are most honestly an archduke candidate, but for as long as we have been here, you have seemed the least like your true self."

A cold sweat ran down my back as Hannelore approached me. I was watching Tuuli out of the corner of my eye. Her expression betrayed concern and a demand to know what was going on.

"There is still time," Hannelore continued. "You can still make it."

"T-To what are you referring?"

"The formal announcement will not be made until the Archduke Conference. If you so wish, let us make you an aub or the Zent before then. I will do everything I can to support you."

I still didn't know what Hannelore meant. Surely she wasn't aware of my dream to create a library city. I turned to my retainers, seeking their aid... but rather than doing anything to stop Hannelore, they also appeared to be awaiting my response. All eyes were focused on me.

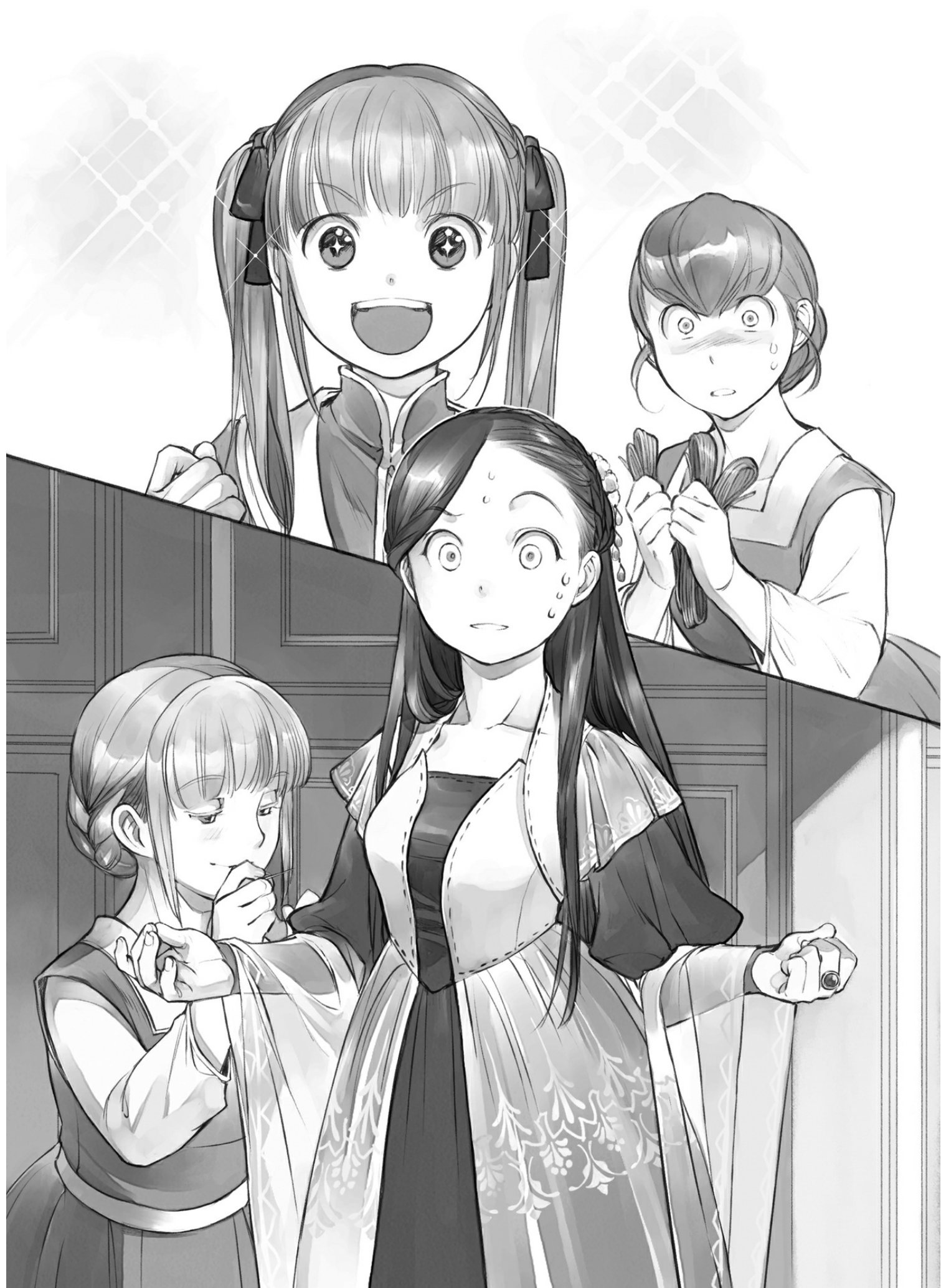
"Lady Hannelore," I said, "assuming I did become an aub or the Zent, what would there still be time for me to do?" Dunkelfelger's support was so overwhelming that it legitimately scared me; I was already well aware that I couldn't treat an alliance with them lightly. I needed to know what Hannelore had in mind.

"Is it not obvious?! You could act on the feelings for Lord Ferdinand you have had since you were young!"

Tuuli was so openly stunned that I feared her eyes might pop right out of her head. Her expression screamed, “You’ve been in love with the High Priest all this time?!”

Corinna kept fitting my clothes, but her smirk spoke for her: “Oh my. I suppose you *are* at that age now.” I seldom cared when nobles misunderstood things about me, but this was unbearable.

P-Please stop! You’re saying all this in front of my family!



“Lady Hannelore!” I exclaimed. “Wait just a m-m-moment. Take a deep breath and calm down. I am *not* in love with Fer—”

“You need not hide your true feelings. Not from me. You told me before that you were in love with someone other than your fiancé, did you not? Someone who has been with you since you were a child, who has guided you on your path, and who has always supported you...”

Oh, right... I guess I did say something like that. But that doesn't make the timing of this outburst any better!

Hannelore continued, “Lord Wilfried told me that nobody matches those criteria better than Lord Ferdinand. Unless you mean to tell me there is someone else.”

This is bad... I was thinking about Fran and Lutz when I said all that, but when it comes to nobles, Ferdinand is the only one who fits the bill. Of course people think I'm in love with him! NOOOOOOOOOO!

I put my head in my hands, unable to bear the pain of my situation. And as I desperately racked my brain for a solution, Hannelore continued with her passionate speech.

“Even in stories, I cannot stand it when love goes unrealized. The one I read this morning almost broke my heart. The very thought of you needing to marry a prince with ill-suited mana all so that you can give the royal family the Grutrissheit pains me greatly. I will not stand for it. You *must* win your husband in fair and glorious combat so that your parents and siblings no longer have room to complain. For the sake of your happiness, Lady Rozemyne, I will support you as much as I can. Okay?”

That little “okay” at the end was adorable, but... Holy cow! Hannelore really is a Dunkelfelger woman!

Following My Heart

Hannelore's desire to "realize my love" wasn't exactly welcome. First of all, I wasn't in love to begin with. Second, my *actual* desire was to end the royal decree keeping Ferdinand in Ahrensbach so that he could return to Ehrenfest at once.

Third, I don't appreciate Tuuli hearing all these absurd declarations about my love life!

"Um, Lady Hannelore... You seem as reluctant to believe me as everyone else, but I assure you—I am *not* in love with Ferdinand."

Hannelore blinked, then stared at me quizzically. "But I was told during the feast that you declared you would save him no matter what, even if you had to make enemies of the royal family and the gods..."

GAHHH! Tuuli keeps twitching! There's fire in her eyes! This might all be true, but she's getting the wrong idea!

Tuuli was practically trembling. She had a hand clapped over her mouth, most likely because she was holding back her urge to scream. This was bad. Unless I cleared up this misunderstanding *now*, who knew what she would tell the rest of my family?

Corinna continued to work on my clothes, acting like she wasn't listening at all, but her eyes were sparkling with curiosity. Everything she heard would surely be relayed to Benno and the others.

"Yes, fine. I *did* say that," I conceded. "Ferdinand is like family to me. He's someone I care about from the bottom of my heart. But love between family members is far from being romantic."

I was aware that my feelings for Ferdinand were more special than my feelings for most others. He was as important to me as Lutz, my temple attendants, the Gutenbergs, *and* my lower-city family... But I didn't think my love for him was romantic.

I can say with certainty that I haven't seen any of the gods dancing in our presence.

“Lady Hannelore, if a member of your family or someone close to you were poisoned in another duchy and close to death, would you not also be ready to make the world your enemy?”

“Um... If my family *were* in a situation like that, I doubt my assistance would do anything for them...” Hannelore muttered, a distant look in her eyes. “They would escape on their own while I blundered about. Or perhaps I would get stuck trying to control those I’d roused in the name of getting revenge...”

This is unfortunate... Her conviction that she's useless in battle is so deeply rooted in her duchy's culture and way of thinking that I'm struggling to understand it.

“I cannot speak for you, but I would do whatever it took to protect those I care about,” I said. “That has always been the case for me; I will rush to their rescue whenever they are in danger. There is no romantic love involved.”

Tuuli gave me a look as though she understood. Was she accepting that I wasn't in love or agreeing that I really would go on a rampage for the sake of my family?

“In that case, what *is* Lord Ferdinand to you?” Hannelore asked. “Could you really not imagine being married to him?”

I tried to picture having Ferdinand as a husband. I'd already done it with two other men I didn't love—Wilfried and Prince Sigiswald—so it seemed reasonably harmless.

Hmm... Wait... Now that I think about it, isn't Ferdinand a major catch...?

“Well... There might not be any love between us, but if we were to speak purely in terms of a political marriage, I might say that Ferdinand is my ideal partner. He owns many books, he gave me a library of my own, we are close enough that I can feel at ease with him, and since he served as my doctor for such a long time, he understands my health needs all too well. He is competent, reliable, and always there for me when I am uneasy or alone. Simply speaking with him calms me down.”

“Um, Lady Rozemyne... Is that not exactly how one would describe being in love?” Hannelore asked, looking sincerely puzzled. My retainers were all wearing the same expression, which made me think... From a noble’s perspective, maybe familial and romantic love *were* the same.

“I may feel at ease with Ferdinand, or sometimes fearful of being scolded... but there’s never a hint of romance in the air between us. Nor are there ever incidents that make my heart beat faster. So no, I would not say we are in love.”

“I... I see...” Hannelore said, looking at me like *I* was the confused one. She really was viewing my situation through rose-colored glasses.

“In a general sense, my ideal partner would be someone like my father, who helps me follow my dreams without restraint and protects me from everyone, no matter their status. Someone who cares for me regardless of status too. Ferdinand does not meet these expectations; the most important thing to him is his promise to his own father, wherein he strives to protect Ehrenfest above all else. So unbreaking is his devotion to that goal that he did not even challenge the royal decree ordering his move to Ahrensbach. As you can see, my standards are quite high.”

Tuuli must have been exasperated that I was using Dad as a benchmark; her expression quickly became one of narrow-eyed disappointment. If she’d been at liberty to speak, she probably would have said, “You really are still a kid.” I didn’t know what else she’d expected, though; I was being totally honest.

“Putting ideal men and all that aside,” I said, “I care about Ferdinand deeply. I, too, treasure promises made with family. That is why I wish to return him to Ehrenfest as soon as I can.”

“But how does Lord Ferdinand feel...?” Hannelore asked, her tone indicating that she wasn’t going to drop this. “He got you to ride his highbeast in Ahrensbach and seemed to treasure you so very dearly.”

As far as Hannelore was concerned, I was in love with Ferdinand, and he loved me back. Were her rose-colored glasses even stronger than I’d thought?

Ferdinand, loving me? No way. Not a chance. Nooope.

“Listen,” I said, “Ferdinand is the one man you can trust not to have any

romantic feelings whatsoever. I may have ridden his highbeast in Ahrensbach, but that was so he could support me in my new position as aub and oversee the battlefield. He was acting logically—that was all.”

To be precise, he had needed to hide the facts that he also had a Book of Mestionora and that he hadn’t been able to enhance his vision because of the poison. He may have been acting as a guardian, but his actions hadn’t felt the slightest bit romantic.

He even used me as a desk when drawing that magic circle!

“And if not even *that* convinces you, Ferdinand once refused the idea on the grounds that he did not want to marry a serial troublemaker.”

“Excuse me?!” Hannelore exclaimed.

My retainers looked equally as shocked, and Tuuli was staring at me with wide eyes. I wasn’t sure I understood their response; sure, marrying Ferdinand would benefit me in all sorts of ways, but he would gain nothing from me but more problems.

“Before my engagement to Wilfried was settled, there was a private discussion with the aub,” I said. “Ferdinand has had nothing but bad experiences with marriage over the years; I would never force an engagement between the two of us when he has already refused it. I would rather he marry someone of his choosing.”

In other words, we didn’t need Dunkelfelger to endorse any more marriages.

Hannelore slumped her shoulders, having caught my meaning. “I... I see. My apologies. I made shallow observations without truly understanding the circumstances. I was not aware that the aub already looked into an engagement.”

At long last, I’d made it clear there was no love between Ferdinand and me. It didn’t feel good to crush Hannelore’s dreams, but misunderstandings like this were best resolved quickly. Now I just needed to change the topic before she recovered and started asking which man I’d *actually* fallen in love with.

I couldn’t bear to admit I made him up to get through the conversation!

“On another note, Lady Hannelore... Might I request your aid in a matter unrelated to love?”

“And what would that be?” Hannelore asked, looking surprised.

“I thought my only future was to follow Aub Ehrenfest’s orders—to marry into royalty as an archduke candidate. But you seem convinced that I can become an aub or even the Zent.”

“Of course. As you have won Ahrensbach’s foundation through true ditter, its fate is entirely in your hands. There is nothing anyone can do to oppose you unless they steal it in turn. The king’s only role in the matter is to give his approval; he cannot take the foundation from you.”

For the king to prevent me from becoming an aub, he would need to choose a replacement to lead the Sovereign Knight’s Order and steal the foundation back. A true Zent might have reclaimed the foundation by moving it, but because the king did not have a Grutrissheit, Hannelore did not see that ever happening.

“If one thing outrages me most, it is the royal family’s decision to take your Grutrissheit through marriage,” Hannelore said. “They act as though they need it more than Yurgenschmidt does. I would much rather *you* become the Zent and choose a suitable consort. At the very least, a prince whose courtship feystone turns to gold dust so easily would not be an appropriate pillar of support.”

Just as female aubs needed to take archduke candidate husbands to cover for them during their pregnancies, a female Zent would need a Zent candidate. A partner whose mana was so inferior that his courtship magic tool turned to dust was out of the question.

“To be clear,” Hannelore continued, “such a person would never be able to give you children. I sincerely doubt that is the future you desire.”

“I suppose...” I said.

It was so hard to imagine that it barely felt real, but even I wanted children of my own one day. Life had blessed me with three loving mothers: my mom back on Earth, my mom in the lower city, and my mother in the Noble’s Quarter. I

wanted to take the care with which they had raised me and raise some kids of my own.

“If marrying into the royal family is not the outcome you desire, then what is?” Leonore asked, having been listening intently with the rest of my retainers. “You originally chose that path to save Lord Ferdinand, and accepted the courtship feystone because you believed that becoming Aub Ahrensbach was unrealistic. We have acted in accordance with that will, but if you desire something else, we will change our course. Retainers cannot take matters into their own hands when their lord or lady is uncertain, so tell us what you seek, Lady Rozemyne.”

Lieseleta similarly asked whether I really wanted to move to the Sovereignty. The awkward, minor disputes I’d noticed among my retainers since our battle with Lanzenave might have been because marrying into royalty wasn’t my true wish.

“I will support you whether you choose to be an aub or the Zent,” Hannelore said. Then, for emphasis: “Even if there’s no romance involved.”

I smiled. “In that case, what I want more than anything else is to become a librarian! That’s why I’ve been taking the scholar course!”

“Wha...?”

Everyone froze in disbelief, which I took as the perfect opportunity to extol the virtues of my dream. I wasn’t sure it would ever come true, but I still said whatever came to mind. That was what everyone wanted me to do, after all.

“I want to be a librarian, searching for whatever books my visitors request, repairing old documents, finding forgotten ones, researching magic tools, and connecting the country’s libraries so that we can gather books from even more places. In those regards, I would say that Professor Solange is my idol. Do not forget that she lives in the Royal Academy’s library. I certainly have not.”

“Professor Solange...?” Leonore muttered, resting a hand on her forehead as she fought to parse my answer. Her reaction made sense; becoming a librarian hadn’t been among the options given to me.

“To tell you the truth, I want to eat delicious food with my friends and family.

I want to hole up in a library and spend my entire day reading. Then, after finishing all of my favorite books, I'd wander around other libraries in search of new ones. I want to do the bare minimum that my social status requires of me and devote the rest of my time to being a librarian, cultivating a collection that everyone can enjoy. I would raise literacy rates across the board, encourage more people to write books of their own, and make reading into a hobby for nobles and commoners both."

Tuuli squinted at me as if she wanted to shout, "Come on! Have you really not changed in the slightest?!" Once again, I was only telling the truth.

There wasn't all that much I could do when the entire country was hanging in the balance and disobeying orders could result in my immediate execution. On top of that, I was needing to manage so many annoying little tasks that collectively made my life even harder. But even then, a single desire dominated my thoughts.

"If possible, I wish to build many libraries and oversee them as a librarian," I concluded.

The nobles must not have expected such an unusual answer to their question. They seemed taken aback that my desire to establish a library city was genuine, but they were the ones who had asked me about my dream.

"In that case... I suppose you will need to become an aub?" Leonore said, desperately trying to make sense of my absurd declaration.

I placed a hand on my cheek. "It does not matter to me whether I am an aub or the Zent. The one, minor difference it will make is whether I create a library city or a library country."

"That is not 'minor' at all..."

"To spread the joy of reading to commoners, it would make more sense for me to be an aub..." I mused. "But being the Zent would put me in a better position to create my interduchy library (network). I could place teleporters like the ones in the country gates in each library to make it easier to travel between them."

Teleporters seemed to be the simplest way of establishing a library network,

but only the Zent could place interduchy teleporters. It was better to have too much than not enough, as the old adage went, so maybe a library country really was best.

“You know, I’m starting to think that marrying Prince Sigiswald isn’t such a bad idea after all. Being able to do whatever I want as a member of royalty sounds very convenient. He said something about me being a third wife for political reasons, and as I understand it, third wives have the least to do when it comes to official duties and socializing. That marriage should prove to be the best approach for advancing my library scheme.”

I’d managed to find positives in all three of my conceivable futures, and my mood started to brighten. I was the one with the Book of Mestionora; making my library network was going to be in the cards no matter which man I chose to marry. I started to rant about Operation: Countrywide Book Collection, as I’d done with Ferdinand.

“This reminds me—when I told Ferdinand about my dream, he said that I could transform Ahrensbach, since the royals were going to tear it apart for treason anyway. He also advised me against becoming the Zent, which made sense at the time... but shouldn’t I secure as much power as I can to expand my library?” I turned to Leonore, who was the most aristocratic of everyone in my retinue. “And retainers would rather serve the Zent than an aub, would they not?”

Leonore looked around at everyone, then smiled. “It would seem that Lord Ferdinand was correct in his assertion.”

“I’m not sure I understand. How can an aub be better than a Zent?”

Leonore made eye contact with Hannelore, who nodded and gently took my hands. “Lady Rozemyne, I am now certain that marrying Lord Ferdinand is the best course of action for you.”

“You... Come again? I thought I just made it clear that he doesn’t want to marry me.”

Hannelore agreed with me a moment ago, didn’t she? How come she’s pairing me with Ferdinand again? She doesn’t even seem to be wearing her rose-colored glasses this time... Her expression couldn’t be more severe.

“Perhaps his feelings have changed since your initial engagement to Lord Wilfried,” Hannelore noted. “Furthermore, the potential for romantic love aside, is he not still near and dear to your heart? You can personally ensure that he finds happiness, Lady Rozemyne.”

“It appears to me that even if there are no romantic feelings involved, Lord Ferdinand treasures you in return. You have a high chance of victory.”

Leonore? Did you really need to chime in? And what did you mean by that last remark?

She continued, “You might not be in love with Lord Ferdinand, and you might not consider him your ideal man, but he’s the best political partner you could ask for, is he not?” There was an intensely serious look in her eyes.

I nodded. Leonore was repeating one of my earlier remarks, and it seemed much too shameless to change my stance for the sake of an argument.

Hannelore smiled. “In that case, let us work out how we can motivate him to agree to a political marriage. If you really do consider him part of your family, then it should not be too much of a stretch for you to see him as your husband. Okay?”

Was that another cutesy okay?! Well, I won’t let it distract me! Husbands and family members are not the same!

Lunch Meeting

Lasfam returned to the estate by carriage and announced that we were to take lunch in the castle. Lieseleta had already known—she had received advance notice via an ordonnanz—so the seamstresses had already taken their leave, and everything was ready for our departure. Hannelore and I climbed into our carriage with our respective guard knights.

“So, how should we convince Lord Ferdinand to agree to this political marriage?” Hannelore asked with a straight face. “My knowledge of the man comes entirely from the tales Heisshitze and the others have told me, so no ideas come to mind. Would demanding some proposal challenges from Lord Ferdinand and completing them not work?”

The last thing I wanted was to go all Clarissa on Ferdinand. I doubted that such an approach would even work on him; he would surely smirk and refuse to give me any challenges at all. Rather than try to bully him into a marriage he would never, ever want, I was resolved to secure him a laboratory in Ehrenfest, his Geduldh.

I'll need to consult him about it before these loons descend on him.

If anyone was going to take action, it was going to be at lunch, when the archducal couple was expected to be in attendance. I needed to leak Hannelore's scheme to Ferdinand and then work with him to devise unbeatable countermeasures; otherwise, he was going to be pushed into a second political marriage by the same people who had brought about his first. Hannelore must already have forgotten my remark that she and her duchy should stay in their lane.

But fear not, Ferdinand! You can count on me to fight your corner!

“Leonore, send word to Ferdinand,” I said. “I wish to speak with him before lunch.” It was a request one would normally make of one's attendants, but for reasons of status, Lieseleta wasn't with me.

“As you will,” Leonore replied. “But is this not too sudden?”

“If you tell him the circumstances are dire, I am sure he will make time for me.”

As much as he frowned and shook his head about it, Ferdinand always made time to listen to whatever was bothering me and help me work through it. This particular disaster risked changing both of our lives, so I doubted he would mind me sharing this intelligence with him.

“FERDINAND!”

He had made time for me—as expected—and prepared a room close to the dining hall where our lunch meeting was being held. I’d arrived to find not only him and his retinue but also my male retainers and Clarissa, who was advising on how to host our guests.

“So, Rozemyne—what are these ‘dire circumstances’?” Ferdinand asked, his brow knit in its usual tight frown. “Dare I ask what you have done this time?”

“It wasn’t me—I mean, it wasn’t something *I* did—but this really is serious, and you’re going to be forced into a political—”

“Calm down. You are far too energetic. *And* you look rather unwell...”

Ferdinand reached out to check my temperature, but I grabbed his hand and squeezed it tight. “At this rate, you might be forced to marry me! Run! RUN AWAYYY!”

“I do not understand a word of what you are telling me. Explain everything that led to your coming here—but not before I activate a sound-blocker. I imagine this is not something to be discussed openly.”

Ferdinand grimaced and waved his free hand, prompting Hartmut to activate an area-wide sound-blocker. Justus, having finished preparing tea, then instructed the gathered retainers to step outside the sound-blocker’s radius. The fact we were using this magic tool showed just how considerate my retainers were; they knew I wasn’t in any state to hold a feystone.

“Now... why the melancholic smile?” Ferdinand asked.

“I am sad to have troubled my retainers... but also touched that they would do so much for me.”

“I see. They surely want the burden on you to be as light as can be, so make your explanation quick, if you would.”

I watched my retainers have their own conversations out of the corner of my eye as I explained the events of the fitting. First, I went into Hannelore and the others’ misunderstanding that I was in love with him and the immense amount of support they had thrown behind the idea. Then I dropped the bomb—their conclusion that we should enter a political marriage.

“I told them my true desires,” I said. “But when I mentioned that I didn’t want any unnecessary burdens, Lady Hannelore and my retainers all started insisting we get married. They changed their stances in a heartbeat. It doesn’t make any sense whatsoever, does it?”

“No, it makes perfect sense, if you ask me. They foresaw the disaster that would come from you having unchecked power and decided you would need someone to control it for you.”

Rather than openly agreeing with me, Ferdinand seemed exhausted. He noted that I was the only one who didn’t understand the situation and then launched into a lecture, glaring at me all the while.

“Their exasperation about your library scheme must have contributed, but even putting that aside, every single person who heard your remarks deduced that they were dangerous. Do you not know why the country gates were placed outside the borders—why teleporters to the Royal Academy all connect to their respective duchies’ dormitories? Is it not clear why their activation requires the aub, or why they can only transport a few people at once despite how many students need to use it each year?”

“Umm...”

“If you had stopped to think for even a moment, you would have realized that a Zent adding teleporters to libraries and placing them wherever she pleased would absolutely devastate duchy security. Even if you had the best intentions, someone would eventually decide to exploit every weakness you created. It should come as no surprise that an archduke candidate from Dunkelfelger—

especially one learned in her duchy's long history—would start to be wary. Fool.”

I'd assumed Ferdinand was exhausted because I was so clearly in the right that discussing the matter was a waste of time, but I couldn't have been more mistaken. His scolding came so suddenly that the most I could do was blurt out random excuses.

“I was just listing my desires as they came to me... It wasn't like I expected them to come true. My main focus was distracting everyone from thinking I was in love with you.”

“Did you not declare that marrying Prince Sigiswald would make your goal easy to achieve? Even if you said it without thinking—as you are wont to do—Lady Hannelore immediately understood the risk of your ‘dreams’ coming true. The teleportation circles aside, I am sure her mind wandered to all the other bizarre claims you decided to make ‘as they came to you.’”

I managed only a small peep in response. Not thinking things through had produced truly dire consequences in the past.

“Oh, the agony... I cultivated the ideal reputation for you—a perfect archduke candidate shrouded in the divinity of sainthood—and you cast it all aside for the most foolish reasons. I cannot say I ever expected my hard work to evaporate quite like this. Were all those reminders during the feast not enough for you to know the importance of maintaining appearances?”

“Ngh... It came up so regularly that I started to drown it out. You can only hear the same warning so many times before it starts to wear on you.”

“I would call you a fool, but the word no longer feels strong enough...” Ferdinand muttered. He sounded as bitter as ever, but was this really the time to bemoan the subtleties of an insult? Surely our battle plan was what mattered most right now.

“My reputation aside,” I said, “unless we take action before Lady Hannelore and the others begin their rampage, I suspect you will again be dragged away from your Geduldh. I can try to convince Sylvester to build you a laboratory here in Ehrenfest, so let us start planning now—ow ow owww!”

“You have brought me such excellent intelligence,” Ferdinand said. He had pinched my cheek and pulled to stop me from speaking. “For that, I thank you.”

“You sure don’t *seem* thankful...” I shot back, rubbing my aching cheek and glaring at him.

Ferdinand cast a glance at the door, so I did the same. Angelica, whom I’d stationed outside the room, was poking her head in to get our attention.

“It must be lunchtime,” Ferdinand remarked.

“Listen to me, Ferdinand... You have devoted so much of your life to that promise you made. Going forward, I ask that you focus on your own dreams. No matter what Sylvester, Lady Hannelore, or anyone else says, do *not* surrender. Do everything in your power to secure the future you desire.” I clenched my fist, wanting to hammer home my determination and support. If we could survive this lunch, the Dunkelfelgerians would return home.

Ferdinand stood up and extended a hand to me. “Fear not—I do not start fights I cannot win.” Spread across his lips was the same smile he always wore when devising evil schemes, and at once, I was convinced that I could leave things in his hands. It warmed my heart to see him so motivated.

I was exceptionally wary of everything Hannelore said and did, but our lunch meeting was going smoothly nonetheless. She had rejoiced over the especially elaborate dishes our duchy’s chefs had served, and the other Dunkelfelgerians seemed satisfied as well.

One topic of conversation that dominated our meal together was how thoroughly Dunkelfelger’s knights had crushed Ehrenfest while sparring. Wilfried spoke at length about the immense strength he had witnessed, having been smacked down with the rest of his peers.

So he took part as well, huh?

From there, we discussed what we were going to do when lunch was over. I wanted to check on the temple, whereas Hannelore had arranged to have tea with Florencia, Wilfried, and Charlotte.

“It would have been nice to tour Ehrenfest’s famed temple and see what

makes it stand out from all the others in Yurgenschmidt... but given the lack of time, I suppose there is nothing we can do,” Hannelore said, her voice tinged with regret. If she had been able to use her highbeast, she would have had just enough time to visit before she needed to return home. But by carriage, she had no chance at all.

“I would have liked to show you around, had that been an option...” I replied.

It was unfortunate, but there was no point trying to force the issue; Ferdinand had already told us there wouldn’t be enough time, and Melchior, who had spent his entire morning vigorously removing traps, was adamant that it still wasn’t safe to welcome guests.

“Uncle, are you going to the temple with Rozemyne and Melchior?” Wilfried asked.

“Yes, that is my intention. I must ensure that Rozemyne returns to the castle in time—and as some of my former attendants are in the temple, I do not foresee any issues with my being there.”

“Dunkelfelger’s knights were calling for you to train with them. I worry this will mean leaving them empty-handed...”

Ferdinand glanced at Sylvester and smiled. “I am told the aub has not had much time to express his appreciation, despite that being the reason our guests came here in the first place. Would this not be an excellent opportunity to remedy that?”

“As thoughtful as always,” Sylvester replied, his smile twitching ever so slightly. We finished our food not long after, and our post-meal tea was brought in.

“Speaking of which, Aub Ehrenfest—what is the status of the Sovereignty? We have received no updates whatsoever, so I wondered if you knew anything.”

It made sense that we were starved for information. I’d set out in the dead of the night, fought until sunrise, slept for two days after taking Ahrensbach’s foundation, and made my return to Ehrenfest while unable to use the magic tool meant for contacting the Sovereignty.

Hannelore turned to Sylvester, no doubt curious as well. “My father was still in Dunkelfelger when I sent word that we were bringing our knights to Ehrenfest.”

“My understanding of the Sovereignty’s situation is about as limited as yours,” Sylvester replied. “To my knowledge, it was two days ago when Hartmut and Clarissa’s letter arrived there through the Royal Academy’s knights.”

Sylvester had informed the royal family that we had rescued Ferdinand and that we were engaged in a large-scale battle with Lanzenave. It hadn’t been particularly urgent news, so he hadn’t used a more direct means of communication.

“And the royal family’s response?” I asked.

“The Sovereign Knight’s Order reinforced their guard, but no one from Ahrensbach or Lanzenave came. In the end, they asked us when the enemy was due to arrive, whether the Sovereignty was being targeted in the first place, and when it would be best to contact Dunkelfelger.”

That lackadaisical response had arrived yesterday morning when we were busy defending our duchy’s foundation. Sylvester had neglected to send anything back, since it hadn’t been all that high on our list of priorities at the time. I understood the feeling all too well.

“How was I meant to know any of that, anyway?” Sylvester continued. “Since the Sovereignty doesn’t seem to be in danger, I figured it could wait for when you got back. Do *you* have any answers for them?”

“If our enemies are seeking the Grutrissheit, then Detlinde’s group should be not in the Sovereignty proper where the royal palace is located but in the Royal Academy...” Ferdinand replied dryly.

Sylvester’s expression changed. “Send word at once,” he said, rising to his feet, but Ferdinand raised a hand to stop him.

“Be at ease. Those of the royal family are safest tucked away in their Sovereign villas. As long as the invaders do not obtain the Grutrissheit, that arrangement will produce the fewest casualties.”

Though he was being indirect, I understood Ferdinand loud and clear: “Don’t

cause trouble by saying things better left unsaid.” He gestured to Justus and stood up.

“Get in touch with Professor Hirschur and gather information about the Royal Academy’s current status. Ahrensbach is in a unique position—its dormitory is closed, and it remains without a dormitory supervisor, as a replacement will not be assigned until the Archduke Conference. I would advise that you also send word to Dunkelfelger. Update them on the royal family’s situation and arrange for Professor Rauffen to search the Royal Academy.”

The Sovereignty was quiet, which meant Detlinde’s group must have been up to something at the Royal Academy. Perhaps they were circling the shrines and praying in order to secure the Grutrissheit.

“Rozemyne, Melchior... We do not have much time,” Ferdinand said. “Let us depart for the temple at once.”

Melchior and I stood, and our retainers sprang into action.

“We don’t have much time?” I echoed. “I’m not sure I understand. Shouldn’t we be heading to the Royal Academy?”

“The dormitory supervisors have yet to contact us, and it is unlikely that anything will occur at such short notice. And then there are the various preparations that will need to be made before our departure. More than any of that, though, have you forgotten that visiting the temple and the lower city was our reason for making this trip in the first place? The royal family can wait.”

At once, my thoughts turned to those still at the Royal Academy.

Raimund and Professor Hirschur rarely leave their lab, so I can’t imagine they’ll cross paths with Lady Detlinde’s group. If our enemies want the Grutrissheit, where would they be most likely to go...?

I was about to leave the room when I stopped in my tracks and turned around. “Sylvester, please confirm that Professor Solange is safe in the Royal Academy’s library. I am concerned about her.”

Sylvester seemed to understand my hidden message and assured me that he would contact Hirschur and Dunkelfelger without delay. Because he knew that the entrance to a duchy’s foundation was in its temple’s book room, it must

have been easy for him to deduce that the Royal Academy's library was important as well.

Everyone moved to the balcony and produced their highbeasts, but I stood rooted to the spot. I couldn't bear to touch my feystone.

"Ferdinand, I, um..."

"Ride with Angelica."

"Right... Angelica, if you would."

I climbed onto my knight's highbeast, and together we headed to the temple.

Oh, now that I think about it... I wouldn't be able to survive as an aub or the Zent.

My new fear meant I couldn't brew, send ordonnanzes, or ride my own highbeast. It was the death knell of any decent noble.

Well, I probably shouldn't stress about it. I can't imagine this is the kind of problem that clears up right away.

That said, I would soon be returning to Ahrensbach, and the duchy was in desperate need of an aub. Would I really be able to meet everyone's expectations? My fingertips went cold as a deep sense of unease started to spread through me.

The Temple and Melchior's Report

"Welcome back, Lady Rozemyne. And, Lord Ferdinand... we are glad to have this opportunity to see you once again."

"I, too, am glad you all remain in good health."

Fran and Zahm had greeted us with the other gray priests, which had brought a slight smile to the lips of our usually stoic Ferdinand. He was clearly nostalgic for the temple; it was one of the few places he could truly feel at ease.

"Time may be of the essence, but we have come to check on the temple and orphanage and confirm that everyone is safe," I said. "Please tell me what you know in my chambers."

"Sister, I've already told the aub everything I know about the attack, but would you like a report anyway?" Melchior asked. "Father saw Lady Georgine's memories, he said. I was summoned and told about them this morning while we were disarming traps."

"I would, thank you." I'd come to the temple precisely because I wanted information; refusing a report wouldn't have made any sense at all.

Melchior said that he would meet me in the High Bishop's chambers once he had put on his robes and then took his leave. Ferdinand wouldn't be able to enter my chambers while my retainers were helping me get changed, so he visited the High Priest's chambers with Hartmut for the first time in quite a while. His former attendants would surely rejoice to see him again.

"Did nothing happen in the High Bishop's chambers?" I asked. "I heard that someone in the temple was working with Lady Georgine..."

"We were all safe. Lady Philine and Lord Roderick were with us."

"I see. That's good to know. Once I've observed the temple and heard its reports, I intend to head into the lower city. Monika, Nicola—there are going to be a lot of guests, so you will need to prepare plenty of tea."

The two girls exchanged glances and then giggled. I'd essentially told them they could skimp on dressing me properly—to a reasonable extent, of course—if other duties were demanding of their time.

"I don't imagine there will be much for us to do," Monika said. "Fran and Zahm have been working exceptionally hard ever since they learned that Lord Ferdinand would be visiting."

"I will inform the others once we are done, Lady Rozemyne," Nicola added.

Monika exited the High Bishop's chambers and Nicola went to the kitchen, at which point Fran and Zahm entered with a fully equipped tea trolley. They looked faintly tense... but also excited, as much as they tried to hide it.

Ferdinand's old attendants really do love him, don't they?

From there, Monika summoned everyone to the High Bishop's chambers. I gestured to the seats in front of me, urging Melchior and Ferdinand to take them, then took a drink of the tea Fran had prepared us. Melchior and Ferdinand picked up their own cups in response.

"How nostalgic..." Ferdinand said once he'd also taken a sip. He had gone without Fran's tea for a very long time, so he must have been relishing the taste.

I turned my attention to Melchior, who I thought looked especially tired. We'd seen each other at lunch, but he'd been seated so far away that I simply hadn't noticed the bags under his eyes.

"Fran brews the most delicious tea, does he not?" I asked. "Has it helped to ease your exhaustion?"

"Yes, Sister. It was delicious. Um... Father gave me something for the soldiers who fought valiantly at the west gate. Might we head there together? The soldiers know you better than they do me, so Father said it would be best if we both went."

We were handing out rewards already? That was an unusually quick turnaround. Had Sylvester gone out of his way to prepare everything early so that I would still have a chance to meet with my dad...?

“But of course,” I said. “Let us go together. You will see the soldiers on a regular basis when you start visiting Hasse’s monastery. This seems like a good opportunity for you all to interact before then.”

I’d already introduced Melchior to the soldiers, but the more chances they had to touch base, the better. I moved to address my retainers.

“Damuel, Matthias—circle the lower city and gather together everyone who fought at the west gate. I wish to give them something from the aub. Collect as much intelligence as you can in the process.”

“Understood,” they replied.

It was the day after the attack, so many of the soldiers who had taken part in the fighting were probably still resting at home. If we didn’t gather them all together, some of them would miss out on their reward. Damuel would know whom to seek out, since he had fought alongside them.

“Laurenz, check on the apprentice blue priests, starting with Bertram. Angelica, could you do the same for the apprentice blue shrine maidens?”

“As you wish.”

Angelica was far from the best person for this job, but sending her out was the most logical choice. Judithe, Philine, and Roderick had traveled all over while defending the temple, which meant they had most likely already heard what Melchior had to say.

“Melchior,” I said, “please tell me about the attack on the temple. You can skip over everything that was mentioned during the feast. There was someone on the inside assisting Lady Georgine, was there not? Were any children of the former Veronica faction involved...?”

“That was all a misunderstanding. The blue priest in question was Krapech, but he was not working with her.”

I cocked my head, having recognized the name but not much else. Most of my interactions with blue priests happened in the High Priest’s room or when we gathered in prayer. Krapech wasn’t all too good with paperwork, and he didn’t have as much mana as Kampfer or Frietack, so we’d never had reason to speak to one another.

“As I recall, the previous High Bishop mostly ignored Krapech,” Ferdinand interjected. “The man was from a mednoble family more aligned with the Leisegangs, so I find it hard to believe he was connected to Georgine.” He gave his temple a few inquisitive taps, his expression so severe that Melchior actually recoiled a little.

Oh, right. Melchior took over from Hartmut. He never knew Ferdinand when he was the High Priest.

I was feeling bad for Melchior, who was faced with the daunting task of reporting to Ferdinand, so I decided to give him an escape route. “Melchior—if you would rather your retainers give this report, nobody would take issue. This burden must be too much for someone of your young age.”

He looked over his shoulder at his retainer, who gave a reassuring nod. That must have been enough to encourage Melchior, as he turned around again and continued on his own.

“By looking through her memories, Father learned that Lady Georgine came to Ehrenfest on an earlier ship than the one that started the fight at the west gate.”

Georgine had avoided the west gate entirely and instead made her way into the lower city through its waterway. She had met with those who attacked the north gate, then used the waterway again to gain access to the temple.

She’s surprisingly tenacious, huh? And aggressive. I would never have been able to do any of that.

Still, something about Melchior’s story confused me. “I don’t doubt what you’re telling me—not when Sylvester looked through her memory—but how did she know about the waterway we made? She was in another duchy.”

“Like magic contracts, entwickeln schematics disappear after use,” Ferdinand said, beginning his explanation. “This was problematic for future aubs, however, so copies were made and archived. As I understand it, most of the people involved in the waterway’s schematics were later... *removed*... during the purge. But of course, our entwickeln happened prior to that, when we did not know who had given their name to her.” He paused, then muttered, “I did not think a thoroughbred noble such as Georgine would actually take such an

approach..." It was clear to us all that she had intended to do absolutely anything to steal our foundation.

"As it stood, Georgine should not have had any noble supporters left in Ehrenfest," Ferdinand continued. "Yet she still managed to create and execute a plan of such outstanding complexity. If only she had put her intellect, ambition, and expertise toward some other purpose... Her skills were wasted on revenge."

"Indeed," I said, empathizing with his every word. "If she had devoted her talents to my library scheme, for example, Ehrenfest and Ahrensbach would already be transformed. It really is a shame that so much potential went to waste..."

Ferdinand gave me a repudiating look. "Hmm... I see. On second thought, I suppose revenge is but one of many ways a person can waste their life. I should not be so quick to judge."

"Um, what do you mean by that?"

"Exactly what I said."

Hmph!

I was debating how to fire back when Melchior said, "Um... May I continue?" His eyes were darting between Ferdinand and me, so we responded in turn.

"You may."

"Of course, my dear little brother."

Georgine had arrived at the temple before the battle at the west gate had even begun. She'd emerged near the orphanage at a time when none of the orphans or gray priests had been around and then moved to the noble section of the temple. The west basement entrance hadn't been locked; some of the servants for whom it was meant had actively been using it.

"The order to evacuate had already been given by the time Lady Georgine reached the temple," Melchior told us. "The attendants and servants stopped using the second floor where everyone was hiding but carried out their usual duties on the first floor and in the basement until the attack on the west gate."

Because of the extra knights keeping watch, the attendants and personal chefs had needed to continue preparing food. People needed to eat, even during an evacuation, and a servant ordered to fetch provisions had no choice but to obey.

“Lady Georgine took advantage of the unlocked door and stole the robes of a gray shrine maiden who happened to be leaving at that moment,” Melchior continued.

Ferdinand shot me a glance, then requested that the details of the theft be omitted. I clenched my fists in response; the shrine maiden must have been killed in the process.

“Was the gray shrine maiden whose robes were stolen one of Krapech’s attendants?” I asked.

“No, she was Kampf’s.”

Georgine had put the stolen gray robes on over her silver clothes, nonchalantly entered the basement through its west entrance, and climbed to the first floor via the nearest stairway.

“She then stole away in Krapech’s room, but only because it was closest to the book room,” Melchior noted.

Georgine had passed the kitchens in the basement of the temple’s noble section and ascended to the first floor, where the attendants’ rooms were located. These rooms were connected to the blue priests’ chambers via stairs to make it easier for the attendants using them to carry out their duties. According to Melchior, that was how Georgine had gained access to Krapech’s room, whereupon she had slaughtered everyone inside.

“Lady Georgine waited patiently as the fighting started at the temple gate. Then she listened out for the inevitable clamor in the book room, deducing which traps her body double had fallen into by the cheers of my knights. Father told us she even heard them rejoice that our teleporter to the Ivory Tower had worked as anticipated.”

Once the footfalls and voices had receded, Georgine had used her silver clothes to pass through the book room’s barrier. She had then avoided the

remaining traps by combining what she had overheard with what she could see. The gloves and shoes stuck to the floor had made it clear where the glue was, and the heap of clothes that had once belonged to her body double had marked the location of our concealed teleportation circles. Georgine had pulled a long string of some kind, allowing her to remove her silver clothes from under her gray robes, and then placed them on the floor so that she could safely amble over the circle.

“Thank you for your report,” Ferdinand interjected. Sylvester had already explained what she had done from there.

“It’s my fault that Krapech, his retainers, and Kampfer’s attendant died...” Melchior began in a whisper, slowly shaking his head. “If only I’d stationed guards at the book room after the impostor was teleported away. If only I’d evacuated the servants more thoroughly... or considered the waterway as a potential weak point. I made such a horrid, unforgivable mess of things.”

No matter how he tried to hide it, any one of us could see that Melchior was exhausted. He looked so sleep-deprived that he must have had the same kind of night as Hannelore and me.

“Your guard might not have been perfect, but you are not to blame for those deaths,” I said. “Lady Georgine was the one who killed them. You must not forget that.”

“But Sister...”

“Would you like to mourn the dead with a prayer? I gave one with Lady Hannelore at dawn. I dedicated mine to all those who died in Ehrenfest, so it should already have reached the temple, but another prayer could not hurt.” I stood, then knelt in front of the small shrine in the High Bishop’s chambers. “Let us pray for Krapech and the attendants who lost their lives.”

Melchior stood as well, though his legs wavered. He accepted a feystone from his retainer and squeezed it with both hands while kneeling beside me.

It wasn’t long before Judithe, Philine, Roderick, and Melchior’s retainers were all in a row behind us. Fran and the temple attendants then formed a second row behind them. Everyone here must have seen the fighting in the temple.

For a gathering this large, it might have been a better idea to move to the chapel.

The small shrine meant we were all rather cramped, but it made sense to pray now while everyone's feelings were most sincere. I formed my schtappe, which prompted everyone else who had one to follow suit.

"O mighty King and Queen of the endless skies, may our prayers reach those climbing to the towering heights. We perform our song of mourning so that you might protect those who can no longer return to us."

Black and golden lights swirled together as they headed up into the air and through the ceiling. I could feel mana flowing from Melchior's ring and the feystone in his hands.

"Sister... Giving my mana has put me so much more at ease..." Melchior said when we were done. He looked nowhere near as tense as before.

"Would you like to come to the orphanage with me?" I replied.
"Remembering those we have lost is important, but so is recognizing everyone you were able to protect."

I stood up and gave Monika an order to warn the orphanage of our visit. She opened the door just as Laurenz and Angelica leapt into the room.

"What's going on?!" Laurenz exclaimed. "We saw the lights of a blessing appear out of nowhere!"

"Are we under attack?!" Angelica cried. The fact she had arrived at the same time as Laurenz despite having been on the third floor said everything one needed to know about her speed. The way she was looking around the room, obviously on guard, reminded me of our exchange with Ferdinand this morning.

"No, Angelica," I said, unable to suppress a chuckle. "We were just praying in mourning of everyone who died in the temple."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ferdinand grimace slightly. "You are headed to the orphanage, are you not?" he asked. "If you do not leave now, there will not be enough time for you to visit the west gate."

"Right."

We made our way down the halls to the orphanage, where Wilma, the gray shrine maidens, and the underage children were already kneeling in anticipation of our arrival. Wilma greeted us as their representative.

“Welcome, Lady Rozemyne, Lord Melchior.”

“I am glad to see you all safe,” I said.

Wilma gave me a peaceful smile. “Lady Philine and Lady Judithe’s warning allowed us to evacuate quickly. On top of that, Lord Melchior and your knights swiftly replaced the guards, so we made it through the fight without experiencing any of the violence.” She and the others had remained in their designated safe spots for an entire bell. Staying there had made them hungry and a little claustrophobic, but it hadn’t been a scary experience for them, at least.

“I see. That is wonderful to hear.”

“Lady Rozemyne, Lord Melchior, and your retainers—we thank you all ever so much. It is because of you that we may continue with our everyday lives while the noble section of the temple remains so busy.”

Wilma’s words of gratitude seemed to comfort Melchior and his retainers, who had worked the hardest of us all. Judithe and Philine had proud smiles spread across their faces.

“Judithe, Philine, Roderick—you all did so much to protect the temple,” Wilma continued. “Fran, the other attendants, and everyone in the orphanage are safe because of you. We thank you ever so much.”

By the time we departed, Melchior’s tense expression was gone, replaced with a pleasant smile. “I am so pleased we were able to protect everyone in the orphanage,” he said. “It comforts me to think that not everything I did was bad.”

“Shall we go to the west gate?” I asked. “Let us praise the soldiers who defended the city with you.”

“Right!” Melchior exclaimed with a firm nod, then instructed his retainer to fetch the rewards. It was good to see him more energized again.

“Have you been praying nonstop since last night?” Ferdinand asked me.

“Obviously not. That was only my second one.”

He gave an exasperated sigh.

“Excuse me? That wasn’t a good sigh, was it?”

“It can wait. Melchior is ready. Let us go to the lower city.”

Ferdinand grabbed my hand, and in the blink of an eye, we were riding atop his ivory lion. He took to the sky and started flying to the west gate without saying a word to anyone.

I turned around, not quite able to flail or cause a fuss. “Um, Ferdinand... What about my reputation?”

“Did you not say it was so troublesome that you wished to cast it aside entirely?”

“I did, but...”

How is this going to impact the others?

In the past, my retainers had gone to such great lengths to keep me from riding with Ferdinand, but now they weren’t saying anything at all. Their silence was very mysterious, but we arrived at the west gate before I could figure out the reason for it. Damuel, Matthias, and the soldiers were all waiting atop one of the gateposts. Dad was among those kneeling.

The West Gate and Groundwork

“Welcome, Lady Rozemyne, Lord Melchior,” Damuel said, greeting us together with Matthias. “Everyone you see here took part in the battle at the west gate.”

I cast my eye over the gathered soldiers while Ferdinand helped me dismount his highbeast. They were kneeling before us, their heads lowered. Damuel had told me that no one was gravely wounded, but looking at their bandages and weakly hanging limbs, they certainly weren't in top shape. Such injuries would almost certainly impact their work lives going forward.

“Sister, there are wounded...” Melchior murmured as he climbed down from his retainer's highbeast. The knights had been tended to by their peers and doctors, whereas the commoner soldiers must not have received any care at all.

“Fear not, Melchior. I shall heal them.”

“You have enough mana left to do that?” Melchior asked, awestruck. Given that he wasn't yet attending the Academy or compressing his mana, he must have really exerted himself during our prayer for the deceased.

I smiled at Melchior and put a hand on his head, which was now far lower than my eye level. “The more divine protections one obtains from the gods, the less mana one needs for these things. You are soon to become the High Bishop. Pray for the duchy and its people, and strive to obtain divine protections from as many gods as you can.”

“I will do my best to be like you, Sister.”

“You are already so skilled and considerate, Melchior. I do not doubt that you will become a far greater High Bishop than me.” I chuckled, then removed my hand from his head and addressed those kneeling. “My retainer Damuel has told me of your heroics. You fought valiantly to protect this city. Had the invaders' wolfaniels made it through the gate, the casualties among the commoners would have been devastating.”

The kneeling soldiers raised their heads... and then gawked when they saw me. I'd visited the west gate last year to retrieve Clarissa—*and* while wearing the same robes—so everyone here recognized the change in me far better than the commoners who only saw me from afar at the chapel.

Dad squinted a little, like he was beholding a dazzling light. There was joy and pride in his expression... but also sadness.

I continued, pretending not to notice their shock, "It would not be an exaggeration to say that your brave actions yesterday saved our fair city—and at the cost of your own wellness, it would appear. I wish to heal you all so that you can continue your fine work. *Streitkolben*."

I closed my eyes, turned my schtappe into Flutrane's staff, and then started to pray.

"O Goddess of Healing Heilschmerz, of the Goddess of Water Flutrane's exalted twelve, hear my prayers. Lend me your divine power and grant me the power to heal those who have been hurt. Play the divine melody and cast the blissful ripples of your pure divine protection."

Even with my eyes closed, I could feel the green light flowing from my staff. The soldiers and my retainers cried out, surprised that I could produce such a large blessing.

"Rozemyne, that's enough," Ferdinand muttered, urgency in his voice. "No more."

I stopped channeling mana into my schtappe, dispelled it with rucken, and then slowly opened my eyes. The soldiers who had just moments ago been grimacing in pain undid their bindings, examined the skin underneath, and then joyously declared that they were healed. The news came as such a great relief.

One of the soldiers stepped forward and then thumped his left breast twice with his right fist. "Your consideration is far more than what we deserve, but we thank you for it. As the commander of this gate, allow me to personally express my appreciation."

"Hm...?" I stared at the man, bewildered. I'd seen him before, but I didn't know his name. "I thought *Gunther* was the commander here."

“He has resolved to join you and your personnel when you move. Thus, we have already carried out his handover.”

That made sense. Nearly a year had passed since I’d asked my family to prepare to accompany me, and the temple had also been busy with its handovers. I could only imagine the chaos that would have ensued if the position of commander hadn’t been passed on before my departure.

“To be frank with you, losing Gunther will deal a great blow to Ehrenfest,” the commander said. “As I am sure you know, he is a talented guard who will protect your personnel without fail.” He was clearly worried about my dad, who was leaving his job to travel to another land with his family.

“It brings me great comfort to know that Gunther is going to be with them. And on that note, I have with me rewards from my adoptive father, the archduke, to be distributed to those of you who fought to protect your duchy.” I called over Melchior and made my announcement: “My little brother, Melchior, is going to succeed me as the High Bishop.”

“I wish to become a High Bishop the people of this duchy can rely on, as my sister was before me. I am looking forward to working with you all,” Melchior declared. He then signaled for his retainers to begin distributing the rewards.

As the soldiers received their compensation, I started asking them about yesterday’s battle. I’d seen some of them on several occasions during our trips to Hasse, and while they were very cautious about how they spoke, they started to relax as they told me tales about Damuel.

“At third bell, he flew to each of the gates and warned us to strengthen our guard,” one said. “He did the same for the workers when the ship drew near. If not for his actions, there would have been so many more casualties.”

“He ensured that as many knights as possible were assigned to the west gate,” another added. “Our evacuating apprentices who saw him slay those vicious dogs one by one have even started to idolize him. Seeing the knights use the same weapons we do also motivated them to train harder.”

The apprentices had seen the fight from a much better vantage point than their peers on the front line, and the spectacle had excited them out of their minds. They had watched in astonishment as Damuel sent out ordonnances,

held the line, and protected the soldiers from enemy attacks. I glanced over at our man of the hour and saw him rooted to the spot, looking as awkward as ever.

Just enjoy it, Damuel. I think you've earned that much.

Dad came to join us once he'd taken his portion of the reward, and the guards launched into stories about his unbelievable antics.

"Gunther did more during that battle than any of us. Still, my heart leapt into my throat when I saw him lunge forward to punch one of those dog feybeasts! I thought he was gonna get eaten!"

"It was so much like him to keep fighting until all the charms from his family were gone."

As his peers all spoke about his recklessness, Dad grinned without an ounce of regret. "Lady Rozemyne, thank you for providing us with such powerful charms. I apologize for using them all, but I could not play it safe when it came time to defend what mattered to me most."

"I understand," I said. "Your lives are far more important."

Like father, like daughter, huh?

If even I could see the similarities between Dad and me, they must have been clear as day to Damuel and Ferdinand. They were both wearing hard-to-read expressions.

"Lady Rozemyne, Lord Melchior..." the new commander said, a stern look on his face. "This might be an inappropriate question, but are we likely to see another fight anytime soon? How much will we need to prepare?"

The other soldiers tensed up as they awaited our answer.

"Fear not," Ferdinand interjected, responding in our stead. He took a step toward us, and the tone of our conversation turned on its head; those who had moments ago been lost in their stories briskly moved into a line, standing bolt upright. "Your rewards from Aub Ehrenfest mean the battle has concluded. Moreover, it was Ahrensbach who attacked us, and they will not be invading again."

Ferdinand took my hand and pulled me over to him. He supported me enough that I wouldn't stumble and presented me to all those gathered. "During the recent battle, Rozemyne stole Ahrensbach's foundation as an Ehrenfest archduke candidate, making her the de facto Aub Ahrensbach. Once the Zent has given his approval, she will rule our once dangerous neighbor. It will never invade Ehrenfest again."

"Ooh!"

The soldiers erupted in cheers, but Melchior and his retainers remained silent, their eyes flitting between Ferdinand and me. My mind went blank as well.

"Ferdinand," I eventually said.

"We must now leave to begin our rule of Ahrensbach. O soldiers of Ehrenfest, I entrust the protection of this city to you all. Preserve its peace so that we may depart without fear."

"Yes, sir!"

Ferdinand was clearly used to giving motivational speeches; the soldiers thumped their chests in a vigorous salute.

"Gunther," he continued, "you are to accompany Rozemyne's personnel to Ahrensbach before the situation there has completely settled. Protect them no matter the cost." He removed one of the charms he was wearing on his arm and proffered it to my dad, who gazed at it before looking between Ferdinand and me.

Dad seemed unsure for a moment but accepted the charm and said, "Without fail."

"Let us scout the lower city and then return to the temple," Ferdinand said—a surprising remark, as I'd thought he would take me straight back to the temple. He put me on his highbeast as he had done before, and we took to the sky. Our plan was to travel to the south, east, and north gates in that order.

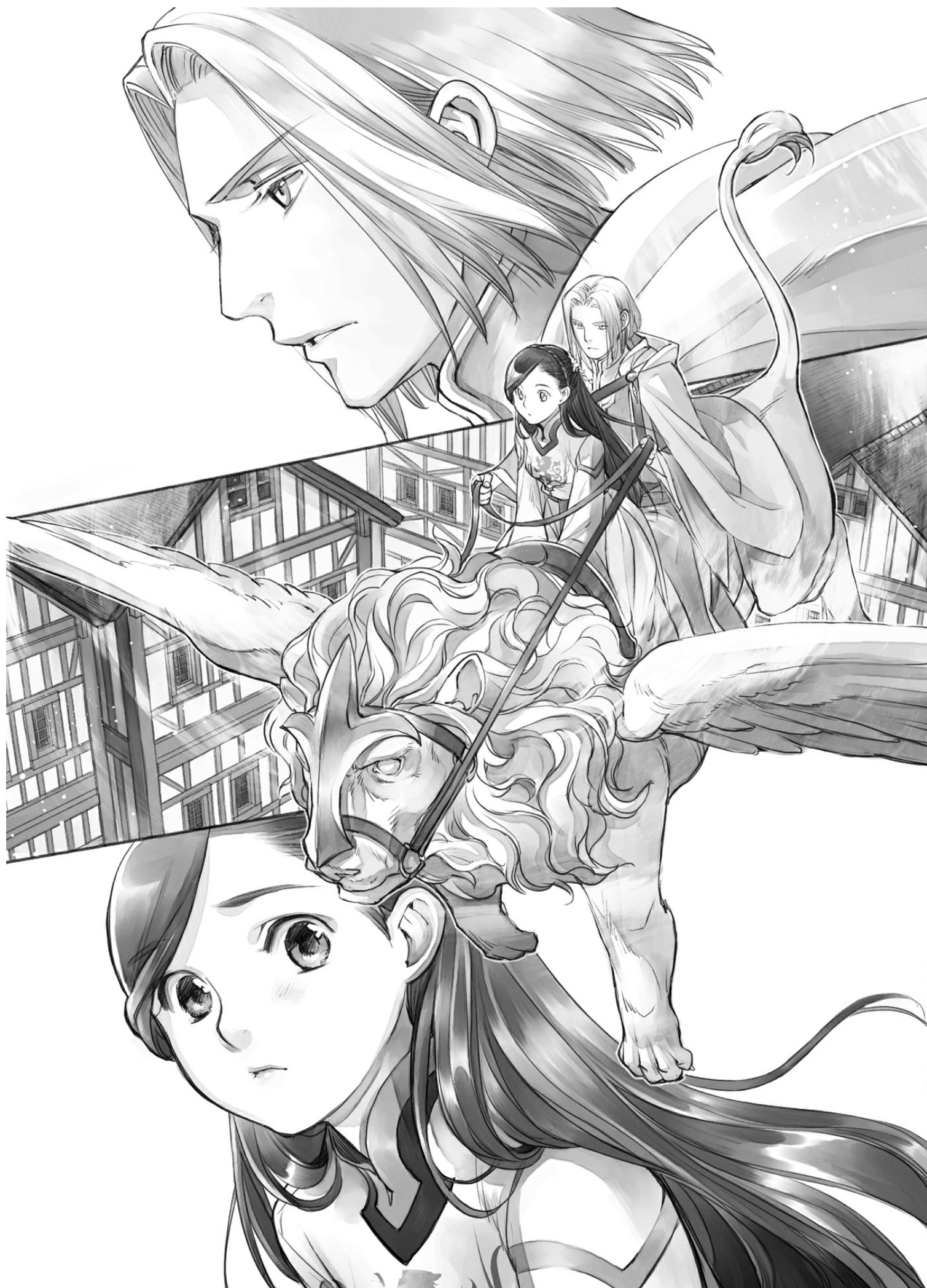
We drew a lot of attention as we flew around the city. People pointed up at us from the street or poked their heads out of their windows to watch us. As I took in the nostalgic sights near the south gate, I decided to air my frustrations.

“Ferdinand, what were you thinking back there? Did you really need to say all that?”

“I told not a single lie. And you asked for this, did you not?”

“You might not have lied, and it certainly is true that I still want to create a library city... but we don’t yet know if the Zent will give me his approval. Should you really have revealed such information when we were only there to give out a reward from the archduke?”

As much as I wanted things to be smooth sailing from here, we couldn’t risk being overly optimistic. If even I understood that, Ferdinand must have too.



“Everyone I speak to tells me I’m not fit to be the Zent,” I said. “And the royal family absolutely needs someone to bring them the Book of Mestionora or the Grutrissheit. Say I did cast all that aside and choose to remain an aub—would the entire country not collapse? I would rather you not get my hopes up when we have so many unresolved problems and not a single solution.” As far as I was concerned, it was better to keep one’s expectations low.

In response to a stern glare from me, Ferdinand simply muttered, “Since when did you get so pessimistic?” Then he started taking us to the east gate.

“This isn’t pessimism; it’s realism.”

“Then get a better grip on reality. If you wish for Yurgenschmidt to have a Zent with the Grutrissheit, is it really necessary for you to marry a royal or enter the royal family through some other means?”

I pursed my lips. “Well, no matter who takes the throne, they’ll need the Grutrissheit to be a true Zent, won’t they?” And to obtain the Grutrissheit, one had to be registered with the royal family.

Ferdinand gave a slight smile. “And what should someone do when they do not have what they want? The answer should come easily to you.”

“Um, make it themselves...?” I ventured. Surely that wasn’t the correct response; Ferdinand would never bring up the philosophy that had given him so many headaches in the past.

“Indeed. I shall take the necessary materials from my workshop and create the Grutrissheit in Ahrensbach. It should not take long—I am halfway done already.”

We passed over the east gate. It was only the day after an intense battle, yet the city was already as lively as ever.

“Ferdinand...” I said. “A quick look at history should tell you that’s a bad idea.” The main reason for the royal family’s decline and the loss of the Grutrissheit was the requirement for the tool to be passed down from one ruler to the next. Would giving them a new one not result in the same problem?

“I shall make one that will disappear after a single generation. My aims are

simply to get us through this crisis and to return the Zent selection process to a meritocracy. If we wish to do away with royals, then we must make it so that Zent candidates once again need to obtain the book themselves. You would do well to trust me more.”

“I *do* trust you,” I said as we used the north gate to return to the temple.

Ferdinand shook his head and snapped, “Get changed. Quickly.” Then he pushed me over to Fran and the others.

“How was the lower city?” Monika asked when I was back in my room, having come to greet me with Nicola. They had stayed at the temple during our brief trip. “Was there a lot of destruction? Did anyone die?”

“I am sure Gil will report on it later, but...”

As the two attendants helped me out of my robes, I explained that the city had seemed almost entirely untouched. They were relieved to hear the news.

“Will you also be the High Bishop in Ahrensbach?” Nicola asked.

“Wha...?” My eyes widened at the bomb she had just dropped. Why was Nicola asking me that, of all people?

Monika must have noticed my shock because she was quick to explain: “Hartmut spoke to us all while you were at the gate. He invited Fran and Zahm to go with you to Ahrensbach and attend the temple there, since you’re going to be made the next Aub Ahrensbach following the Archduke Conference.”

The two girls had apparently been told they could come along as well. But first, they needed to stay here and serve Philine until she came of age.

“We were told to pack your High Bishop robes with the rest of your luggage. Should we?”

“Um... Yes. Go ahead.”

I turned to Judithe and Angelica, who were in the room as guards. “Did you two know about this?”

“Hartmut told us bits and pieces before lunch, when you were with Lord Ferdinand,” Judithe hesitantly replied. “As we speak, Lieseleta and Lord Justus are in the castle, spreading the same rumors to our guests from Dunkelfelger.”

For a scheme this large to have been set in action so quickly, Ferdinand must have been involved. He was just as gung ho as Hartmut when it came to these things. I supposed that I really was out of touch with reality.

This got dangerous the moment Ferdinand and Hartmut decided to team up. How was I such a fool...? I should have realized something was up when Hartmut elected not to accompany me to the gate!

“And where are Fran and Zahm...?” I asked.

“They are serving Lord Ferdinand tea in the hall near the front entrance. We were told to take you there once you are changed, so...”

I stepped out of my High Bishop’s chambers with my two attendants. Ferdinand, Hartmut, and my other male retainers were waiting for me at the front entrance. Melchior was there too with his retainers in tow; they all wore convinced expressions like something had just been explained to them.

Fran and Zahm were also present. They looked somewhat uneasy when they saw me approach.

“Lady Rozemyne,” Zahm said, his tone more peaceful than his face suggested. “Lord Ferdinand and Lord Hartmut were just telling us you are soon to become Aub Ahrensbach. He asked if we would go with you so that we could make Ahrensbach’s temple like this one.”

“Can I really come with you?” Fran asked, looking doubtful. “Is it really okay for me to join you and Lord Ferdinand...?”

“Um, Fran... These plans are far from set in stone,” I said, shooting a glare at everyone who was treating it like a done deal. “We still need the Zent’s approval.”

Fran slumped his shoulders in response. He looked a little dejected, so I took his hand in mine and continued, “Th-That said, if they *were* set in stone, *of course* I would ask you to accompany me. I would want you in whatever temple I moved to.”

“I shall await your invitation while training my replacement,” Fran said. His and Zahm’s expressions reminded me of when Lasfam had waited to be invited to Ahrensbach, and at once, I was struck with the feeling that I absolutely

needed to make this happen.

Ferdinand gestured me over to his highbeast, and we took flight once again. I couldn't help but glare at him as I reproachfully spoke his name.

"Have you finally made some resolve?" he scoffed. "You stated your wishes, and it was unsightly to see you act so noncommittal toward them."

"Can I really become an aub when I can't bear to even touch feystones?"

"That issue can be resolved with more determination on your part. Follow your desires! Do not let your fears misguide you."

Ferdinand then pushed me forward. As I gazed at the vast sky sprawled out ahead of me, memories of the wishes I'd shared with Leonore and Hannelore flitted through my mind.

To Ahrensbach

We returned to the castle to find our guests from Dunkelfelger all wearing bright smiles and Sylvester's group looking especially conflicted. I suspected that a harsh scolding was on the horizon, but I stated my resolve nonetheless.

"Sylvester, I have decided to become the next Aub Ahrensbach."

"I know."

Umm... How?

I'd made up my mind on the trip here and elected to make this my first reveal, aware that Sylvester would feel the brunt of my absence greater than anyone. How, then, was he already aware of my intentions? It didn't make any sense.

"What do you mean?" I asked. "You understand the consequences of my move to Ahrensbach, correct? Ehrenfest will—"

"Of course he knows, Lady Rozemyne," Hannelore interjected. "But even then, the magnanimous Aub Ehrenfest granted you his permission."

Ah...

Hannelore's and Heisshitze's smiles, the distant look in Sylvester's eyes... The pieces all suddenly snapped together. Ehrenfest had thus far remained passive in its diplomacy with greater duchies, but our archducal family must not have stood a chance against Dunkelfelger once they'd sat across from each other at the negotiating table.

Sylvester cleared his throat. "It would be utterly ridiculous to permit you to steal Ahrensbach's foundation and then prevent you from becoming its aub!" His voice sounded especially coarse like he was trying to emulate Heisshitze. "Moreover, I must recognize that a Zent candidate with the Grutrissheit ranks even higher than the current royal family! Apparently..."

I was starting to worry whether this really was okay. Hannelore had given me her support, at least, so I supposed that her duchy was right behind me.

Probably.

“If you intend to return the Grutrissheit to Yurgenschmidt,” Sylvester continued, “you’re fated to leave Ehrenfest anyway. Ahrensbach or the Sovereignty—no matter which one you choose, I’m told the movement of your luggage and personnel will remain largely unchanged.”

“Indeed,” Hartmut added, looking especially enthusiastic. “We will need to move quite a few gray priests and shrine maidens to Ahrensbach’s temple, but that should not impact Ehrenfest’s overall mana as taking blues would. Their successors can be trained up from there.”

Hartmut was about to launch into a long speech, no doubt wanting to announce that everything was ready for my departure, but Sylvester shook his head. “I am well aware of the situation,” he muttered, looking exhausted.

“I am so pleased we are in agreement, Aub Ehrenfest,” Hannelore said with the satisfied smile of a victor. She then shot a glance at her retainers, who were patting themselves on the back.

“Sylvester... I really am sorry this came at such an inconvenient time,” I said, suddenly struck with the urge to apologize to him from the bottom of my heart. “I did not know things would turn out like this when I was leaving for the temple...”

He waved away my words like he was shooing a bothersome pest. “There’s no need for that. Ferdinand agreed to negotiate with the royal family on Ehrenfest’s behalf and intends to return to Ahrensbach with you in preparation. How could I refuse him? Besides, with Georgine gone, my only real burdens are the royals and you. There’s a lot I want to say about how these dramatic twists and turns are always throwing me for a loop... but that’ll cease to be a problem by the end of the next Archduke Conference. I can hold my tongue until the dust has settled.”

“Did you not ask me to stop fixating on Ehrenfest and find happiness in Ahrensbach?” Ferdinand asked, a grin playing on his lips. “I simply mean to live as you requested, dear brother of mine.”

Sylvester’s cheek twitched. “You’re always pulling stunts like this...” he grumbled, his expression a mix of exasperation and joy.

As I watched the two brothers' back-and-forth, I started to wonder whether they'd forgotten about our guests. This was how they normally acted when they were alone together.

"Do whatever you want," Sylvester concluded.

"But Sylvester," I said, "what about Ferdinand's Geduldh?"

"You mean those labs you're making for him, right? I'm glad one of us gets to have some fun, at least."

Sylvester was making a huge mistake; Ferdinand only wanted a lab in Ahrensbach as a last resort. His true desire was to have one here in Ehrenfest, but that idea had already been rejected.

"Those laboratories aren't his Geduldh," I said. "Ehrenfest is. That's why I think you should make him a lab here—so he can return home whenever he wants."

"We don't have the time *or* resources for that. If *you* promised him a lab, then *you* can provide it. The rest of us need to sort out the Gerlach estate you destroyed. Ferdinand told me he messed with its foundation so much that we'll need to remake the whole thing from scratch."

"Gaaah! My sincerest apologies!" I cried, my head in my hands. "I'll send you the gold dust for it right away!"

"You would do well not to make promises you cannot keep..." Ferdinand noted, his eyes fixed on our guests.

"Ah..."

He was right—I might have had enough mana to create the dust, but I wasn't going to make any headway with my fear of touching feystones. I slumped my shoulders, having once again been reminded how useless I was at the moment.

"You need not rush to repay him," Ferdinand said and gave me a light pat on the shoulder. "Once we are back in Ahrensbach, we shall send aid and monetary assistance under the guise of reparations. Furthermore, though you seem adamant to return me to Ehrenfest, Sylvester no longer needs me to complete his duties as the aub. He is doing well enough on his own. As long as I

am permitted to come home on occasion, I am perfectly fine with this arrangement.”

“I’m not so cold as to refuse you,” Sylvester retorted. “I’ll take care of your estate.” They were speaking like everything was already set in stone.

“Ferdinand...” I said. “Are you sure you want to live in Ahrensbach? You aren’t doing this as a self-sacrifice, are you?”

He shook his head. “Need you be so annoyingly stubborn? I am more than capable of making my own decisions.”

“Seems he’s actually focused on his own happiness for once,” Sylvester chimed in. “You’re giving him three labs, right? That sounds like payment enough. Just let him do what he wants.”

I squeezed my hands into tight fists. “Very well. In that case, as the next Aub Ahrensbach, I shall create an environment in which he can do as much research as he desires. Rest assured, Sylvester—I *will* ensure his happiness!”

Sylvester burst into laughter while Karstedt, who was standing as his guard, merely coughed a few times in a poor attempt to mask his amusement. Hannelore was staring at me like she wanted to shout, “So close!”

Ferdinand seized my shoulder in a viselike grip. “Rozemyne, I understand your motivations and resolve. There is no need to say any more.”

“Ferdinand, have your ears gone re—?”

“Be silent.”

“Okay.”

Rihyarda then came to report that the teleportation circle was ready and the border gate had been contacted. Ottilie and Gretia were among those who entered with her, as were Leonore and the others, who had made their preparations while not on duty.

“The scholars wish to send over everyone’s belongings,” Rihyarda continued. “Travel to the border gate to accept them, if you would.”

“Alright.” Sylvester nodded, then went out to the balcony and made his highbeast. “Let’s go.”

We were headed to the teleporter at the knights' training grounds. The necessary arrangements must have already been made, as even the Dunkelfelgerians had mobilized without the slightest hesitation. I must have been more out of the loop than anyone.

"Ferdinand," I said, "you've been keeping me in the dark, haven't you? It feels like I'm the only one who doesn't know what we're doing."

"I will elaborate on my highbeast. Hurry."

I did as instructed, and we took to the sky. Ferdinand explained curtly and in a quiet voice that he had proposed this method of transportation over using my Pandabus to disguise my fear of using feystones.

"We will use the teleporters meant for taxed goods to send your luggage to the border gate," he continued. "Then we will move it all to Ahrensbach's castle. Ehrenfest's side of the border gate has already been made aware, and it seems safe to assume that the same is true for Ahrensbach's side."

"How come these teleporters aren't used when someone marries into another duchy?" I asked. "They seem so convenient." My mind wandered to all the luggage we'd crammed into Lessy back when Ferdinand was moving to Ahrensbach.

"Accepting such items from another duchy would pose too great a security risk, so an aub would never allow them to be teleported straight to the castle. However, as you are the new Aub Ahrensbach, this is merely a convenient way to send your luggage back to your new home. There is nothing to be on guard against. Aside from that... there is also the mana cost to consider. You are supplying it on this occasion."

It took longer to send items by carriage, but they were by and large the more affordable option. We were electing to use the teleportation circles this time only because I would need my luggage immediately upon my return. My clothes for tomorrow wouldn't arrive in time if sent by carriage.

"You will not be in Ahrensbach for long," Ferdinand continued. "We will make the bible in my workshop there, then prepare for the duchy's remaining nobles to participate in the Archduke Conference. Your move proper and the arrangements for your becoming the aub will need to wait until you have

received the king's approval."

Our top priority was making the magic tool Grutrissheit so that we could negotiate with the royal family.

We arrived at the knights' training grounds and used its huge teleporter to move to the border gate between Ehrenfest and Ahrensbach. It had relieved me to learn that my fear of feystones didn't include channeling mana into magic circles.

Knights of both Ehrenfest and Ahrensbach were already at the gate when we arrived, and my luggage was moved between the two duchies' teleporters. Lieseleta and Gretia were leading a group who were checking the labels and such.

"Rozemyne," Ferdinand said, "we will need to use these teleporters quite regularly for the rest of the day. If you need a rejuvenation potion, drink one now while you have the chance."

We were going to send Justus, my attendants, and my scholars to Ahrensbach's castle with my belongings. Ferdinand and I would take the guard knights back to the border gate and teleport to Bindewald with the volunteers, who would then make their way to the gate connecting Ahrensbach to Dunkelfelger.

"I do not know how many times we will need to activate the teleporter to move all one hundred knights," Ferdinand said.

"Are you sure we should not simply return home by highbeast...?" Hannelore asked, sounding concerned, but Ferdinand shook his head. It had taken them an entire day to reach Bindewald, so who knew how long they would need to travel to reach Dunkelfelger, which was all the way on the other side of Ahrensbach.

"Place a teleporter here and start preparing to teleport everyone," Ferdinand instructed me. By the time I was done, we had made contact with Sergius in Ahrensbach's castle and Strahl in the Bindewald estate.

"Nenluessel. Ahrensbach."

I'd made sure that Justus, Lieseleta, Gretia, Hartmut, and Clarissa were all standing on the teleporter with me before activating it—with some help from Ferdinand, of course. They would spend their time at the castle putting my belongings away and preparing my room, among other things.

Letizia came to welcome us when we arrived, so I entrusted my retainers to her. Then I activated the teleporter again, returning Ferdinand and myself to the border gate.

"Aub Ehrenfest," I said. "We will send word once the date for our meeting with the royal family has been established."

"I don't expect this to work, but I'll say it anyway—don't do anything crazy, alright?"

Yeeeah... I'm not sure I can promise that.

I averted my eyes in lieu of a response. Making our own Grutrissheit so that we could negotiate with the royal family was sure to be "crazy" by anyone's standards.

"Just what are you two planning...?" Sylvester asked, his eyes narrowing.

"I must ask that you make haste in calculating the damages of the recent invasion," Ferdinand interjected with a smile, completely disregarding the question. "That information should prove most useful during the Archduke Conference."

Ferdinand must have realized that he was pushing his luck; he started rushing Hannelore and the others to pour mana into the teleporter without even waiting for a response. He ignored Sylvester's demands for an explanation and told me to hurry up as well.

"Nenluessel. Bindewald."

In the blink of an eye, we teleported to our destination, having successfully escaped Sylvester. Strahl and the Dunkelfelger knights were all standing in neat rows in anticipation of our arrival.

"Aub Ahrensbach. Lord Ferdinand. Welcome back," Strahl said, his tone heavy and severe. "We have been waiting for you."

As it turned out, Dunkelfelger's knights had devoured all the food and alcohol in the Bindewald summer estate. They had then divided themselves into groups the following morning and set up a ditter tournament. Ahrensbach's knights had been forced to participate and couldn't even begin to hide their exhaustion—in stark contrast to their Dunkelfelger peers, who looked as satisfied as ever. It was clear to see which duchy had the most stamina.

"We shall now start teleporting everyone to Dunkelfelger's border gate," Ferdinand announced.

"Yes, sir!" the volunteers chorused in response.

At most, only about thirty knights could stand on the teleporter at once. I started teleporting my own guards as well as the knights while Ferdinand received reports about the state of our current province and Old Werkestock. The Bindewald estate had been closed until the end of the Archduke Conference, when a new giebe would surely be assigned to it.

"My apologies for the wait, Lady Hannelore."

"Oh, no—there is no need to apologize," she replied. "Especially not when you are going to all this trouble for our sakes."

Hannelore instructed the remaining knights to move onto the teleporter. Three round trips had made me feel so sick that I wanted nothing more than to rest, but I couldn't quit now. This was the last one. I rubbed my temples and took a few deep breaths.

"Teleportation sickness?" Ferdinand asked.

"Yes, most likely."

"Then I will perform this last one with you. Strahl, return to the castle—but leave five guards behind to watch over the estate."

"Yes, sir!"

Ferdinand then stood atop the teleporter with Eckhart, and the two of them helped to supply it with mana. It wasn't long before we all appeared at the border gate connecting Ahrensbach to Dunkelfelger. The knights who had arrived ahead of us were waiting in uniform rows.

“Lady Hannelore, we are so greatly indebted to you and your knights,” I said. “How can we ever thank you?”

“My new hairpin alone feels like more than enough,” she replied, then let out a quiet gasp. “Oh, but... I *would* appreciate a special invitation to the Archduke Conference, seeing as I am too young to attend otherwise. I wish to see you, the Divine Avatar of Mestionora, bestow the Grutrissheit upon the Zent with my very own eyes.”

Um, excuse me? The heck is all this “divine avatar” business? Talk about exaggeration...

My sainthood was swiftly transforming into something else entirely. Hannelore’s calm, bright smile was starting to seem ominous, and something told me Hartmut was to blame.

“Um, Lady Hannelore...” I said.

“Very well,” Ferdinand interrupted. “That sounds like fair compensation for your assistance. I shall broach the idea with your aub and make whatever arrangements are required on my end.”

“I thank you ever so much,” Hannelore replied. “Oh, Lady Rozemyne... Isn’t this exciting?”

Huh? Isn’t what exciting?!

Paying no attention to my confusion, Hannelore turned to her knights and shouted, “Salute the Divine Avatar of Mestionora—she who shall return the Grutrissheit to Yurgenschmidt!”

The knights thumped the left side of their chests twice in perfect union.

“And with that, Lady Rozemyne... may we meet again at the Archduke Conference.”

H-Hold on a second... Just one second...

Before I could even try to stop them, Hannelore and the knights took their leave in an orderly fashion. I could only watch in a daze as their highbeasts vanished into the distance.

“Um, what was all that about...?” I asked Ferdinand. “We’re going to make

me the next Aub Ahrensbach, aren't we? I don't see why Lady Hannelore thought it necessary to call me a divine avatar, nor why she stated it as though it were fact."

"Hartmut was insistent that you would end up in serious danger unless we put you on a higher pedestal than the royals. If you wish to know more, then ask him for the details when we return." He held out his hand to me. "If your teleportation sickness is too much, we can travel the rest of the way by highbeast. We are not too far from the city of Ahrensbach."

"The only thing making me queasy right now is this unsettling news. Let's use the teleporter again. I need to interrogate Hartmut at once!"

"Welcome back, Lady Rozemyne, Lord Ferdinand," Letizia said once we were back at the castle, looking somewhat pale. "A letter from Lady Detlinde arrived in your absence. She seems quite irritated that she is unable to return to Ahrensbach."

We were handed the letter in question, which I started reading at once.

"What's all this about the foundation being stolen and a new aub taking over?! I'm on the cusp of seizing the throne! Lords Leonzio and Gervasio are both with me. I swear, this 'new aub' will pay the price of their insolence soon enough!"

We already knew we had to arrest Detlinde, one of the driving forces behind this whole incident, but reading her rant almost knocked the wind out of my sails. One had to question how much thought she was putting into her actions, if any.

"Lord Ferdinand, do you know whom she meant by Lord Gervasio?" Letizia asked uneasily. "I visited the Lanzenave Estate on many occasions but never once encountered a man by that name."

"I think so," Ferdinand replied, his true emotions hidden behind a fake smile. "As I recall, he was the man raised to become the king of Lanzenave."

Making the Bible

“If what Detlinde says is true and Leonzio is not the only member of Lanzenavian royalty here in Yurgenschmidt, then we must be quick,” Ferdinand said. “Rozemyne—we are going to my workshop.”

“Hm? Weren’t we going to spend today listening to reports from those who stayed in Ahrensbach...?”

“That can wait. Order for them to be given to Justus and Hartmut instead.”

Like in Ehrenfest, Ahrensbach’s teleporter was located in its training area, only it was much farther away from its castle’s main building. Ferdinand sent out several ordonnanzes, then put me on his highbeast and took flight.

“So we’re going to your workshop, right?” I asked.

“Yes, in the west building. If we hurry, we should be able to finish before dinner.”

By his “workshop,” Ferdinand meant his hidden room. We arrived at his chambers to find them in exactly the same state as before: torn apart from the Lanzenavians’ rampage. I couldn’t help but scrunch up my nose at the sorry sight.

“What a mess...”

The walls and decorations were marred with cuts and scratches, and there was broken furniture scattered all over the place.

“I asked for what remained of my belongings to be moved into a guest room,” Ferdinand informed me.

“Sergius has done just that so you have somewhere to rest,” Justus noted as he pushed a small trolley of Ehrenfest ingredients over to the workshop’s entrance. “The luggage we teleported earlier has been taken there as well. None of us thought you would need to use your workshop so soon.”

Cornelius was following along as my knight when he suddenly cried, “Wait,

Lord Ferdinand! Are you and Lady Rozemyne going to be alone in your workshop? If so, I must protest, no matter the circumstances. If nothing else, allow a few guards to join you or some scholars to assist with the brewing.”

“Anyone who wishes to join us may do so, but I warn you—do not get in my way. I act only for a lack of time.”

Ferdinand took the trolley from Justus and proceeded into his hidden room. Eckhart stood outside as his guard, then pointed at the entrance with his chin as though telling us to hurry inside. I nodded and made my way through.

Wait. Ferdinand normally has a mana-dependent barrier blocking the entrance to his hidden room, right?

That had been the case for his hidden room in the temple, and it seemed unlikely that he hadn’t set one up here in Ahrensbach, where he was at much greater risk. I waited for Cornelius and the others to follow me inside, but they weren’t able to—as expected.

“Ferdinand, it would appear your barrier stopped Cornelius from joining us.”

“Yes, it certainly would appear that way...” he replied.

The magic tool used to communicate through the hidden room’s door flashed, and a single message from Cornelius came through: “Please disable the barrier.”

“No,” Ferdinand replied. “If you wish to enter, then obtain more mana. Eckhart, do not disturb us until dinner. Bind anyone who causes too much of a fuss.”

Ferdinand turned away from the door to look at me. “Rozemyne, come here. I should give you a medical examination now while there is nobody around to complain about it. Having a clear understanding of your health is of the utmost importance.”

At once, he started touching my cheeks and neck, as he normally did when inspecting my health. He carried out various checks, then grumbled that I’d gotten better at putting up a front.

“Should you not praise me for becoming more ladylike?” I asked, my lips pursed. I couldn’t believe he was complaining now that I was finally conforming

to the demands of noble society.

In response, Ferdinand pinched my cheek and said, “Excellent work.”

“I can’t say this feels very sincere...”

“Your mana is even more unstable than I expected. That might be why so much escapes you when you pray... A blessing large enough to fly outside the city was not necessary for mourning the dead or healing the wounded.”

“I prayed for *everyone* who died, be they friend or foe. And because I healed the soldiers with my eyes closed, I was unable to see how much mana I was using.”

Ferdinand grimaced. “Was there really any need to mourn our enemies?”

“It might not have made sense by the standards of Yurgenschmidt, but it was important to me.”

“Another custom from *over there*, then...”

Classic Ferdinand. He’s as perceptive as ever.

“I would not normally criticize you for acting in a manner befitting a saint,” he continued, “but you must be more cautious of your mana quantity. An excessively large blessing can do more harm than good to manaless commoners. Take care to keep your eyes *open* if you ever need to heal them again.”

“Was it really that excessive?”

“It enveloped almost the entire city.”

That had probably been because I’d wanted to heal everyone in Ehrenfest who had taken part in the battle. But of course, anyone who hadn’t known that would have seen it as exorbitant.

“Then again, now that we can no longer use feystones to drain your overflowing mana, I suppose your prayers do have *some* merit...”

Ferdinand peered down at me, frowning. My sudden growth spurt, coupled with the jureve having dissolved my mana clumps, meant I posed a tremendous threat to everyone around me when my mana was this unstable.

“Insomnia, a reduced appetite, this newfound fear of feystones... Do you have any other symptoms?” Ferdinand asked.

“None that I’m aware of. If we have to start somewhere, I’d like to get rid of this feystone phobia. It really is quite inconvenient...”

His brow still drawn in a tight frown, Ferdinand asked me a series of questions—which feystones scared me most, what situations made me most uncomfortable, whether I was comfortable with any magic tools other than my schtappe, and so on.

“Unprocessed feystones are the scariest, then ordonnanzes,” I said. “Seeing what might as well be a living creature turn into a feystone just reminds me of...”

“Hmm... So you have no trouble with schtappes because they do not look like feystones. But you closed your eyes when using Flutrane’s staff, did you not? Was the sight of its feystone too much for you, even knowing it was just your schtappe transformed...?”

“I tried not to look because I didn’t want to remember everything I witnessed...”

“I see. Then you can use magic tools as long as you do not look at them. Let us try something.”

Ferdinand gave me a fruit—a schallaub, from what I could tell. I rolled it around in my hand.

“You seem fine with the ingredients themselves,” he said. “Channel your mana into it. I wish to see if you can stomach touching a feystone when you have witnessed its creation.”

Making a feystone... The very idea made me tremble. Ferdinand took my hand in his and encouraged me to rest on the nearby bench. It had been quite a while since I’d last used it, but it was just as hard as I remembered. The schallaub in my hand suddenly felt even more imposing for some reason.

“Um, Ferdinand. I...”

He sat down beside me and placed a reassuring hand on my shoulder. “If you

find this too hard, then you may close your eyes or throw the fruit away.” His face was much closer to mine than I was used to, no doubt because I was taller now. There was concern in his light-golden eyes.

“You’re being unusually kind today. The Ferdinand I’m used to would have complained and told me to hurry up already.” It really was hard to believe this was the same man who had previously forced me to go without sleep and pushed me to the point that I ended up collapsing or bedridden.

“Would you rather I be strict with you?” he asked with a glare.

My answer was a resounding no.

“I knew you were sensitive to bloodshed and death, yet I still elected to push through the enemy and rescue Gerlach’s knights,” Ferdinand said. “Your current state was a consequence of that decision, and now you have a fatal weakness that must be overcome. It would surely aid us both if a few kind gestures could do the trick... but I doubt things are going to be that easy.” He gave me a few pats on the head. It was an awkward attempt at consolation, but it worked to ease some of the tension I was feeling. “It was because you agreed to stay with us and provided your healing that Gerlach’s knights survived. Do not forget that.”

“Right...”

I started channeling mana into the fruit, trying to turn it into a yellow feystone. But as the transformation began, my entire body went rigid.

“It is only a schallaub, Rozemyne—a simple fruit. There is nothing to be scared of.”

I clung to his words, but they weren’t enough; I couldn’t ignore the feystone that had appeared in my hand. I continued to force my mana into it, terrified, and it turned into gold dust in the blink of an eye.

“I-It appears I can make gold dust without issue...” I muttered. “Guess I can help Sylvester repair the Gerlach estate after all.”

“We are in a hidden room; there is no need to hide behind such a phony smile. I am sorry that I put you through something so unpleasant, but I now have the answers I sought, at least. Drink a potion and then rest until my

preparations are complete.”

Ferdinand rose to his feet, surveyed the potions on his shelf, and handed one to me. He mustn't have been lying when he'd told Cornelius that time was of the essence, as he then started rushing around the room, taking out and neatly lining up everything he would need for his brew. His hands didn't stop moving for even a moment.

As I watched Ferdinand take out a sheaf of the fey paper I'd sent him before, I gave the potion he had given me a quick sniff. It didn't smell like any of the rejuvenation potions I was used to.

“What kind of potion is this?” I asked.

“A valuable kind that I use when I must eat but do not want to. You will need to have some Ahrensbach cuisine soon, correct? Drink that now while you still can.”

I doubted Ahrensbach's spice-heavy cooking would agree with me in my current state. I remembered the “healthy dishes” Letizia had given me after my two-day slumber and decided to drink the potion without a single complaint.

“Do we know where Lady Detlinde is right now?” I asked. “She can't enter Ahrensbach's dormitory or return to the Lanzenave Estate, correct?”

“The Lanzenave Estate contains a teleporter to the Adalgisa villa, where their princesses and the children chosen to become king stay. If she used that, then I would assume she is there now. It is located within the Royal Academy's grounds—perfect for obtaining the Grutrissheit.”

Ferdinand went on to note that the original Zent who had welcomed Adalgisa had not wanted to put her quarters in the Sovereignty where he and those close to him lived.

“How do you know all of this...?” I asked.

“It flowed into my mind unbidden. If your bible lacks such details, then good. There is no need for you to know them.”

For him to have acquired that knowledge from the Book of Mestionora, it must not have been present in the portion I'd received. I performed a quick

check and, indeed, there was no mention of Adalgisa.

“If you would, write down all the information you obtained,” Ferdinand said. He pushed a low table in front of me and placed atop it the paper he had taken out.

As I inspected the sheets, I noticed there was already so much information written on them. The thought that I was about to make a book raised my spirits a little.

“Grutrissheit.”

Ferdinand sat down next to me, then made his Book of Mestionora and opened it. I peered inside and saw that its text was full of empty spaces, which he pointed to as he said, “Rozemyne, I want you to search for these parts in your own bible.” He was on a section about country gates.

I started searching for the information Ferdinand wanted. In the meantime, he took and skimmed several of the sheets resting on the table, then plucked out one incomplete page in particular.

“Here,” I eventually said. By comparing our two Books, I’d managed to find the missing text.

Ferdinand inspected my bible, then started filling in the gaps on the sheet he’d picked up. He was quick, but writing everything out would still take ages.

“Might I suggest copying and pasting the text?” I said. “Your current approach will take far too long.”

“We *do* need to be cautious of time... but does your method truly work?”

“Eheh. Just watch.” I put the tips of my fingers on my Book of Mestionora, marking my selection area. Then... “Copy and place!”

“Rozemyne, the size of your letters does not match the rest of the text.”

“Wh-What?”

Before now, I’d only ever pasted onto completely blank sheets of paper. I wasn’t able to adjust the size to perfectly match already existing text.

“Th-They don’t quite fit, but... It’s readable enough, right?”

“It looks inelegant.”

“Right... Even I thought that.” The mismatched text looked aesthetically terrible and was, to be honest, flat-out hard to read.

“The text *is* legible, but the sizing will cause problems down the line. The magic circles will need to fit perfectly to be complete. Your new spell is unusable here.”

“H-Hold on a moment. Let me see whether I can shrink it down.”

“As I said, we need to be cautious of time. It will be faster for me to do it by hand.”

Ferdinand had given up on my idea in the blink of an eye, but I wasn’t going to crumble so easily. “It’s going to be really useful. Trust me.”

“I am not disregarding the idea in its entirety. We can experiment later, at our leisure. As I told you, we do not have the time right now.”

“But I invented it *specifically* as a way of saving time!” The thought that we weren’t going to use it now when it would prove most useful was actually depressing.

Ferdinand grudgingly turned his Book of Mestionora to face me. “In that case, attempt to plant the contents of your bible in mine. Having to show you each page would prove most tedious, so I would appreciate a method to skip that process. *However*, if you are unable to manage it, I must ask that you give up for now.”

“Got it. I’ll do my best. Copy and place!”

I tried to use my technique as I’d proposed. My mana was sucked into Ferdinand’s bible, and the missing text was successfully copied across.

“I did it, Ferdinand! I did it!” I cried, looking at him for confirmation that my method was pretty dang useful. “The letters are the right size, and the page is completely filled with knowledge!”

Ferdinand crossed his arms, his brow drawn in a contemplative frown. “It *is* convenient, but...”

“But what? Is there a problem?”

He remained silent for a moment, then deliberately stood up and brought over what appeared to be two test tubes. “Though I acknowledge the extreme convenience of your spell and accept it as the most logical use of our time... I must ask that you drink these before we continue.”

“What are they?” I asked.

“You have had them before. Drink them and you should have your answer.”

Confused, I drank the potions. The first was sweeter and went down easier than a rejuvenation potion, but I couldn’t remember having tasted it before. To be frank, I didn’t have the slightest idea what it might be. The second, though, was another story—it was the same potion he’d made me drink once when I’d ended up completely drained of mana.

“I didn’t recognize the first, but I remember the second,” I said. “Was there a reason you gave it to me now? I already have more than enough mana.”

“You did not recognize the first, hmm? I see. Well, in any case—fill in the blanks as I ask you to.”

Ferdinand took a deep breath as though steeling his resolve, then turned to the next page of his Book of Mestionora. I found the corresponding entry in my own bible and copied the content over using my special method. We repeated this process again and again.

“Ferdinand, are you okay?” I eventually asked. “You look a little unwell.” He kept holding his head and rubbing his arms.

“You need not worry about me.”

“How can you say that?! You’re acting very strange... Ah! Could this be because you haven’t rested properly since you were poisoned...? You should take a break before we continue with our work here.”

“You saw what Cornelius was like—if we leave this room, I doubt he will allow us to return. We have only until dinner, so I must ask that you prioritize the Grutrissheit for now. Once you have completed all the pages I need, I will carry out the brewing on my own.”

I wasn’t going to argue with the stern glare Ferdinand was giving me, so I

quickly returned to the task at hand.

Copy and place. Copy and place. Copy and place...

“That will do,” Ferdinand said. “I should be able to manage the rest without you. Some of the steps to follow involve working with feystones, so I permit you to leave ahead of me.” He was putting on a brave face, but the way he was slumped over betrayed complete and utter exhaustion.

“Shouldn’t *you* leave early? You’re clearly unwell. Getting some rest before dinner could go a long way.”

“Forget about me. Just leave,” Ferdinand replied, waving me away. It was kind of annoying how stubbornly he was refusing to cooperate, but this wasn’t his first time trying to hide his poor health from others.

“If you are not unwell, then how about you transcribe your sections of the Book into mine?”

“Have you lost your mind? Absolutely not,” Ferdinand snapped, staring at me like I was the biggest idiot in the world.

“Have *you* lost *your* mind?” I retorted, my lips pursed in the face of this outrageous injustice. “I used my new technique to fill out some of your Book, so why shouldn’t you fill out some of mine in return?” He wasn’t the only one who wanted to read the whole thing.

Ferdinand grimaced and said, “I refuse. Your new spell requires an abnormal pronunciation and operates on principles unknown to me, so I expect it would take me far too long to learn.”

“I believe in you, Ferdinand. Do you remember how quickly you learned to make my water gun?” Bonifatius and the others had struggled to replicate it, but not Ferdinand. I was sure he’d pick up my new spell just as easily...

But he continued to refuse.

“If you cannot learn my spell, then I shall use it,” I said. “Lend me your Book so that I might reproduce its text.”

“Can you really do that on your own?”

“Let’s find out.”

I touched two fingers to Ferdinand’s open bible and used them to “select” the information I wanted. Ferdinand gasped and slapped my hand away before slamming his Book of Mestionora shut and making it disappear.

“Aah! What was that for?!” I cried. “It was working!”

“It is still too early for you. Wait until you have come of age, at the very least.”

“Huh...?” My eyes widened in response to this sudden change of attitude. “You want me to wait two whole years? That’s much too long—especially when I could just do it now.”

Ferdinand glared at me and shook his head. “I have my reasons for refusing. To do it now would be completely unacceptable.”

“You have your *reasons*, do you? Care to explain them to me?”

“No,” Ferdinand replied, not even attempting to play ball. Even when I peered into his eyes, silently demanding that he elaborate, he put a hand over my face and pushed me away.

“Do not get so close,” he said. “Do I really need to remind you that we are painfully short on time? Creating our magic tool should naturally come before filling out the gaps in your bible. And my request that you leave early was for *your* sake; I am about to take out my brewing feystones.”

“Ferdinand... is this Gervasio person that much of a threat?” I asked. His rush to make the Grutrissheit had started with the mention of that name. “He was raised to be the king of Lanzenave, right? Does that make him your brother?”

In an instant, the emotion vanished from Ferdinand’s face. He wasn’t angry or anxious; he just stared at me blankly before gazing down at his hand. “He is not my brother,” he said cautiously. “As far as I am aware, the two of us have never even met. But I *do* know *about* him.”

He must have been referring to knowledge he’d obtained from the Book of Mestionora. Maybe he’d stared down at his hand to read from it, having forgotten that he’d made it disappear.

“Gervasio was the omni-elemental son with the most mana out of all those

born to the three Adalgisa princesses,” Ferdinand explained. “Thus, he was chosen as Lanzenave’s king.”

“In other words, he has more mana than you?” I found that hard to believe.

Ferdinand nodded slowly. “To my knowledge, he was head and shoulders above the rest during his pre-baptism measuring. By the time I was born, he had already been sent back to Lanzenave to rule.”

There was a slight pause before he continued, now staring into empty space, “My mother initially had me with the intention of turning me into a feystone, so she chose a partner who had the elements she did not rather than one with more mana. It meant I had the least mana out of all the Adalgisa seeds at the time, but as an omni-elemental child with balanced elements, I was best suited to become a feystone.”

A shiver ran down my spine, and tears welled up in my eyes. Ferdinand had most likely obtained his Book of Mestionora when he was a student at the Royal Academy. I doubted that he’d wanted the information he was sharing with me, and the thought that he’d received it at such a young age was just...

I stood up and instinctively reached out to Ferdinand. The next thing I knew, I was kneeling beside him on the bench with my arms wrapped around him. “You were not born to be turned into a feystone,” I said. “You were born to become an Ehrenfest archduke candidate. That’s why the gods intervened and made it so.”

“Rozemyne. Let go.” Ferdinand gave me a few hard pats on the back, frantically urging me to desist. I squeezed him even tighter in response.

“Not until you understand the value of your life. The previous Aub Ehrenfest took you in because he needed you, and right now, I cannot overstate how important you are to Sylvester and me. I won’t let go until you acknowledge it.”

“Fine. I understand. I understand perfectly well, so let go of me. You are far too prone to acting on your emotions. Not even I can believe it sometimes. As hard as this might be for you to understand, your appearance has caught up with you, and the world now sees you as a woman of marriageable age. Learn to act a bit more like a proper noblewoman.”

I'd already learned to be more proper—that was why I'd stopped asking Ferdinand for emotional support hugs—but that still wasn't enough. My attempt to console him had only earned me a scolding.

"In any case, I must ask you to leave," Ferdinand said. "I will continue making the magic tool. You should use this time to inform your retainers of your circumstances and start discussing how to minimize your everyday interactions with feystones. Discuss, even, brewing the feystone brooches for the Archduke Conference. This is not information to be shared with other nobles, so ensure that nobody from Ahrensbach is present when you hold these conversations."

And with that, Ferdinand shooed me out of his hidden room. It seemed a little cruel that he'd just tossed me aside the moment he was done with me, but I supposed that was nothing new.

It's fine. Ferdinand seems like he's doing better, at least.

"Rozemyne," Cornelius said. He ran over the moment I passed through the barrier and started checking that nothing was wrong with me. "What was he up to? He deliberately made sure we couldn't be there for it."

"He wasn't 'up to' anything. You don't need to worry. The most he did was give me a checkup because he was worried about my health."

"No matter how little he did, it was unacceptable. An unmarried man and woman sitting alone in a hidden room is absolutely unconscionable."

Cornelius went on to explain in great earnest what a shameless act we had committed. It was so unacceptable, in fact, that it was reasonable grounds for everyone to assume we had engaged in premarital relations.

As unfortunate as the situation must have seemed, we hadn't had any other choice. I doubted Ferdinand would ever reveal that he had the Book of Mestionora, and we'd even used ours together, so we'd absolutely needed to be alone. On top of that, we'd discussed my other life and, as much as Ferdinand despised it, Adalgisa. I was certain he wouldn't have said a word about any of that if someone else had been there.

"Ferdinand needed us to be alone so that he could do something of the utmost importance," I said.

“You need to take better care and—”

“Though I cannot reveal what I discussed with Ferdinand or what he is brewing right now, I *can* tell you this: he forced me out the moment he had what he needed. There is little for you to worry about.”

Looking back, I’d tried to console Ferdinand and received a lecture for my trouble. I kind of regretted having done anything in the first place.

“On a more important note,” I said, “we must discuss the very relevant results of the medical examination Ferdinand gave me. Please gather all of my retainers.”

Cornelius looked between the hidden room and me before rushing out to contact the others. As he went, Eckhart said, “Rozemyne, is Lord Ferdinand not coming out?”

“He told me to leave because he was done with me, but he still needs to finish a brew. I should note that he did not look particularly healthy. He might also take some time to make a few restorative potions.”

“I see. Thank you.”

From there, I spoke with my retainers who were accompanying me and then started toward the guest room my attendants had prepared. It was then that Cornelius came rushing back.

“Hartmut just sent an ordonnanz—a scholar is calling for the aub. An urgent message has arrived from Ehrenfest.”

“Eckhart, tell Ferdinand,” I said. “I will go on ahead.”

I was slow enough on foot that Ferdinand would probably catch up to me before I reached the archduke’s office. I tried to speed up as much as I could, but alas, as I’d expected, he was far too quick for me.

Dunkelfelger's Request

As soon as we arrived at the archduke's office, a scholar informed me that the magic tool meant for emergency communication between aubs was flashing. Ferdinand stepped forward, then gestured toward it. The size and shape were exactly as I remembered, but there was a cover of sorts over the top that hid the pool of water.

"Rozemyne, close your eyes for a moment and allow me to guide you," Ferdinand said. "You will need to supply the tool with your mana."

"Right."

I closed my eyes and immediately felt Ferdinand take my hand. He touched it against something—the water mirror, I assumed—told me to start channeling my mana into it, and then instructed me to open my eyes. I could see Sylvester in the pool of water before me.

"Took you long enough," he complained, having seemingly been waiting quite a while. "Why weren't you in your office? Hirschur sent a response from the Royal Academy. She said there were people she didn't recognize near the scholar building."

Hirschur was approaching the climax of some excellent research, so she had planned to disregard Sylvester's orders entirely. The suspicious individuals had only been spotted because Raimund, who had suddenly lost access to Ahrensbach's dorm, had decided to start sleeping in the scholar building. He had reported the strange sight to Hirschur, who had then realized that Sylvester was probably telling the truth and sent ordonnances all over the place. It really was unusual to see strangers not wearing duchy capes at the Royal Academy.

"She really doesn't trust you, huh?" I remarked.

"This has more to do with her fixation on her research."

"It was wise to leave Raimund there," Ferdinand said with a satisfied nod.

I started to wonder whether anyone had contacted Raimund and explained

why he wasn't able to enter his dormitory all of a sudden. I assumed not.

Sylvester continued, "Hirschur contacted the professors still at the Royal Academy. She also sent word to the royal family and the Sovereign Knight's Order. Their response was immediate, meaning there are now black-capes stationed at the Academy."

"Right..." I said. "That's good."

The royals must have relaxed their guard at the Sovereignty to send troops to the Royal Academy. Dunkelfelger's volunteers had already crushed Lanzenave's troops, and Sylvester had shared what we knew about our enemy's silver cloth and instant-death poison, so the invaders would surely be suppressed in no time.

Sylvester gave a serious frown and shook his head. "The situation isn't good at all, Rozemyne. That's the very reason I chose to contact you like this."

"Come again?"

"That librarian you were worried about—Solange... Nobody's been able to reach her. She might have been caught up in the commotion, or maybe she's just coincidentally unable to respond. Hirschur was going to check on her, but she received an urgent ordonnanz from Rauffen telling her not to step foot outside her room."

I said nothing in response. Small, dark spots swarmed my vision.

"Something big is happening at the Royal Academy..." Sylvester announced. "I wish I could do more for you, but this report is the most Ehrenfest can provide; we don't have any manpower or resources we can spare you."

"I thank you ever so much for this information," I said. "As we of Ahrensbach do not have a dormitory supervisor right now, this information might not have reached us otherwise."

The moment our conversation was over, I deactivated the magic tool and looked back at Ferdinand. "I'm going to the Royal Academy's library."

Ferdinand shook his head. "That is not something I can permit. How do you expect to leave Ahrensbach in your current state?" He was referring to the fact

that I couldn't ride my highbeast, but still—I was deeply concerned about Solange, Schwartz, and Weiss.

“I should put Schwartz and Weiss in combat mode. Then they can protect Professor Solange...” I mused. I would simply need to pour mana into the feystone buttons that decorated their clothes. “I suspect the two shumils are quite strong. My own played an important role during the battle at the temple.”

Ferdinand scoffed; he had researched Schwartz and Weiss when designing the base schematics for my battle-ready shumils. “They are magic tools made by a Zent of the distant past to slaughter Zent candidates. Mere riffraff would not stand a chance against them.”

“They certainly are strong... And that means Professor Solange must be safe, right?”

I wanted some reassurance, but Ferdinand cast his eyes down. “As I understand it, the two shumils cannot enter combat mode without mana and an order from their master. I am unsure what Professor Solange would manage to accomplish on her own.” He shook his head; then his voice took on a much colder hue. “Nonetheless, I simply cannot allow you to leave Ahrensbach. How much can you really do for her as you are now?”

Before I could respond, the emergency contact magic tool started to flash again.

“Dunkelfelger...?” Ferdinand muttered. “We shall agree to speak with them. Rozemyne, close your eyes.” He took my hand and pressed it against the mirror's feystone, causing my fellow aub to appear on the surface of the water.

“Aub Ahrensbach,” the man said. “I am delighted to see you well on this most auspicious day. Hannelore reported to me about your recent battles; she said in no uncertain terms that your performance was splendid and a sight to behold. Few words can describe the astonishment that took me when I saw that every one of our volunteers had returned alive.”

This was the first time I'd ever seen Aub Dunkelfelger speak so politely. I was so taken aback that I could only blink at him in response.

“Though I realize these are busy times,” he continued, “a most pressing

matter has required me to contact you. Are you aware of what is happening at the Royal Academy?”

“Ahrensbach is missing its dormitory supervisor, but we did just receive a message from Aub Ehrenfest,” I said. “He told us that suspicious individuals—from Lanzenave, I would assume—were spotted near the scholar building and that both the royal family and the Sovereign Knight’s Order had been made aware. He also explained that Professor Solange of the library has not been responding to attempts to contact her. I wish to confirm her safety sooner rather than later, but as the Sovereign Knight’s Order has been dispatched, I assume people are already looking into it.”

“That seems unlikely...” the aub replied with a frown. “According to Rauffen, our dormitory supervisor, the Sovereign knights sent to the Royal Academy are working *with* the intruders.”

“Excuse me...?”

“Detlinde was seen among the suspicious individuals, but the knights made no attempt to capture her.” Rauffen hadn’t known whether the Order was working for or against the crown, so he had sent word of the situation back to his duchy and requested orders. “To make matters worse, we find ourselves unable to contact the Zent at this current moment.”

“Um, does that mean...?”

“Lady Rozemyne—we hereby request that you, a legitimate Zent candidate and the owner of the Grutrissheit, do everything in your power to defend the Royal Academy. Outsiders must *not* be allowed within its grounds. Here in Yurgenschmidt, that is an unbendable law.”

I swallowed dryly. “Is that not the duty of the Zent...?”

“Ask us to take action. We will do as you command. As the Zent’s sword, Dunkelfelger shall guarantee the Academy’s safety.”

“That is not something we can respond to here and now,” Ferdinand interjected, having addressed the aub before I could even open my mouth. “Rozemyne might have obtained the Grutrissheit, but she has dyed Ahrensbach’s foundation and thereby become its aub. She cannot give such an

order.”

“Lord Ferdinand! Do you not understand the importance of the Royal Academy?! Outsiders are ravaging it as we speak! This is no time to be so passive!”

Detlinde would need the Grutrissheit to become the Zent, which meant the Royal Academy’s library was the most dangerous place of all. I suspected it was receiving the same treatment as when the Lanzenavians ravaged the Ahrensbach Noble’s Quarter, which made me even more worried about Solange and the two shumils, who must have been there all alone.

“Ferdinand, Professor Solange is in the library...” I said. “And what about Professor Hirschur? She’s at the Royal Academy too.”

Hirschur had told various people about the outsiders and requested the aid of both the royal family and the Sovereign Knight’s Order. If the knights truly had turned coat, then she and Raimund were at great risk as well.

“Professor Hirschur might be safe now, but she’s still in a dangerous position,” I said. “If Aub Dunkelfelger is offering us his aid, should we not accept it and go straight to the Royal Academy?”

“Fool... You are in the most danger of all,” Ferdinand snapped. He then sized up the aub on the other side of the water mirror, his expression harsh, before continuing in a quiet voice, “I do not deny the urgency of our situation—the Royal Academy’s importance is abundantly clear to me—but I still cannot back your proposal. If you *did* act on our orders but proved unable to rescue the royal family before Detlinde’s group acquired the Grutrissheit and dyed the country’s foundation, then *Rozemyne* would be branded a traitor and insurgent.”

Ferdinand added under his breath that the royal family might not even genuinely thank me for saving them. In his words, they would most likely take advantage of the opportunity to bring me and the Grutrissheit into their ranks, declaring that they would charge me with treason or something equally unreasonable otherwise. Thinking back on my dealings with this country’s royals, I couldn’t help but concur.

“I wonder...” Ferdinand continued, “how will the Zent’s so-called sword

respond when its petition is found to have put Rozemyne in such a grave predicament? You will abandon her to side with the royals, I suspect.”

“Ferdinand, aren’t you being unbelievably rude right now?” I asked. “They wouldn’t do something so cruel—not when they made the proposal in the first place.”

“*This* is the reason you are called overkind and naive,” Ferdinand sneered, then returned to his attention to the water mirror. “The aub of a duchy with as long a history as Dunkelfelger’s has surely made many cruel decisions for the sake of his people. I do not blame you—weakness is not permissible in your role—but I will not allow you to cast Rozemyne aside.”

“No matter how dire the circumstances, Dunkelfelger cannot send its knights to the Sovereignty without being ordered to!” the aub retorted. “Do you intend to sit back and watch Detlinde and the Lanzenavians run amok until some foreigner obtains their own Grutrissheit? As the royal family cannot be reached, we must turn to a Zent candidate to send us into battle! Only she can save Yurgenschmidt!”

The aub had said a lot, but he hadn’t refuted the claim that he would cruelly abandon me. He had asserted that his duchy would protect the Royal Academy but not that he would do anything to aid me in the worst-case scenario. On top of that, he had addressed me only as “a Zent candidate” as though deliberately trying to put some distance between us.

“Not quite...” Ferdinand muttered.

At once, I turned to look at him. I wasn’t the only one with the Book of Mestionora; there was someone far better suited to becoming the Zent whose Book had just recently been filled with all the information he would need to rule.

But surely he wouldn’t...

There didn’t exist a world in which Ferdinand wanted to become the Zent; his dream was to live peacefully in Ahrensbach with his various laboratories. I clung to his chest, terrified of what he was about to say.

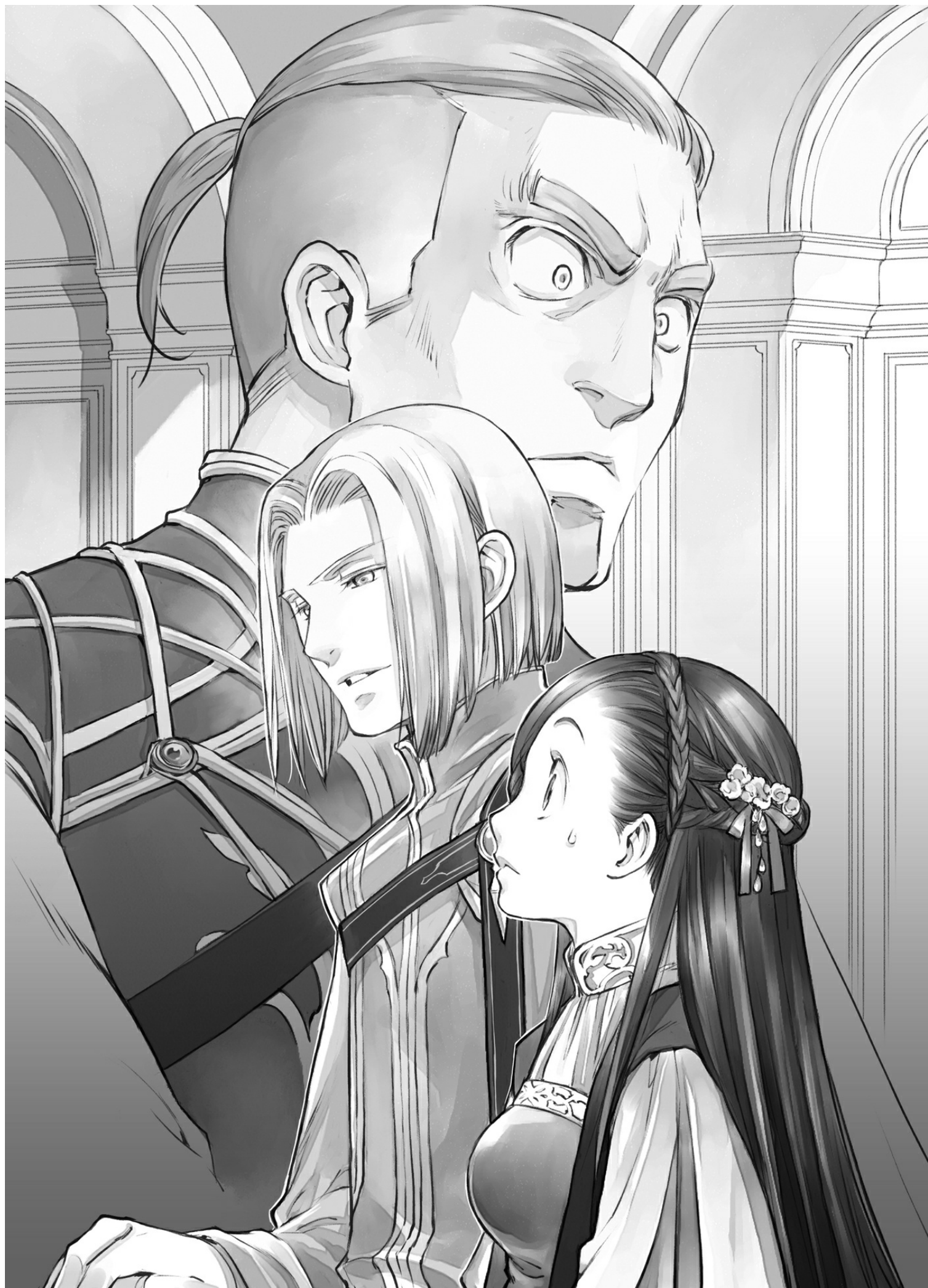
“Ferdinand, wait. That’s not—”

"You shall take the throne, Aub Dunkelfelger."

"Um..."

"Excuse me?" the aub replied, equally as shocked.

My mind went blank as I tried to process this completely unexpected turn of events. I gazed up at Ferdinand, seeking an explanation of some kind, and saw that his lips were twisted in a smile.



“Did you not say that Lady Hannelore spoke to you?” Ferdinand asked. “Rozemyne is the Divine Avatar of Mestionora, here to return the Grutrissheit to Yurgenschmidt and revive praying to the gods. Her duty is not to become the Zent but to grant the Grutrissheit to whomever she deems most worthy.”

I didn’t know what to say. Ferdinand was spouting absolute nonsense, all while looking the aub dead in the eye.

Ferdinand continued, “Such a great demonstration of strength in the presence of a divine avatar is the same as agreeing to accept the Grutrissheit from Rozemyne. And as the Sovereign Knight’s Order has sided with our enemies, if our attempt to save the royal family ends in failure, then *you* will need to take the throne. You are welcome to petition Rozemyne again, but only if you are ready for such consequences.”

The man in the water mirror stared at us, stunned. “But I am Dunkelfelger’s aub.”

“And Rozemyne is Ahrensbach’s,” Ferdinand replied with a thin smile. “Do you sincerely wish to save Yurgenschmidt from this crisis, no matter the cost, or are you merely using Rozemyne so that you can rampage through the Academy? If we are to continue this conversation, I must know your true intentions.”

I was reading the subtle undertones of this conversation loud and clear. Just as Aub Dunkelfelger wanted to protect his duchy and people, we wanted to protect Ahrensbach and ourselves.

“I shall say it again,” Ferdinand continued. “There is a chance you will emerge from this incident the next Zent. You will need someone to replace you as aub in such a case, so I would advise you to discuss it with your first wife before we take things any further. I should also note that very few duchies would appreciate you acting alone in this matter. Have you broached your intentions with them?”

Ferdinand wasn’t “advising” the aub at all—he was stating unequivocally that this wasn’t a decision to be made lightly.

“And above all else,” Ferdinand said, “Rozemyne has just returned from

Ehrenfest; her health would not allow her to march into another battle so soon. We also prioritized the return of your volunteers, so Ahrensbach's knights have yet to come back from Bindewald. Even if we did accept your proposal, we would not be prepared to act on it." He took my hand and then declared, "We shall await your response tomorrow at third bell."

His rant finally over, Ferdinand quietly asked me to deactivate the water mirror. The aub had yet to recover from his confusion, so I gave him a simple "Good day" before closing my eyes and doing as instructed.

"That should give us a little more time, but it means I will need to complete my brew tonight without fail..." Ferdinand said with a sigh once he'd made sure we were alone. Then he glared at me and snapped, "Do not be so quick to accept the petitions of other duchies. You have resolved to become the next Aub Ahrensbach—you must challenge anyone who calls you a Zent candidate."

"But I'm worried about the library. Nobody can reach Professor Solange..."

Dunkelfelger's intentions aside, I was extremely concerned about what was happening at the Royal Academy. So concerned, in fact, that I would have rushed straight over there if not for my current lack of strength and mana. The aid of a greater duchy would only boost my chances of success.

"I suspect she is fine," Ferdinand assured me. "Ordonnanzas have not refused to fly to her. We can also trust Dunkelfelger to take action; theirs is not a duchy that will remain inactive when they can take matters into their own hands. I cannot say how long their preparations will take, but the aub did not speak out against my target of third bell tomorrow. Consider tonight a most crucial opportunity to get some rest; we might not have another for quite some time to come. Thus, rather than worrying about everyone else, I would advise you take a moment to focus on your own health. You teleported so many people today that you need not just potions but a good night's sleep."

"But I might have more bad dreams..." I muttered. My body was crying out for rest, but I was afraid of what it would entail.

Ferdinand wore a slight frown. "Do you need another potion to get you to sleep?"

"Not one that'll give me a terrifying nightmare. I can't imagine a worse way to

wake up...”

“As much as your health has improved, you are on the verge of collapse. I suspect you will need potions just to make it through dinner. Do not put such great faith in your stamina when it barely met the bare minimum to begin with.”

Ferdinand then handed me a kindness-infused potion. He was right about my health, so my only choice was to accept it.

Over dinner, Letizia told us the events that had culminated in Detlinde’s furious letter. Some people had tried to open the door in the Lanzenave Estate from the other side, and the knights in the Royal Academy’s teleportation room had received ordonnanzes asking what was going on. Letizia had refrained from providing any answers, having wanted to consult me first, which had eventually earned us that colorful correspondence from Detlinde.

“Continue to ignore them,” I said. “Make sure they receive no information of value.”

“Understood,” Letizia replied with a nod. She looked tired and unwell, and not just because she was busy—she wore the same strained, cornered expression I’d seen from Melchior that morning. It wasn’t the kind of visage one would expect of a child.

“Oh, these fish...” I said.

“The fishermen you saved sent them to the castle with words of gratitude,” Letizia explained. “Lord Ferdinand informed me of your preferences, Lady Rozemyne, so I did my best to follow them. Are these meals to your taste?”

Most of the dishes being served were covered in so many spices that I couldn’t even tell what was buried under them. Instead, my eyes were drawn to some plainly salted white fish. Letizia had apparently been uneasy about serving something so simple, but she had swallowed her fears and persevered.

“My appreciation of this recipe is considered strange even in Ehrenfest, but its simplicity really highlights the flavor of the fish,” I said. “You must have asked the chefs to prepare it for me despite it seeming so unusual to them. Thank

you. And thank *you*, Ferdinand, for still remembering my tastes after all this time.”

“I considered it the best choice while you are still unaccustomed to Ahrensbach cuisine,” he said.

Indeed, the overabundance of spice customary of Ahrensbach cooking would have been far too stimulating for me. I took only very small portions of the other dishes but devoured the salted fish even with my lack of appetite.

I was satisfied with my meal, but the same couldn’t be said for Letizia. Though she spoke with a smile, her cutlery barely moved at all.

“Lady Letizia, could you come here for a moment?” I asked, beckoning her over. “Bring one of your guard knights, if you would.”

She blinked at me a few times before she complied. The knight accompanying her tensed up in preparation for what was to come.

“You were dragged into something awful,” I said, “yet you have continued to work so astoundingly hard. Even in our absence, your dedication to protecting Ahrensbach could not be ignored. It is with gratitude in my heart that I ask to grant you Schlaftraum’s blessing so that you might rest more easily tonight.”

Letizia’s expression changed, and she shook her head. “You need not waste your mana on me, Lady Rozemyne. The sentiment is enough.”

“Is that so? Very well, then.”

Letizia went to take her leave, but I wouldn’t let her get away so easily. I took out my shtappe and said, “O Schlaftraum, God of Dreams—may Lady Letizia be blessed with pleasant sleep and joyous dreams.” The white light of a blessing rained down upon her... and at once, her eyes grew heavy.

Letizia wavered in place for a moment, then started to collapse. Her guard knight caught her before she could reach the ground.

“For such a minor blessing to have worked this well, she must have spent days unable to sleep...” I said. “Please give her time to rest.”

“As you wish, Lady Rozemyne.”

The knight picked up Letizia and exited the room. Letizia’s attendants hurried

along behind them.

“Come, Rozemyne,” Ferdinand said, extending a hand to me like it was second nature to him. He must have mastered the art of escorting women during his year and a half with Detlinde—a tremendous win for the old adage that practice makes perfect.

“Um, Ferdinand...?” I said. He had given me one hand... and then used the other to cover my eyes.

“O Schlaftraum, God of Dreams—may Lady Rozemyne be blessed with pleasant sleep and joyous dreams.”

The dark spots in my vision were suddenly filled with white light. My mind cleared, and the immense weight on my shoulders vanished. By the time I’d realized I couldn’t feel my feet anymore, I was already being carried away like Letizia.

“Rest,” Ferdinand urged me. “Do not fight Schlaftraum’s blessing. You will not have any bad dreams tonight.”

“Are you awake, Lady Rozemyne?” Lieseleta asked, a hand on her chest. “You look so much better.”

I was feeling better too. Refreshed, even. Schlaftraum’s blessing really had given me a good night’s sleep.

We had decided to eat breakfast in our rooms, so my attendants brought me a plate of salted fish. They must have thought I really loved it or something. I started eating while my retainers explained that last night, while I was asleep, they had received a lecture from Ferdinand about my current state and the best way to deal with it.

“We were also made aware of the dangerous situation at the Royal Academy and the request Aub Dunkelfelger made of you.”

“We knights were ordered to be ready to sortie at any moment. If you accept the aub’s request, I suspect you will need to come as well, Lady Rozemyne.”

“Before the civil war, the Zent used to travel around Yurgenschmidt each year

to open and close all the country gates. Kirnberger's has been closed for a very long time, though, so this isn't something we've ever experienced. Using a Grutrissheit, one could apparently teleport straight to the Sovereignty."

Teleporting from the Lanzenave Estate to the Sovereignty would essentially be like diving headfirst into enemy headquarters—not that we could even use the teleporter right now. I would need to brew registration brooches with my mana for us to pass through Ahrensbach's dorm, so we planned to teleport via our country gate instead. As the aub, I would naturally need to be there.

"Once you have eaten, Lady Rozemyne, you are permitted to rest until third bell," Lieseleta said. "I even have an Ahrensbach book for you to read."

"Oh my!" I exclaimed. "Would it really be wise of me to spend this time reading...? I assume Ferdinand prepared it for me, so it must be for the best, right?" As I stared at the book now sitting on my desk, I tried to remember the last time I'd sat down to read.

"According to Lord Ferdinand, you are to rest as much as you can before Aub Dunkelfelger contacts you again."

Dunkelfelger's Response

It was third bell. The scholars had announced that Dunkelfelger was once again trying to contact us via the emergency tool, so I'd gone with Ferdinand to answer their call. Aub Dunkelfelger wasn't the only one on the other end this time; his first wife, Sieglinde, was there with him.

"In regard to yesterday's discussion, how do you respond?" Ferdinand asked the aub.

"Protecting the Royal Academy, defending Yurgenschmidt, and rescuing the royal family are our greatest priorities. And as the Zent's sword, we cannot remain inactive when there are other options before us. We petition Lady Rozemyne to grant us her orders."

Dunkelfelger was determined to protect Yurgenschmidt no matter the danger—and in truth, the strength of their conviction moved me. Sieglinde didn't oppose the declaration; she merely watched us in silence. That she was here at all indicated that her entire duchy supported this course of action.

"Very well," I said. "I request your aid to protect the Royal Academy and, in turn, all of Yurgenschmidt."

"We seek to follow the Avatar of Mestionora," the aub replied. "We must make it clear to all those at the Royal Academy that righteousness is on our side." He probably wanted me to flaunt my Grutrissheit when we arrived.

"Worry not. We shall travel to the Academy via its country gate, so our presence alone will prove we have a Grutrissheit."

"Using the gates again, are we?" Sieglinde asked. "That certainly will show everyone you are a legitimate Zent candidate."

Aub Dunkelfelger nodded. "In that case, I will inform the knights at—"

Before the aub could spring up and take his leave, his wife grabbed on to his cape. "First, I would propose we bring each other up to speed on what we know about our situation," she said with a crafted smile. "Lord Ferdinand, if you

would do me that courtesy.”

“Of course,” Ferdinand replied, smiling back at her.

Sieglinde and Ferdinand seem like they'd get along swimmingly. I could see them being a pair of assassins or something.

“Because of recent developments here in Ahrensbach,” Ferdinand said, “our dormitory is closed, and we can obtain intelligence about the Sovereignty and Royal Academy only from Ehrenfest. An unfortunate circumstance, as *their* only source of information is the research-obsessed Professor Hirschur.”

Hirschur really was dedicated to her research, and it was common knowledge that she wasn't cut out to be a dormitory supervisor. Stressing our reliance on her immediately demonstrated how little we knew. Sieglinde must have understood as much because she began sharing what she'd learned from Rauffen.

“Lady Rozemyne—are you aware that Aub Ehrenfest spoke with the royal family on the day of your dinner invitation?”

“I am,” I replied. “He met with Prince Sigiswald and discussed my leave for Ahrensbach. I was given a crest to wield royal authority.” I wasn't wearing it now, since the chain was on the verge of turning to dust, but I was still carrying it with me.

“Once the Zent heard the news from Prince Sigiswald, he told the supervisors to stay in their dormitories and ordered the Sovereign Knight's Order to guard the door to Ahrensbach's dormitory.”

Professor Hirschur didn't mention that, did she?

I paused in thought. Hirschur must have chosen to interpret the king's words as “You can hole up anywhere as long as you're not roaming about” and elected to stay in the scholar building.

“Our hands were too full sending volunteers to Ahrensbach and preparing knights to sortie at the Sovereignty's call, so I did not exchange any other words with Rauffen,” Sieglinde continued. She had received the almost impossible task of controlling the men riled up in preparation for their game of true dinner.

By the time the volunteers were due to leave for Ahrensbach, Dunkelfelger still hadn't received any further correspondence from the royal family. Their only choice was to proceed to the country gate. A message hadn't even arrived in their absence; they had returned to find themselves still without any further orders.

"We anxiously awaited dawn, at which point we received a letter from Hannelore. She wanted permission to lead our volunteers to protect Ehrenfest's foundation, and stated that Lady Rozemyne had obtained Ahrensbach's. We attempted to inform the Zent that the fighting in Ahrensbach had concluded, but we could not reach him directly."

Aub Dunkelfelger hadn't been too surprised—he'd said the Zent was probably occupied with the fighting. Sieglinde hadn't considered it suspicious either; one needed to touch the water mirror's feystone to activate it, so unless both parties were available at the same time, they wouldn't be able to communicate. They'd expected a scholar to tell the Zent they'd called and assumed they would receive an update in short order.

But an entire day later, still nothing.

His patience running thin, Aub Dunkelfelger had elected to contact Rauffen. "But there was nothing he could tell me, for he had stayed in our dormitory as per the king's instructions. His response stated only that he was continuing to wait."

Rauffen had always struck me as someone who would abandon orders to wait around when there was fighting to be done, but I must have been mistaken. Hirschur had a thing or three to learn from him.

"He did eventually leave, whereupon the knights stationed outside Ahrensbach's dormitory began to chastise him. He convinced someone he knew in the Sovereign Knight's Order to send an ordonnanz requesting an update on the situation, and the response confirmed that the royal family had safely evacuated. As for their silence, the Zent had decided it wasn't worth summoning Dunkelfelger when the invaders had yet to show themselves. I informed Rauffen that Lanzenave had been purged from Ahrensbach and that we needed the Zent to contact us nonetheless."

As it turned out, Rauffen's associate had sent the ordonnanz announcing the Purge of Lanzenave just after the royal family had told Ehrenfest they didn't care about the current status of Ahrensbach.

"They must have thought it best to discuss the matter with the Zent. The bare minimum of knights were left in the central building, and normalcy returned to the Royal Academy and Sovereignty."

That same afternoon, Hirschur had sent ordonnanzes to various people warning them of the outsiders who had infiltrated the Royal Academy. Raublut, the commander of the Sovereign Knight's Order, had responded at once, ordering her to return to her dormitory.

"Rauffen set out for the scholar building when he heard about the intruders," the aub noted. "He had grown frustrated during his time holed away in the dormitory and sent an ordonnanz to Raublut bargaining for permission to join the coming battle."

He showed more restraint than most, but... in the end, he was still a man of Dunkelfelger.

The ordonnanz had set out and, to Rauffen's surprise, flown almost straight down—to the forest near the scholar building where he had already been headed. He had watched the bird as it approached a group of knights working with people he had never seen before.

"They were all wearing black capes, but perhaps a dozen among them were not clad in armor—a good indication that they were not knights. Most notable of all was a woman with bright blonde hair adorned with gaudy accessories."

Lady Detlinde, I presume?

She had some nerve to wear her over-the-top hair ornaments at a time like that. I wanted to be exasperated, but part of me respected her overwhelming display of girl power, which would forever be beyond me. It seemed safe to assume that even the Lanzenavians were finding her a pain to deal with. I could already imagine her launching into one of her sparkly dances.

"Ten-some individuals who were not knights, you say?" Ferdinand asked from behind me.

“Indeed. We cannot give an exact number because they were largely concealed, but we can say with all certainty that the knight commander was with them. He appeared to be instructing them to stay hidden in the forest. Rauffen turned around without a second thought and started making his way back to our dormitory. He was passing through the central building when he received an ordonnanz from Raublut stating that it was the duty of the Sovereign Knight’s Order and nobody else to find and capture the outsiders.”

Unable to determine the knight commander’s intentions or where the information might spread, Rauffen had instructed the other professors not to leave their rooms under any circumstances. He had then sent word to Dunkelfelger, leaving it up to the aub to decide what he should do next.

“Aub Dunkelfelger wishes only to protect the Royal Academy—and with Lady Rozemyne’s orders, we can now start a battle in its defense,” Sieglinde noted. “However, in this case, our enemies and their location are uncertain. We cannot say whether only a portion of the Sovereign Knight’s Order is behaving strangely under Raublut or the entire Order is compromised. There is even a chance the Zent told him to fraternize with the outsiders as a means of securing them. If we do not know our opponents, then we do not know where to attack.”

Sieglinde had acutely identified the problem with our situation: unlike during true ditter, where the foundations were the main focus of most battles, we had no idea what we needed to target. She asked if we had any more intelligence that might be of use in that regard.

“The Lanzenave Estate seems to provide access to someplace other than the Ahrensbach Dormitory. Lord Ferdinand, would you happen to know where?”

“Yes, but I must ask that you keep it a secret—this is information I acquired only upon moving to Ahrensbach and assisting its aub. The Lanzenave Estate contains a teleportation circle to a villa where another country’s princesses once lived. Now that Rozemyne has stolen Ahrensbach’s foundation, its previous aub’s brooches no longer hold any power, meaning Detlinde’s group cannot access their dormitory. I would assume they have moved to the villa instead; it was sealed after the civil war, and the princesses inside were all executed. Is there anything more you can tell us about it, Aub Dunkelfelger?”

I was amazed. By choosing his words carefully and redirecting the question, Ferdinand had discreetly implied that he was much too young to have a satisfying answer.

The aub glanced at his first wife, then gave a slightly uncomfortable nod. “As I understand it, the door leading inside can be found in the rearmost section of the central building.”

The Royal Academy’s central building contained doors to the various dormitories, which were lined up according to the duchy rankings. At the far end were the royal family’s villas, but if one went even farther than that—an especially rare occurrence—one would come across a door hidden behind the seal of Verbergen the God of Concealment. That was the entrance to the Adalgisa villa.

“According to Ahrensbach’s documents, the villa is fairly close to Verbergen’s shrine,” Ferdinand added.

“Verbergen’s shrine...?” Sieglinde repeated, slowly drawing her eyebrows together. She must not have known the location of every shrine at the Royal Academy. That couldn’t have been too unusual; I’d only found out from looking through the underground archive.

“I can tell you roughly where to find it,” I said. “Back when I was helping the royal family translate documents in the underground archive, I saw a map depicting the location of every shrine at the Academy.”

The placement of the dormitories made the Academy’s grounds look something like a shrunken-down map of Yurgenschmidt. That, coupled with Ahrensbach’s country gate being associated with Darkness and the fact that Verbergen was a subordinate of the same element, made it obvious that the shrine we were looking for was near Ahrensbach’s dormitory.

“The villa might be impossible to find from the outside without prayers or magic circles from Anhaltung the Goddess of Advice—a subordinate of the Goddess of Light,” Sieglinde mused aloud.

“I see.”

“However, in the same way that using teleportation circles requires the

approval of the relevant aubs, entering the Adalgisa villa will most likely require the approval of the royal branch family that manages it. But alas, we are not yet sure who they are—or why the teleportation hall of a sealed villa was open and ready to accept Ahrensbach invaders.”

“Professor Rauffen’s account paints Raublut as fairly suspicious...” I said, eliciting stern nods from everyone else.

“That said,” Ferdinand interjected, “although Raublut *is* our most likely culprit, we have only one eyewitness to rely on. Raimund did not mention seeing Sovereign knights with the intruders in his report. Raublut would need only declare that he was trying to capture Detlinde when he was spotted.”

“Furthermore, knight commander or not, an archnoble having control over that villa makes no sense,” Sieglinde added. “How long has he had the key? And why is he supporting Lady Detlinde and the Lanzenavians? We lack far too much information.”

I was nodding in agreement with those very sound points when a sharp *smack* drew my attention. Aub Dunkelfelger had slammed a determined fist against his open hand.

“The main takeaway is, we no longer need to wander about the Royal Academy in a blind search for outsiders. We shall launch an attack on this Verbergen-hidden villa *tonight*.”

I was completely taken aback. We were all bemoaning our lack of evidence... so why was the aub proposing an ambush all of a sudden? Ferdinand grimaced at such a blatant lack of awareness while Sieglinde placed an exasperated hand on her forehead.

“We already know about the outsiders, don’t we?” Aub Dunkelfelger continued, making his argument with a broad grin. “Destroying what seems to be their base of operations takes precedence. They should all be there at the dead of night—and that’s when we’ll strike!”

Ferdinand crossed his arms. “Though I appreciate the idea of crushing them all with one quick measure, will you not need to work with the other duchies? Have you laid the groundwork for such cooperation?”

Indeed, if our two duchies acted alone, the others would assume we had tried to seize the glory for ourselves. They might even accuse us of acting against the king's best interests during the next Archduke Conference. Making them aware of our plans before we took action was particularly important.

"They were all spineless cowards," the aub replied. "Involving them is out of the question."

Aub Dunkelfelger really had invited the other duchies to help protect the Royal Academy... and they had all replied that they would need three days to prepare to sortie. They wanted time to investigate the royals' current status, mobilize their knights, select which of them would participate, and prepare magic tools and potions. Depending on the scale of the battle, there was a chance they would also need to move servants to the dormitory to attend to rooms and prepare food.

In response, the exasperated Aub Dunkelfelger had shouted, "Would you sit on your hands if massive feybeasts were attacking?!" The other aubs had said it was a poor comparison when we were potentially on the verge of war.

Hmm... To be honest, I'm not sure I can side with Dunkelfelger on this one. How many other duchies are prepared for a battle like this at the drop of a hat?

Dunkelfelger was a reliable ally, to be sure, but we couldn't expect anyone else to match their readiness for combat. Ehrenfest had needed at least a month to prepare for Georgine's attack.

"Detlinde, a self-proclaimed Zent candidate, was spotted among the intruders," the aub said plainly. "Their goal must be the Grutrissheit. And even if we put her aside, the Lanzenavians pose a tremendous threat as descendants of Tollkuehnheit. If we base our estimations on the princesses they sent over, then we cannot risk underestimating how much mana they have."

"Oh my... And why might you know how much mana those princesses had...?" Sieglinde asked with a calm smile. This elicited a grunt from her husband, who was evidently unsure how to respond.

"Aub Dunkelfelger's concerns are perfectly valid," Ferdinand said. He had given the man a stern look but proceeded to support him nonetheless. "Lanzenave has sent its princesses to maintain the city that Tollkuehnheit built.

They had relations with Yurgenschmidt's royal family, and the child of theirs with the most mana was returned to Lanzenave upon obtaining a schtappe. Knowing one's history is enough to deduce that the princesses had plenty of mana."

"Indeed," the aub added with a shameless nod. "Lord Ferdinand is correct."

"According to Detlinde's letter," Ferdinand continued, a more vacant look in his eye, "there is one such child among those who invaded the Royal Academy. A boy who was raised to be the king of Lanzenave."

"Come again?"

"He has far more mana than the current royal family—and a schtappe to boot. It is written that in order to obtain a schtappe, a child of the villa must be registered to a royal branch family. There is no way for us to check whether that registration still exists, but depending on the location of his medal, he might be able to obtain the Grutrissheit at any moment."

Ferdinand said nothing about the fact that one had to pray at each of the Royal Academy's shrines as part of the process. His wise omission made the looming threat seem even worse—like it was right in our faces.

"I don't care if the other duchies keep biding their time; we *will* attack tonight," the aub declared. "We cannot allow a foreigner to take the Grutrissheit. Even if Raublut leads the Sovereign Knight's Order against us, we shall crush every last Lanzenavian who dares to cross us."

"Let us take action when the date changes," Ferdinand added.

"We shall go by highbeast from our dormitory to the villa. May we act faster than Steifebrise the Goddess of the Gale!"

Prayers and the Departure

“And there he goes...” I said. Aub Dunkelfelger had ended our call as soon as he’d made his last declaration, leaving us staring into the empty water. “He sure seems to like that ‘faster than Steifebrise’ phrase, huh?”

“It does seem like the kind of saying his people would take to,” Ferdinand replied while putting the tool away. “I cannot shake my suspicion that his knights’ tales of true ditter have brought out his thirst for battle, but still... We need to finish our purge of the Lanzenavians sooner rather than later. It would also be wise to remember that Raublut used the royal family’s order to protect the Royal Academy as a cover for his fraternizing with the enemy.”

Ferdinand gave his forehead a few taps, then continued in a much lower voice, “I was hoping the Sovereign knights would dispatch the remaining Lanzenavians or the Lanzenavians would massacre the royals while we were in Ehrenfest... That both parties have survived is rather troublesome...” He spoke with a completely straight face, which made it all the more terrifying.

“Ferdinand,” I said, staring up at him, “was that not a rather violent thing to say?”

“Ah. I was frustrated that the situation did not go as I anticipated, but I should not have made that so apparent. I will take care to better disguise such remarks in the future.”

“That wasn’t what I meant! You shouldn’t casually bemoan the absence of a massacre! Do you not realize how scary that sounds?!”

As much as I agreed that the royals were a pain to deal with, I didn’t want Detlinde’s group or the Lanzenavians to kill them all. A tragedy like that would only leave a bad taste in my mouth. The most I wanted was a guarantee they would never bother me again.

“You are as moderate as ever,” Ferdinand said, then looked around the office. “Eckhart, have Strahl and the others returned yet?”

“They spent the night traveling by highbeast and are expected to arrive soon.”

“Inform them upon their return to rest until seventh bell. Send ordonnanzes to the knights and scholars telling them to be ready for a fight the very moment the date changes.”

“Sir!”

Ferdinand then turned to Justus. “How goes the scholars’ production of rejuvenation potions and magic tools?”

“Things are proceeding smoothly under Hartmut and Clarissa’s guidance.”

“Good. Have them continue as they are.”

“Though I should note that Hartmut and Clarissa are making tools only for Lady Rozemyne,” Justus added with a wry smile.

Ferdinand told my knights to take turns resting before he rounded on me. “Rozemyne—regarding the coming battle... You will *not* be participating.”

“Huh? But you need me to activate the teleportation circle, don’t you?”

“Correct. You will teleport the knights from Ahrensbach’s country gate to the Royal Academy. Then you will return here. There is no need for you to get involved any more than that.”

On the one hand, I was relieved that I wouldn’t need to fight. But on the other, I was racked with unease. I was the one who had accused Ahrensbach of treason, stolen its foundation, and announced to everyone my intention to become its new aub. It wouldn’t be right of me to leave capturing the Lanzenavians to Aub Dunkelfelger and Ferdinand, who still wasn’t formally associated with Ahrensbach.

“Ferdinand, do I not need to participate in my capacity as an archduchess? Is it not Aub Ahrensbach’s duty to capture Lady Detlinde and the Lanzenavians?”

“You were not *hoping* to take part, were you?”

“Of course not. But what does that have to do with anything?” I asked, staring intensely at him. “Is it truly acceptable for me to stay behind and abandon my duty as an aub?”

Ferdinand grimaced, looking equally as intense. “I agree that your involvement would make the most sense, but there is no way to make that happen while you are in your current state. I shall carry out your duty for you. Simply wait for my return.”

“I refuse,” I said with a strict glare. “I might ask for your help sometimes, but I’m not going to dump my workload on you. Don’t treat me like I’m Sylvester. And on top of that, if we intend to leave in the dead of the night, then a certain someone needs rest far more than I do.”

Of course, I wasn’t speaking out of a newfound appreciation for my role; I might even have agreed to let Ferdinand act in my stead if not for how weary he seemed.

Eckhart and Justus gave firm nods of agreement.

“Rozemyne...” Ferdinand muttered, clearly on his guard. “Just what are you planning?”

“Our preparations are already in full swing. Hartmut and Clarissa are used to the process, and the knights know exactly what they need to do. It was through your assistance that I was able to sleep peacefully... so allow me to return the favor.”

Eckhart understood exactly what my intentions were. He moved behind Ferdinand, ready to catch him, while I took out my schtappe and started to pray.

“O Schlaftraum, God of Dreams—may Ferdinand be blessed with pleasant sleep and joyous dreams.”

“You fool...” Ferdinand grumbled. He must have been in dire need of rest because he passed out even quicker than Letizia.

Our late-night departure meant I would need to take an afternoon nap of my own, but there were some important matters I needed to attend to first. I summoned Hartmut’s group and asked them for the best way to seek out a villa hidden by Verbergen, then instructed them to prepare whatever magic circles we would need.

“If the villa and its door are too hard to find because they bear Verbergen’s sigil, then it might help to search for them using the sigil of Anhaltung the Goddess of Advice,” I said, relaying what I’d discussed with Sieglinde and Aub Dunkelfelger.

Hartmut crossed his arms in thought, then cast his eyes down as if searching through his memories. “This magic circle you desire must be especially rare; barely any of the Academy’s courses explore circles meant for finding things. Have you encountered it before, at least?”

“Lady Rozemyne,” Leonore interjected, “while I agree with using Anhaltung’s power to expose our enemies, could we not also employ Verbergen’s seal? Doing so would allow us to act in secret, which should aid us tremendously in our ambush.”

As the two discussed their thoughts, I formed my Book of Mestionora and started researching Verbergen and Anhaltung. There was no need to be discreet; everyone here already knew about my bible.

“Hartmut, this magic circle looks like it might work,” I said, then transferred it onto a sheet of paper. There were holes in its design, but I was knowledgeable enough to fill them in.

“You have no issues with magic circles, then?” Hartmut asked as he accepted my work.

“No, none at all. I do not feel anything in particular while drawing them.”

“In that case, we might be able to circumvent the need to use ordonnanzes by modifying the Ordoschnelli magic circle used to make them. You will need something of the sort if you intend to join the battle.”

From there, Hartmut asked me to find out as much as I could about Ordoschnelli that wasn’t already covered in the Academy’s lessons. He was being impressively insightful, so I gave my Book another search.

I’m not sure I’ll find much, though. Ferdinand’s bible contained a lot more about old magic circles than mine.

I started to look... then peered up at Hartmut and cocked my head. “Are you not sleep-deprived, Hartmut? You might not be in as bad shape as Ferdinand,

but you haven't rested nearly enough, have you?"

"Oh? Would you grant me Schlaftraum's blessing?" he asked, raising an eyebrow in amusement.

I shot a quick glance at Clarissa, who was clasping her hands in front of her chest, ready to beg. "Of course, Hartmut. I understand just how hard you've been working. I would not refuse to grant you a single blessing."

"In that case, I shall ask for one when Lord Ferdinand awakens. We cannot have you lose any more retainers."

I gazed around and remembered that my knights were taking turns to rest in preparation for tonight. Eckhart and Justus were also sleeping so they could attend to Ferdinand once he was awake and operating at full strength.

"Fear not," Hartmut continued with a slight smile. "I shall sleep with you, Lady Rozemyne."

"Hartmut," Leonore said. "Mind your phrasing. You could simply have said that you plan to rest at the same time as her."

Until then, I spent my time drawing magic circles on the fey paper Hartmut and Clarissa had made, speaking with Letizia about how many nobles had probably exited through the Lanzenave Estate, and so on.

"Ferdinand," I said. "You're up early."

It wasn't even fifth bell yet. I'd thought Ferdinand would need more sleep, but he looked alert and much healthier than before.

"Rozemyne, obtain permission before using blessings that will disturb the schedules of those you cast them on," he retorted.

"Practice what you preach, then," I replied with a glare. He had blessed me without asking not too long ago.

"I... shall work on it," Ferdinand said with a nod and a grimace.

"So, what wonderful dream did you have? Mine was about reading in a glorious library."

“It was nothing worth mentioning.”

“That’s strange. Was my prayer not strong enough?” I’d elected not to use much mana, since Ferdinand had fallen asleep almost at once, but maybe that hadn’t been a great idea.

“Do not worry about such trivial matters. On a more important note, have you received any updates? How are the preparations coming along?” He was looking not at me but at Hartmut. “Ah, employing Verbergen’s sigil to help with our concealment, I see. A fine idea. We intend to use it, of course, but we should distribute some to Dunkelfelger’s knights as well.”

“Are we not going to blow our cover simply by teleporting to the Royal Academy?” I asked, wondering whether stealth truly was an option.

“Dunkelfelger’s country gate shone like a beacon when we used it.”

Ferdinand gave his temple a few contemplative taps. “It would still serve us well to prepare some.”

“Incidentally... Lady Letizia told me she wished to speak about the instant-death poison before the battle. Her current status means we cannot discuss it openly with her, and my knights would not have let me be alone with her in the first place, so I said that I would need to wait until you were awake. Do you have time to weigh in?”

It seemed only natural that the Lanzenavians at the Academy would use the same poison as their countrymen. Speaking with Letizia felt like a wise decision—maybe she knew something about it we had yet to consider—but at the same time, I wanted to know what Ferdinand thought. He was her victim in this matter, after all.

“Yes,” he replied at length. “I will see her. Information about Lanzenave has been exceptionally hard to come by.”

“Then I will prepare tea. And since you missed lunch, I suspect you will also need a light meal.”

I turned to Lieseleta, who chuckled and said, “You have looked so worried since lunch that we opted to take the initiative and prepare some food we could serve at any moment. Would you prefer Ahrensbach cuisine or dishes from

Ehrenfest?”

Ferdinand wasn't even able to open his mouth before Justus replied, “The dishes from Ehrenfest, if you would.”

Lieseleta and Sergius moved to the adjacent room to oversee the preparation of our tea. In the meantime, I asked Gretia to summon Letizia to the tea party room.

Once everyone was gathered and we had our tea—Letizia included—Ferdinand activated an area-wide magic tool. “So, what would you like to share with us?” he asked.

Letizia took a deep breath, then said, “The Lanzenavians conceal their dangerous poison within silver tubes.”

“I... am well aware,” Ferdinand said curtly. “On top of that, Rozemyne saw the poison in action during the Battle of Ehrenfest, so we need no more information about how it functions.”

Letizia's eyes wandered as she sought her next words. “They have some form of medicine that makes them immune to their poison. That is why they can use it without covering their mouths. Take care.”

“Medicine?”

“Yes. It looks and tastes just like the sweets they handed out as souvenirs, but the core is somewhat bitter. Lady Detlinde and Lord Leonzio called me over and gave me one on my way to the Mana Replenishment hall.”

In other words, she had received the medicine immediately before her meeting with Ferdinand. They had arranged to discuss her head attendant, Roswitha, who had vanished two days prior.

“The poison is exceptionally dangerous in enclosed spaces,” Letizia continued. “Shortly after your retainers fled, Lord Leonzio used it inside the aub's office. In a single moment, everyone except Fairseele and me was turned into...”

She fell silent, bit her trembling lip, and cast her eyes down. Back in Ehrenfest, only archnobles closely related to the aub could enter his office during Mana

Replenishment. Could a group that powerful really have died in the blink of an eye? I imagined my own retainers being turned into feystones and immediately clapped a hand over my mouth.

“So their poison is extremely dangerous, and they have medicine that makes them essentially immune to it,” Ferdinand concluded. “That will do. You may leave.”

“Understood. Please, *please* be careful...” Letizia pleaded, her blue eyes wet with frustration. “The Lanzenavians view us only as sources of mana.”

And with that, she took her leave.

“Rozemyne. Are you okay?” Ferdinand asked.

“I... feel somewhat nauseated, but that’s all. I resolved to hear everything Lady Letizia wished to tell us. And in any case, she saw things far worse than anything I witnessed.”

Letizia needed care and consideration far more than I did. There was no way the things she’d seen hadn’t traumatized her.

“As much as I might want to help her, it will need to wait,” Ferdinand replied. “She brought about that situation in the first place. Our focus right now should be ensuring that nobody else meets the same end as her retainers.”

He was right—we couldn’t leave the Lanzenavians as they were. I nodded, took his outstretched hand, and stood up.

“You still need to rest, do you not?” Ferdinand asked. “Would you care for another blessing tonight?”

“I slept so peacefully last night that I doubt another would even work on me. Hartmut needs it far more, which is why I promised to bestow it upon him.”

“Go to sleep already. I shall visit his chambers and grant the blessing for you. Not even by the greatest stretch of the imagination would you be able to carry an almost full-grown man.”

Ferdinand then sighed; he really must not have appreciated being carried away by Eckhart. I couldn’t fault his logic, though—Hartmut was a man, meaning I wouldn’t even be able to enter his room—so maybe it really was best

to let him take over.

Ferdinand granted me the blessing in spite of my refusal. I didn't immediately fall asleep this time, but I did end up having nice dreams. I would need to see about receiving it every night from now on.

By the time I awoke, our preparations were complete. I put on my riding clothes, then went to the staging area together with my guard knights.

"The fighting has stretched on for days now," Ferdinand said as he gazed upon our main force—eighty Ahrensbach knights, my knights, and a portion of our scholars. "You have not had the luxury of resting at your leisure, so I realize you are not at your best."

Our group might not have been the largest—we needed to leave enough people behind to protect Ahrensbach—but our manpower was far greater than anything Ehrenfest could provide at the moment. Combined with the knights of Dunkelfelger, we wouldn't have any trouble conquering the Adalgisa villa.

"However," Ferdinand continued, "we must make do. We cannot leave the villains who ravaged Ahrensbach to their own devices. We must restore peace to this land—both for our new aub and to prove we are not traitors ourselves. We must drag those shameless Lanzenavian dogs from their den, capture them, and toss them before the Zent."

In response, Eckhart slammed the butt of his spear against the ground. The knights stomped their boots in turn, and the mood started to change. This was the frenzy that came before a battle!

"This is our only chance to avenge our brothers who fell victim to their dishonorable ambush!" Ferdinand declared. "To wipe away the shame of our failure to protect those whose lives were in our hands!"

"Sir, yes, sir!"

"Do not forgive those fools who put their country in danger by choosing to ally with a foreign power!"

"Sir, yes, sir!"

“Let not a single ransacker go free!”

“SIR, YES, SIR!”

As the atmosphere became electric, Ferdinand called my name. I slowly approached and moved one step ahead of him, ready to do the obvious: it was time to bless the knights heading into battle.

“May those of you going into battle be blessed,” I said, holding my schtappe tight. “First by Verdrenna the Goddess of Thunder and Greifechan the Goddess of Luck, subordinates to Flutrane the Goddess of Water.”

Green light rained down on the knights. They must never have received a blessing before, if the looks of total shock on their faces were anything to go by.

“Then by Angriff the God of War and Schlagziel the God of Hunting, subordinates to Leidenschaft the God of Fire.”

This time, the light was blue. Ferdinand placed a hand on my back and told me that was enough—this was no small group to pray for—but I shook my head in protest. I wanted to give everyone as many blessings as I could. It wasn’t like I needed to conserve my mana; I was useless in battle, and I could just drink an ultra-nasty rejuvenation potion when it came time to teleport everyone. I was acting out of my own selfish desire not to see anyone else turn into a feystone.

“And also by Steifebrise the Goddess of the Gale and Duldsetzen the Goddess of Endurance, subordinates to Schutzaria the Goddess of the Wind.”

As soon as I was done, we departed en masse. In this pitch-black world where the sea and sky blended into one, the only light came from the border and country gates.

I was riding with Ferdinand and drinking a rejuvenation potion of the kind variety. We couldn’t risk all the flailing about that came with the ultra-nasty ones—not when we were so high up. I appreciated his consideration, but I thought I could do without the lecture.

“How many times must I tell you not to overdo it, fool? Blessing such a large group at once places far too great a burden on your body. Have you forgotten how much mana you will need to teleport everyone to the Royal Academy?”

“Not at all. My mana will regenerate, but those we lose in battle will never return. If giving them multiple blessings will increase their chances of survival, then I consider it worthwhile, no matter how much it might inconvenience me.” The last thing I wanted was the weight of even more deaths on my conscience.

“You really are troublesome...” Ferdinand sighed.

I opened the border gate as Aub Ahrensbach, then used my Book of Mestionora on the country gate. Because I still couldn’t stomach using my Pandabus, my retinue had to take the stairs.

My knights were the first ones to enter, since they’d used a country gate before. Eckhart was last—he was serving as our rear guard—so I closed the gate once he was safely inside.

“*Grutrissheit*,” Ferdinand said when we were finally alone; only those with the Book of Mestionora could enter the gate from above. He used rucken as we passed through the barrier.

“Am I just a cover for you?” I asked. He was using his Book as much as he pleased yet hadn’t shown any intention of revealing it.

“Indeed. Now make your bible shine bright enough for all to see. Swallowing the darkness is my duty.”

Yeah, yeah... Stay in the shadows and keep pulling the strings.

Once we were ready for them, I told the Ahrensbach knights coming up the stairs to stand on the teleportation circle. They did as instructed, curiously looking around all the while.

I confirmed that everyone was in place, then moved my fingers, tapped the magic circle on my tablet, and said, “*Kehrschluessel*. Ersterde.” The circle rose from the screen, then spun faster and faster while shining with the light of all seven elements.

Next, the teleportation circle on the ground started to move. My mana was sucked out from above and below until my vision went completely white and the feeling of weightlessness unique to teleportation took over.

Epilogue

Warm sunlight streamed into the Royal Academy's forest, where Gervasio was resting a hand against the door of a dimly lit shrine. He had finally obtained the last tablet he needed. It might not have equated to obtaining the Grutrissheit, but the most essential part of the process was now complete.

Gervasio let out a hushed sigh, only to have Detlinde hurry him on from behind. "Lord Gervasio," she said. "Please be quick, if you would."

The woman's urging aside, Gervasio had yet to finish playing the role assigned to him. He made his schtappe, cleaned the shrine's door with waschen, and then descended the steps so that Detlinde could take over.

"Expertly done," Raublut said, having elected to wait near the bottom of the shrine.

Despite the circumstances, Gervasio looked somewhat displeased. "I should not need to say it, but your words have cost me a lot of mana..." he grouched.

At the very start of their shrine tour, Raublut had explained to Detlinde that Lady Rozemyne had simply washed the shrines with waschen and then prayed. It was a necessary lie, since Detlinde wasn't able to enter the shrines, but Gervasio had needed to waste so much mana to uphold it.

"And that's that!" Detlinde exclaimed, sounding as pleased as ever. Her voice rang out just as an ordonnanz came into view.

"This is Hirschur, Ehrenfest's dormitory supervisor. It would seem that outsiders have gained access to the Royal Academy. A report indicates they were last seen near the scholar building. I am requesting that the Sovereign Knight's Order look into and capture them."

Everyone paled. Someone was nearby.

"Hide in the trees. *Now*," Raublut snapped while the ordonnanz spoke its message again. The forest would shelter them from anyone patrolling the sky. "We need to return to the dormitory without being seen."

Raublut then clucked, outraged that someone had ventured outside the dormitory—against his orders, no less. He picked up the ordonnanz’s feystone and said, “This is Raublut, the Sovereign knight commander. We will search for them at once. Return to your dormitory until further notice.”

The others had already moved away from the shrine to retreat into the forest. Raublut urged them to go deeper when another ordonnanz arrived.

“This is Rauffen, Dunkelfelger’s dormitory supervisor. It has come to my attention that there are intruders on the Academy’s grounds. Please allow me to serve as a guard or join the fighting. I *will* demonstrate my worth.”

“This is Raublut. Though your consideration is appreciated, it is the duty of the Sovereign Knight’s Order to find and imprison outsiders. I must ask that you wait in your dormitory.”

It was bad enough that Rauffen was trying to get involved—but then *another* ordonnanz arrived. Raublut shot his arm out for the bird to perch on, annoyed to be dealing with yet another interruption.

“This is Solange. Professor Hirschur just informed me that outsiders have infiltrated the Royal Academy. Could she have mistakenly been referring to your retainers? The ones you brought to retrieve Hortensia’s belongings, I mean. Would you allow me to explain to Professor Hirschur that Hortensia passed away?”

Indeed, Raublut had told the librarian that he needed to collect his late wife’s possessions—the perfect excuse to head straight to the library once Gervasio had visited all the shrines.

“This is Raublut. Thank you for your message. I intend to announce my wife’s passing during the next Archduke Conference, when I shall ask the Zent to send you another archlibrarian. My apologies, but please continue to keep this a secret. I will contact Professor Hirschur to explain things.”

Once the ordonnanz had departed, Raublut groaned in frustration. If only Solange had contacted him first, he thought; then he could have wrapped Hirschur into the deception.

“In any case... we have finished circling the shrines,” Raublut announced. “We

should hurry along to the library. As I said, I must collect my late wife's belongings. Lord Gervasio, would you care to meet Professor Solange?"

"The name does ring a bell," Gervasio replied. "Greeting her sounds like a worthwhile endeavor." They had gone over their plan well in advance, so he knew their next step was to head to the underground archive.

"Oh my..." Detlinde murmured. "Allow me to come with you, then."

Everyone started. Letting her tag along would ruin their cover story.

"That isn't an option, I'm afraid," Raublut finally said. "Lord Gervasio is a fresh face here, so I can claim he is my attendant. But someone as famous as Yurgenschmidt's next Zent would never go unnoticed."

"Yes, that certainly is true." She gave a proud nod, suddenly convinced. "My status as a Zent candidate is known so widely that I stand out wherever I go."

"Consider our trip to the library a distraction for you—the means by which you can safely return to the villa. Everyone, ensure she makes it there without incident."

Having dealt with Detlinde, Raublut gave Gervasio the signal that it was time for them to go. They headed to the library with his attendants, who were disguised as knights.

"Raublut, those ordonnances seemed concerning..." Gervasio said.

"Professor Rauffen might be wise to us, in which case Dunkelfelger will question the Zent and start calling for aid. The threat of that happening is precisely why we need to obtain the Grutrissheit now, before they come charging in."

As far as Raublut was concerned, there was a good chance Dunkelfelger would take their side once Gervasio had the Grutrissheit. The greater duchy seemed far more open to negotiating than Klassenberg, whose greatest priority had been returning Eglantine to the royal family.

"I see. Then let us hurry."

Raublut and those disguised as members of the Sovereign Knight's Order formed a circle around Gervasio, and the group started toward the library.

Anyone who spotted them now would think the Order was marching a captured prisoner.

“This place is exactly as I remember it...” Gervasio murmured, watching the scenery beyond the forest with a warm look in his eyes. “The memories are all coming back to me.” The blooming flowers—a pleasant reminder of spring—drew his attention to the gazebos dotting the land near the scholar building. There had been a time when he would eat lunch and enjoy tea in them between study sessions at the library.

Raublut chuckled. “I remember being told to go with you to the library not long after receiving my initial assignment.” He had just come of age, and his features had betrayed that youth.

“Yes, I can still picture the shock on your face. Not that it was warranted. There’s nothing strange about having to guard your charge on a day out.”

“Well, I was unaware of the villa’s circumstances. I thought I was being assigned to guide Lady Valamarlene after her baptism, not serve House Loeweleier in its entirety.”

There were three special rooms in the Adalgisa villa, each bearing the name of a Yurgenschmidt flower: Koralie, Schentis, and Loeweleier. Those born there were moved from the main building to the side building once they were baptized. Because paternal half-sisters weren’t recognized as family in Yurgenschmidt, the children were divided into three separate groups, each with its own mother.

Legitimate members of the royal family had their own guards, but those assigned to the Adalgisa villa had to serve one of its three groups. There was no need to give the villa’s residents their own knights; they seldom went beyond its grounds and needed guards only when going to the Royal Academy. As a new recruit of the Sovereign Knight’s Order, Raublut had been ordered to serve Loeweleier after Valamarlene, Gervasio’s younger sister of the same mother, was baptized.

“You would do well to know that I acted for your sake,” Gervasio remarked. “Outside of winter, you knights had nothing to do but watch the villa. I thought a new recruit would find it suffocating.”

“Is that so? Was it not because you thought a younger knight would be more lenient and allow you more peace?” Raublut was nearly the same age as Gervasio, so he had always accompanied the boy when he’d traveled to the royal palace or the Royal Academy’s library.

Even once he was ten years old, Gervasio had been forbidden from attending the winter Royal Academy for a number of reasons: the next king of Lanzenave didn’t need the full education of a Yurgenschmidt noble, there was nothing to gain from letting him get attached to the country he was due to leave upon coming of age, and the existence of the Adalgisa villa needed to be kept private. Instead, he had studied during other seasons, with royals or members of a branch family as his instructors.

Gervasio hadn’t socialized with any nobles outside the royal family, but he had been encouraged to associate with the Zent and their children at the time. It had been necessary to learn of the villa’s history and purpose and to keep it alive as time marched on.

“I remember it clear as day...” Gervasio said. “You told me time and time again that I was better suited to becoming the Zent than Prince Waldifrid, did you not?”

“I stand by those words even now,” Raublut replied, one eyebrow cocked in surprise. “In fact, King Gervasio... I would say that *nobody* is better suited to the role than you.”

Raublut had disliked the power struggles within his house—a branch of Gilessenmeyer’s archducal family—and aimed to become a Sovereign knight to escape them. He had come to believe it was better to judge people based on their talents than the circumstances of their birth, so it had frustrated him to no end when Yurgenschmidt’s royal family had mistreated Gervasio, a man of such great mana and intellect.

“For years, I’ve worked under King Trauerqual,” Raublut continued. “I understand his struggle and the heroics of his continued dedication to Yurgenschmidt, but my time in his service has only reinforced my conviction that a Zent must have the Grutrissheit. He who wishes to rule must have the means to do so, which is why I pray from the bottom of my heart that the seat

becomes yours.”

“I see. Then I shall reward your loyalty.”

The two exchanged smiles as they arrived outside the entrance to the Royal Academy’s library. Raublut took out and presented a feystone, and the door opened in response to Hortensia’s mana.

“Hortensia is back.”

“Welcome, Hortensia.”

The black and white shumils came over, having also reacted to the feystone’s mana. Solange was with them. She had aged considerably from when Gervasio had seen her last, but the same went for him as well. If nothing else, he was relieved to see that her bright smile and peaceful blue eyes hadn’t changed.

“Solange. Ah, how much time has passed... It is I, Gervasio, of the royal branch family. Do you remember me?”

“Goodness! It really has been a while! I was told your sickness required you to go somewhere far away. It warms my heart to see you well.”



Solange's words reminded Gervasio of the cover story Yurgenschmidt's royals had given him. To hide the existence of the Adalgisa villa, they had said that he was part of a royal branch family but couldn't attend the Royal Academy due to his poor health. Out of sympathy for the boy's situation, the Zent had permitted him to use the library during the offseason. Then, when it had come time for Gervasio to leave for Lanzenave, they had declared that his deteriorating health had required him to leave the Sovereignty. Oh, what a farce it had been.

"I am here to gather Hortensia's things," Raublut said, holding up a folded teleportation circle. "We do not have long before the Royal Academy closes. Might you take me to her room?"

Solange nodded, then took her guests into her office. She opened the door to the librarians' dormitory and called to her attendant.

"Catherine. Lord Raublut is here. Please take him to Hortensia's room."

The attendant arrived in short order and gestured the knight commander inside. "Thank you for coming. Please follow me," she said.

"Lord Gervasio, wait here and speak with Professor Solange," Raublut said, then headed into the dormitory with those disguised as Sovereign knights. Though he claimed to be retrieving his late wife's belongings, his actual objective was to search for the keys to the underground archive. It was necessary that each key be assigned to a separate archnoble, so they were most likely being kept in the archlibrarians' rooms.

"Lord Gervasio..." Solange said. "I thought you would never return. But to see you here—and with Lord Raublut as well... This really is just like old times."

"Yes, it would seem we have a mutual attachment to one another—because I was his first assignment as a Sovereign knight, I would assume. I could not help but accept his invitation."

Raublut had served Gervasio until the latter's departure for Lanzenave. He had even fought to honor his charge's last request—that he protect and, if possible, marry Valamarlene. Had the suggestion come from anyone else, Gervasio would not have even considered returning to Yurgenschmidt to obtain the Grutrissheit.

“You were such a bookworm back then, weren’t you?” Solange reminisced. “Always with your nose in a book. Do you still read, even now?”

“There is *one* book I wish to obtain. One that cannot be found anywhere else.”

“Well, this library contains books not found anywhere else in Yurgenschmidt. If you tell me what you’re looking for, I can have Schwartz and Weiss find it for you.” She moved toward the reading room, evidently unaware that Gervasio was looking not for some ordinary book but for the Grutrissheit.

“Professor Solange...” came a voice.

“Oh, Lord Raublut. Were you unable to find something?” Solange asked, confused as to why the knight commander had returned so soon.

Gervasio could guess from Raublut’s expression that he hadn’t found the keys to the underground archive; they must have been taken out of the dormitory and stored somewhere else. He didn’t want to hurt his longtime friend, but they had to find those keys at any cost.

Raublut reached down to his waist just as an ordonnanz flew into the room.

“Oh my. Another one?” Solange mused aloud. “There have been so many today. I wonder whom it came here for...”

The bird flew in a circle and then landed on her wrist. “This is Hirschur. Solange, are you safe? I’m concerned that you didn’t respond to my last message.”

“What...?” Solange murmured, looking increasingly concerned as the ordonnanz repeated its message. She turned to Raublut. “Um... Were you not going to reply in my stead...?”

“I received so many ordonnanzes that I might have forgotten,” Raublut said. He maintained an unfaltering calm even as he once again moved to take something from his waist.

Solange reached for the yellow feystone, but Raublut was faster; he seized her arms and clapped schtappe-sealing bracelets on her wrists.

“Lord Raublut! Are these what I think they are?!”

Gervasio gave Solange an apologetic look. “Forgive us, but we cannot risk you contacting the outside and causing a stir—not right now. If we let you respond, who knows what you might say?”

“Hortensia’s room didn’t contain the keys to the underground archive,” Raublut added. “Tell us where they are.”

“The underground archive...?” Solange couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “Lord Gervasio, do not tell me you are here to...”

“Might I ask you to be up front with us?” Gervasio interjected, admonishing her gently. “I cannot bear the thought of harming an old friend, but I must warn you—that sentiment does not extend to your attendant.”

“What have you done with Catherine?”

“She is bound and unable to use her *schtappe*,” Raublut answered. “No harm has come to her. Not yet. But that might change depending on your response.”

Solange paled as Raublut took out his *schtappe* and transformed it into a sword. She watched its glimmering blade for a moment, then cast her eyes down and said, “Very well. I will fetch them for you.”

To avoid a repeat of her past struggle to retrieve the keys, Solange had elected to store them in her desk. She took them out, then lined them up with trembling hands.

“So *these* are what we’ve been looking for...” Gervasio accepted the keys and, alongside his companions, overwrote the mana within them—mana belonging to Hortensia and two members of the “Library Committee” who had agreed to assist her. “Is there nothing else we need to enter the archive?”

“Take this key to the second closed-stack archive, and this one for the door inside.”

“I see. Wait here while we are gone,” Raublut said, taking the keys before binding Solange in place. They couldn’t allow her to run away and contact someone while they were in the archive.

“I will come back to unbind you once I’ve obtained the *Grutrissheit*,” Gervasio promised. “I ask only that you remain here in silence until then.”

Now prone and unable to move, Solange made no attempt to meet the man's gaze. Instead, she spoke to the shumils in a quavering voice: "Schwartz, Weiss—guide them to the underground archive."

Gervasio followed the shumils out of the office. They went from the reading room to the second closed-stack archive, then through a door leading into the underground archive. The dull patter of footsteps accompanied their journey downstairs.

"This leads to the Grutrissheit, then?" Gervasio asked. "I am impressed you were able to discover all this."

"In truth, it was largely the work of an Ehrenfest archduke candidate—though Lady Seradina's son was pulling her strings."

Gervasio thought back to Seradina, his elder sister by blood. He could still envision her light-golden eyes and perfectly straight silver hair, and the sagacious features that complemented them. People had often said they looked very much alike.

Gervasio had spent about two years with Seradina after being baptized and moving into their side building—yet he had interacted with her far less than one normally would with a maternal sister. Upon coming of age, she had returned to the main building as the Loeweleier flower, whereas Gervasio had departed the villa as the next king of Lanzenave. Compared to his little sister, Valamarlene, he'd spent barely any time with her. In fact, he hadn't seen her at all since she'd taken leave of the villa.

"Do you mean that rare seed who escaped the villa?" Gervasio asked. "Ferdinand, was it?"

The children born in the Adalgisa villa were assigned roles based on their gender, birth order, and mana capacity. Girls could serve as flowers, buds, gardeners, or seeds. Boys were always seeds.

Flowers were girls who returned to the main building after coming of age. This role normally went to the eldest daughter of each of the three houses, which was why Seradina had served as the flower of Loeweleier.

Buds were girls with the potential to become flowers. They were treated as

members of a royal branch family after their baptism but would be returned to the main building if anything happened to the flowers there. Otherwise, they had to find marriage partners, else they would end up being turned into feystones.

Valamarlene had once been a bud of Loeweleier.

Gardeners were girls who served the villa after coming of age. They were baptized not as members of a royal branch family but as the children of the villa's head attendant and subsequently worked under her as archattendants. One of Gervasio's siblings had been a gardener, but due to the timing of their baptisms, he did not remember her.

Last of all, there were seeds—children destined to become feystones before their baptism. Gervasio had been raised as one before being chosen to become the next king of Lanzenave. He had escaped being turned into a feystone only because he had possessed the most mana out of all the boys in the villa. Ferdinand was an exceptionally unusual case, having escaped the villa without being selected to rule.

“Indeed,” Raublut said. “The loss of that seed was the reason Lady Valamarlene was summoned back to the villa to serve as Loeweleier's new flower.”

Gervasio had doted on Valamarlene, and she had loved him dearly in turn. That was why he had asked Raublut to protect her—and even marry her, if possible—before his departure for Lanzenave. Of course, such a request was much easier said than done; though Raublut was a member of an archducal branch family, he was still an archnoble, whereas Valamarlene's family was associated with royalty. It was only through blood, sweat, and tears that he had managed to secure the engagement.

Valamarlene had then come of age; but while her marriage to Raublut was still on the horizon, Seradina's son had been taken from the villa. Raublut hadn't been told the reason, only that it was “the guidance of the Goddess of Time.” The loss of a boy had meant the loss of a feystone, so Seradina had become one in his place—and Valamarlene, who had just come of age, had been sent back to the villa to take over as Loeweleier's flower. Those were the

rules, meaning they were unavoidable, but Raublut's pain when the Zent at the time had dissolved his engagement had been too intense to describe.

After the civil war, when the Adalgisa villa was sealed off, Valamarlene and all the other occupants had ended up being executed. Raublut had failed not only to keep his promise to Gervasio but also to protect the woman he loved most.

"That man does not understand his place as a seed of Adalgisa, nor does he understand the harm he caused so many by leaving the villa," Raublut spat, hatred oozing from his every word. "I will *not* let him have the Grutrissheit."

Gervasio gave a wry smile. Raublut's loyalty was founded in a complex maelstrom of emotions: memories of their past together, his regret over Gervasio's younger sister, and even his resentment of the royal family. That was what made him such a trustworthy ally. He wasn't someone who would change sides or resort to betrayal without excellent reason.

The group reached the bottom of the stairs to find themselves in a pure-white room, the farthest wall of which gleamed as though it were made of metal. Three equidistant ornaments stood out on its surface.

"Three, line up."

"Lock will open."

The keyholders did as instructed and slid their keys into the slots. Their mana formed magic circles, which caused the glimmering wall to start rotating in three pieces. They moved one hundred and eighty degrees, almost coming close enough to connect again, and then disappeared, revealing the previously hidden archive.

And this is where the Grutrissheit is held...?

Gervasio inhaled sharply at the fantastical sight, and the white shumil took his hand. "Guide you, Gervasio," it said, then continued into the archive.

"King Gervasio," Raublut said, "as I understand it, only members of the royal family can pass beyond this point. Now that you have returned to your branch family, I am sure it will..." He fell silent, seemingly in prayer.

Gervasio turned slightly and nodded; it was because Raublut had involved the

Sovereign temple that he had already been reregistered to a royal branch family. He saw no reason why he wouldn't be allowed into the archive.

I will obtain the Grutrissheit.

His resolve steeled, Gervasio passed through the invisible barrier, entered the archive, and followed the shumils to a door even farther beyond. But even he was repelled when he reached the magic circle.

"Not registered, Gervasio."

"Cannot enter."

Being in a branch family wasn't enough. Gervasio couldn't ignore the humiliation he felt as he was once again reminded that in Yurgenschmidt, he wasn't true royalty—something he hadn't been able to ignore during his youth. His mana and elements were far superior, yet the country's leadership depended entirely on one's birth.

"King Gervasio..."

"The circle repelled me. Being in a branch family was not enough."

There was a deep furrow in Raublut's brow. He said nothing in response, but his clenched, trembling fists spoke volumes.

"We have no reason to stay here any longer. Let us return," Gervasio said, giving Raublut a light pat on the shoulder. As they ascended the stairs, he continued, "That archduke candidate from Ehrenfest was on the right path. There is not a doubt in my mind that she was approaching the Grutrissheit. I am told she went missing—do you know what else she did or what she might have found?"

Raublut looked up with a start. "According to Prince Sigiswald, she went missing after going to the library's second floor. Perhaps there is a clue there."

Gervasio's group returned the keys to the shumils and then briskly made their way to the upstairs reading room. Once there, they began searching for anything that might lead them to the Grutrissheit.

"Ah. That must be it," Gervasio said.

"What must be?"

“That statue of the Goddess of Wisdom.”

Gervasio had recognized it at once, but Raublut didn't seem to understand. He simply eyed the statue with a look of confusion. Was it because Gervasio had seen such statues nonstop during his circling of the shrines or because statues were so common in Yurgenschmidt's castles that its nobles no longer even noticed them?

“Is the Grutrissheit not a copy of Mestionora's divine instrument?” Gervasio said.

“Aah, I see.”

“I suspect I will need to pray to Mestionora, but the statue isn't draining my mana automatically as the shrines did. What should I do?”

Gervasio examined the statue with his arms crossed. Mestionora was often depicted as a child, so she was the one and only goddess who wore her hair down. The statue was ivory—like all the others at the Royal Academy—with the exception of the divine instrument in its hands; that alone was colored and adorned with feystones. Recreating the divine instrument would give one the Grutrissheit.

O Mestionora, Goddess of Wisdom... I pray that you grant me your divine instrument.

Gervasio touched the divine instrument, mentally reinforcing his desire to create it, and suddenly felt his mana being sucked out. His eyes widened in surprise, but he didn't resist it.

Soon enough, Gervasio lost track of how much mana he'd channeled into the tool. It felt close to the amount the shrines had taken from him. As he started to think he might need a rejuvenation potion, a magic circle and word arose in his mind.

“*Grutrissheit*,” Gervasio said—and with that, he disappeared.

The Defense of Ehrenfest (Second Half)

Charlotte — Supporters of the Rear Guard

“Here is what you ordered, Lady Charlotte. We will now begin work on today’s portion.”

“It is thanks to your dedication that Lord Bonifatius and the others can fight without restraint. Please continue your hard work.”

I exchanged the order form I’d received last night for the completed potions and magic tools, then left the castle’s brewing room. I needed to deliver everything to Brunhilde, who was working in the castle’s kitchen—well, the room for attendants right beside it.

“Lady Charlotte, are you taking all that to the kitchen yourself...?” my attendant Kathrein asked. “Would it not be better to entrust the task to someone else and—”

“Oh my. I intend to go there anyway as part of my patrol. And is it not obvious that I would want to express my thanks to Brunhilde, who has been managing these support lines on her own since yesterday afternoon? I fear that something might be troubling her by this point.”

“You have become exceptionally active since putting on your riding clothes...” Kathrein said with a titter.

Normal clothes were generally being worn in the northern building and other locations with protective barriers, but in the castle proper, women were wearing riding clothes as a matter of course—Kathrein included. It meant we could mobilize as soon as we needed to, so for the past three days or so, I’d also been wearing them, with feystone armor hardened underneath.

The feystone armor in question was the same kind one learned to make during one’s second year at the Royal Academy. It was light and primarily protected one’s back and chest. The professors had told us we all needed to

know how to make it or else we would end up in trouble when danger came. Still, I'd never thought the day would come when I would actually need to use it.

I do appreciate being able to move better, but still...

Every morning when I put on my riding clothes and when I saw the castle's nobles wince at the sight of such uncouthly dressed women, I was reminded of the abnormal situation Ehrenfest was currently facing. I couldn't help but pray that our lives would return to normal soon enough.

"Lady Charlotte. I did not expect you to come to the kitchen. You can always summon me if you require my services."

Brunhilde had stopped instructing the chefs and was staring at me in surprise. She looked just as mobile and active as I did, perhaps because she, too, was wearing her riding clothes.

"I was already headed in this direction on patrol. And with how little I can contribute, I would not dare summon you away from such important duties. I came to give you the rejuvenation potions and magic tools from the scholars. And while I am here, I wish to give a report on our latest meeting..."

Brunhilde must have realized that my report was too important to be delivered through an ordonnanz; once she had finished instructing those around her, she cleared the room and produced a sound-blocking magic tool.

"Carrying out such an important duty on your own cannot be easy..." I said. "Are you having any problems that you might be hesitant to bring up during a meeting?"

Brunhilde, who was due to become the archduke's second wife, was here by the kitchen because she was in charge of sending supplies to the front lines. She had the important duties of directing the castle's chefs and sending the finished provisions to the knights engaged in combat. She also passed along any magic tools and rejuvenation potions the scholars sent over. It was because Brunhilde and those working with her were maintaining the supply lines with such assiduousness that Lord Bonifatius's group had managed to fight in Illgner and Griebel for so many days in a row. One could say she was fighting her own

battle within the castle's walls.

"I am fine," Brunhilde replied. "Though I am tackling this position alone, my duties make up but a portion of the work I was carrying out already."

In truth, it was Mother's duty as the archduke's first wife to oversee the food and other essentials being sent to the front lines. She had been in charge of them until yesterday morning, with plenty of support from Brunhilde and me. Going through the process with her had taught us the proper order of things, whom to ask for what, when to distribute supplies, and how much to send at a time, among other things.

Once Brunhilde had picked up everything she'd needed to know, she had received the role in full, thus completing the handover process. Mother was having to guard a hidden passageway in case Lady Georgine's group tried to invade the castle, and it was important that the flow of supplies not be suddenly interrupted when that time came.

"Your managing of the city's shipments has allowed us to focus on hosting the knights," I said. "According to Lord Bonifatius, Lady Georgine should make her move very soon."

Ahrensbach's invasion force had apparently retreated every time our knights had tried to challenge them. This meant there were very few casualties on both sides, but the scope of our enemies' invasion had steadily increased over the past few days. We believed their goal was to draw our knights away from the castle and divide them before launching their attack, but even knowing that, Lord Bonifatius couldn't return with his troops while Ehrenfest's mana was being stolen.

"I am more concerned about you than about myself, Lady Charlotte. The air in the castle is as sharp as a knife, and the aub has ordered you to operate with Lord Karstedt when the time comes, no?" Brunhilde asked with a respectful smile.

The previous afternoon, Father had instructed me to work with the knight commander in the event of an emergency. His order was tantamount to recognizing that I was due to become the next aub, not my brother. I would serve as Father's representative in the archduke's office while he stayed with

the foundation.

Father had asked me the status of my resolve, then told me the location of our duchy's foundation and the nature of the High Bishop's key. I personally believed that Melchior would grow up to be a much better aub than I—he had been raised to appreciate religious ceremonies, and schtappes were now being obtained much later—but it wouldn't have made sense to give him my current duties. He hadn't even obtained his schtappe yet.

"How is Lord Wilfried?" Brunhilde asked at length.

"My brother was informed about his engagement's cancellation a full year before the news was made public. He has firmly refused to become the next aub, so my assignment to the role in an emergency should not bother him. His retainers, on the other hand, must be finding it hard to accept that he is being kept out of the loop."

The retainers in question had kicked up quite a fuss when I, not my brother, was attached to the knight commander. That much was to be expected; they had yet to learn that my sister was being adopted into the royal family, that her engagement to my brother had been canceled, and that their charge was no longer the next aub.

"However," I continued, "with Kirnberger's knights spreading rumors as they are, most nobles have no choice but to accept the truth of our situation."

In the aftermath of our archducal meeting—when Rozemyne had revealed so many secrets during an emotional outburst—Mother had sworn everyone in attendance to silence. But that magic contract was no longer enough; Kirnberger's knights who had come as reinforcements, largely thanks to my brother's connections, spoke openly of what Father had said and done during his visit to their province. The news was quickly spreading that my sister had the Grutrissheit, that the first prince had given her a courtship necklace, and that Kirnberger's country gate had activated for the first time in two hundred years. Such rumors made the cancellation of my brother's engagement obvious and stressed why I was chosen to act alongside the knight commander.

"I did not think Father would return without first silencing Kirnberger's knights..." I mused. "Mother must have the headache of a lifetime. I was hoping

the battle would end before circumstances required me to work with Lord Karstedt, for fear of destabilizing the nobility even further... But at this point, I think it might be inevitable.”

“Personally... I am glad that people now know the seat of aub would go to you if something happened before Lord Melchior came of age,” Brunhilde said. “I understand your concerns, since your first duty involves the very fate of our duchy’s foundation, but the Leisegangs must understand the archducal family’s stance on these matters.” Her voice then lowered to a whisper as she added, “Well, assuming Lord Wilfried stays on board...”

The archducal family couldn’t risk being divided at a time like this; it would only create an opening for the Leisegangs to exploit. I wanted to respectfully bow my head to Brunhilde, who was keeping her promise to control the Leisegangs even in these dire and busy times.

“I shall strive to reward your dedication,” I said. “In any case, I see no reason to believe Lady Georgine will stop short. Perhaps I should consider it inevitable that our nobles will discover the truth.”

“Indeed. Lady Georgine must believe she has a good chance of achieving her aim, else she would never have launched such an indiscreet assault. Lord Bonifatius concurs, and the aub will stay with the foundation for as long as he needs to. Though I will pray this battle does not last much longer.”

Even now that my sister had taken Ahrensbach’s foundation and rescued Uncle, the forces invading us weren’t deterred in the slightest. She had enough influence to stop the knights belonging to Ahrensbach, but a letter had informed us she was currently asleep. Given the circumstances, Uncle planned to bring Dunkelfelger’s volunteers into Ehrenfest to support us further.

“Last night,” I said, “Gerlach was attacked in the same manner as Illgner. The invaders retreated at the first sign of a fight, so Gerlach’s knights are fine for now, but the time will come when they will need reinforcements. It makes me wonder—will my uncle join the fray before Lord Bonifatius and his troops are stretched too thin?”

We might not have known how long this battle would endure, but tensions in the castle would clearly only continue to rise.

Brunhilde pondered the question. “As I understand it, the journey from Ahrensbach’s castle to the border gate it shares with Ehrenfest takes two days by highbeast. I cannot say whether Lord Ferdinand would make it in time, but several giebess sent reinforcements in response to the aub’s and Lord Bonifatius’s calls for aid. Are they expected to make it in time?”

“Most certainly. Troops from Haldenzel arrived soon after those from Kirnberger. In fact, I came here specifically to announce their arrival. I suspect this gives us enough knights to defend the Noble’s Quarter.”

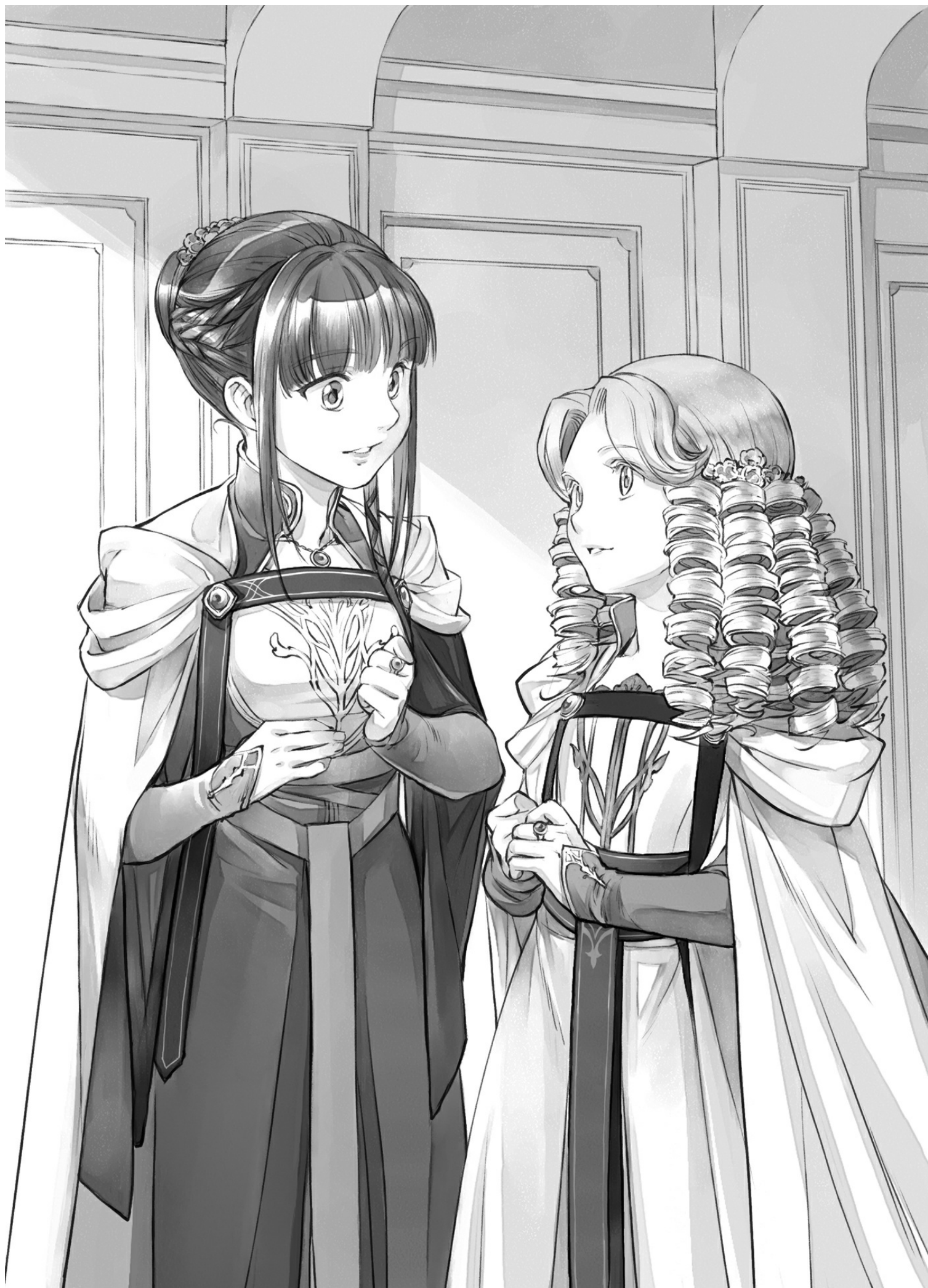
Brunhilde clapped her hands together, a joyous smile spread across her face. “Goodness! That is most welcome news. The hole left by Lord Bonifatius’s knights has almost entirely been filled, then.”

“Precisely. But with so many more mouths to feed, the castle’s food stocks must be under a lot of pressure. It is said that war cannot be waged on an empty stomach...”

The arrival of reinforcements was reassuring enough, but it also meant we needed more food, rejuvenation potions, magic tools, and so on. We currently had these supplies in excess, since we had been preparing for this battle for over a month, but not only were we unsure how long the war would continue, we also hadn’t expected to host so many extra knights.

“Furthermore—though I must apologize for asking at all—could you send Leisegang a request to aid us?”

“You may rest assured—I have nudged them several times since it was decided that Kirnberger’s reinforcements would come and that Haldenzel would participate. The teleportation circle in the giebe’s estate will be linked this afternoon.”



Now that my sister had gone to Ahrensbach, Brunhilde's engagement to Father played a critical role in obtaining the Leisegangs' assistance. It was good to know we hadn't run out of provisions partway through a war.

"I thank you ever so much, Brunhilde. Nobody else could perform your duties so exceptionally well. Please tell me if any of the returned food containers come with reports or requests from the knights."

"You may count on me," she replied with a reassuring smile. I'd intended to give her my support if she needed it, but I could see now that she was capable enough to manage on her own.

After returning the sound-blocker, I carried out the rest of my patrol and then returned to the archduke's office. I needed to make sure the newly made secret passages hadn't been discovered or used—a duty that could be completed only by a member of the archducal family.

At present, the archduke's office was serving as a command post for the Knight's Order. There were knights stationed in the dormitory and around the training grounds, but the commander and several other higher-ups were in the office gathering intelligence. Just as we wore our riding clothes at all times, they wore their armor, ensuring they were ready to sortie at a moment's notice. My father, Aub Ehrenfest, was armored as well, though he also wore the surcoat that distinguished him as the archduke.

Of course, the knights weren't the only ones here; there were also scholars sending out ordonnances and recording the responses they received, and attendants looking after all those gathered. Everyone was doing their job.

"You're back, Charlotte?" Father asked. "Give me your report."

I reported the state of the castle's brewing room and kitchen, then stated that I hadn't seen anything unusual on my patrol.

Father nodded. "So we're to receive provisions from Leisegang this afternoon, are we? That's good to hear."

"Brunhilde seems to be performing her role just fine on her own. She is completing every single duty expected of her. Where is Mother?"

“She went to check the special emergency room and make sure the traps in the hidden passageways hadn’t activated.”

Just then, an ordonnanz flew into the room. It circled above our heads, then perched on the arm of Lord Karstedt, who was standing behind my father. The bird must have come from a knight at the training grounds.

Has a patrol schedule been prepared for the knights of Haldenzel?

That was my first guess, but it actually concerned a likely invasion force: “We received word from Illgner that two days ago, individuals who appeared to be nobles boarded a merchant ship in Leisegang. A lumber merchant saw them.”

The unexpected news surprised us all; we could only stare in silence as the bird started again. No regular nobles would come to Ehrenfest by boat—and those who did would use a far more luxurious vessel.

“Send word to Leisegang and investigate this!” Father ordered. “Find out when the boat is going to arrive!” Before the bird we’d received could even finish repeating its message, he took out a yellow feystone and tapped it with his schtappe.

“We should also inform the commoners at the port,” I said as the newly made ordonnanz took flight.

How long will this investigation take? The boat set out two days ago, did it not?

“Father, if the boat departed two days ago, it might already have arrived,” I said. “There is no knowing when the fighting will begin. We have not heard from Mother, so the hidden passageways must not have been used, but we will never recover if our foundation is stolen. You must go protect it at once!”

“Right. I’m leaving the rest in your hands. Karstedt, support Charlotte with your men,” Father said. Then he marched out of the room, bringing with him as few knights and attendants as was socially acceptable.

I turned first to Lord Karstedt, then to the remaining knights and scholars. “As the archduke has decreed, I shall oversee things in his absence. May we all work well together.”

“Understood!”

“I do not know when Leisegang will respond, but we should do as much as we can on our own in the interim,” I continued. “Any ship that arrives at Ehrenfest will dock at the west gate, so we should first increase the number of knights stationed there. Please also station the knights from Haldenzel as quickly as you can.”

Lord Karstedt nodded in agreement with my orders. “We should station more knights at the other gates as well. If our potential invaders were suspicious enough to be noticed, then they might be a decoy meant to distract us from another attack.”

“It *does* seem suspicious that a group of nobles was acting so indiscreetly...” one of the knights agreed, spurring a discussion among his peers.

“Still, we can say for sure that nobles of some kind are en route to the west gate. We know not whether they are friend or foe, but a defense of some kind is necessary.”

“What if we assigned some of the knights guarding the Noble’s Quarter to the west gate and temple?”

“Good idea. We can have Haldenzel guard the Noble’s Quarter. They don’t know as much about the lower city’s gates.” The knights in question visited the Noble’s Quarter for winter socializing but never ventured into the lower city or used its gates, so it stood to reason that they might not work well with the soldiers there.

“Would you care to weigh in, Lady Charlotte?”

“I am in full support of your proposals,” I said. “Reinforce the gates posthaste and give the knights from Haldenzel their new orders.”

No sooner had we come to an agreement than an ordonnanz swooped into the room. Leisegang had sent their response much sooner than expected.

“This is the scholar Giebe Leisegang assigned to investigate the suspicious nobles,” the bird said. “I see no reason to doubt the claims that the group in question boarded a merchant vessel. They are scheduled to reach Ehrenfest at fourth bell today.”

Before the ordonnanz could finish repeating its message, another white bird perched on Lord Karstedt. “This is Damuel. I received a response from Leisegang. Please order the Noble’s Quarter to start evacuating—and ensure they are done before fourth bell. I will do the same for the temple and each gate.”

Damuel was my sister’s guard knight. Illgner must have contacted him, which was why he’d asked Leisegang to investigate the matter. That explained why their response had come so quickly. His ordonnanz prompted the scholars present to begin sending one ordonnanz after another to the Knight’s Order and the Noble’s Quarter, asking them to start the evacuation.

“Mother, this is Charlotte,” I said, having made an ordonnanz of my own. “We have reason to anticipate an attack at fourth bell and the arrival of a separate enemy force. Please move into position once you have finished your patrol. May Angriff guide you.”

Then I prepared a second ordonnanz: “Brunhilde, we have reason to anticipate an attack at fourth bell. Please finish your shipments before then.”

From there, I contacted each member of the archducal family one by one. A new ordonnanz shot into the room while another of mine was taking its leave.

“Sister, this is Melchior. Damuel has contacted the temple, and Kazmiar has started our evacuation. I will send another ordonnanz when it is done. Let us both continue to do our best.”

Kazmiar must have sent the ordonnanz, but Melchior’s voice made it clear he was putting his all into carrying out his duties. The atmosphere in the room started to relax as another ordonnanz flew in.

“Charlotte, it’s me. Seems like we’ve got invaders coming at fourth bell, huh? I’ll come protect you.”

It was Wilfried. The knights around me glanced at one another. Someone in my brother’s retinue was apparently in contact with a former, dismissed retainer, so we couldn’t allow him in the archduke’s office. The threat of sensitive information being leaked to the enemy was far too great.

“What if we have Kirnberger’s reinforcements guard the east side of the

Noble's Quarter with Lord Wilfried while the knights from Haldenzel guard the west?" a knight suggested.

"We could ask Lord Wilfried to command them. He has training as a knight and enough leadership experience from playing ditter at the Royal Academy."

I prepared an ordonnanz. "My apologies, Brother, but could you instead lead Kirnberger's knights in defense of the east side of the Noble's Quarter?" The knights were only lending us their aid because of Alexis, one of his guards, so this felt like a sensible arrangement.

"Scholars," I said, returning my attention to the room. "Take our brewed goods to the knights at the training grounds. Attendants—those of you who can cast healing should go there as well."

I was about to continue when an ordonnanz interjected in Father's voice. "Charlotte. Giebe Gerlach sent me a request for reinforcements. His province is under attack by an army far too large for him to defeat alone. Gerlach must have been our enemy's true target. They need troops as soon as possible."

A stir ran through the room.

"We must inform Lord Bonifatius!" one of the knights shouted.

"He's still fighting in Illgner," another replied. "Only once he finishes there can he proceed to Gerlach."

"Let us ask Gerlach's neighbors to help them."

I sent ordonnanzes to the giebes, but they didn't respond as we'd hoped. They said they couldn't send troops to Gerlach when their own provinces might be invaded next.

What should we do...?

Lord Bonifatius was caught up in a battle too intense for him to leave right now, Gerlach was facing more troops than it could ever hope to fight back, and a ship carrying suspicious nobles was headed straight for the west gate. The plots to disperse and distract our troops were now in full swing. Lady Georgine's group would surely begin their attack at fourth bell.

My throat was raw. My hands trembled. My heart pounded in my chest. I

could feel my every thought vanish into a pure-white void. As the next aub, how was I supposed to respond...?

“Lady Charlotte?” Lord Karstedt asked, peering down at me with a look of concern.

At that moment, a bird shot into the room and turned into a letter. Ordonnances could travel only to nobles, but magic letters could also be sent to places and even commoners without mana. This one was from Heisshitze, one of Dunkelfelger’s commanders, and was addressed to the office of Ehrenfest’s archduke. It said that Uncle would soon arrive at the border gate with Dunkelfelger’s volunteers and that they sought permission to enter Ehrenfest.

They’re at the border gate?! I can’t believe it! They made it in time!

A ray of hope had cut through the darkness. The remarks made by the knights now staring down at the letter didn’t even bother me.

“Should it not have been Lord Ferdinand who sent this letter?”

“Has something happened to him and Lady Rozemyne?”

“I received a report stating that while Lady Clarissa’s letters are allowed through, Lord Hartmut’s are not. Perhaps the enemy has control of the border gate and is destroying all correspondence from Ehrenfest residents.”

“Lord Ferdinand is no fool; he must have asked Lord Heisshitze to send a letter identical to his own, ensuring that their message would reach us.”

“Get them Father’s permission to pass through the border gate,” I said, interrupting their back-and-forth. “And start writing a response.”

One scholar sent an ordonnanz while another penned our response to Heisshitze. My father and I were in agreement as to what should happen next.

“Send word to Ferdinand,” Father said. “Have him go to Gerlach.”

I wrote in our letter to Uncle that Gerlach had been attacked last night, that we wanted him to contain the Ahrensbach knights, and that his force had our permission to get involved in the battle. In the meantime, I asked a scholar to contact Ehrenfest’s knights at the border gate. We told them it was likely our letters were being confiscated and that they should give the correspondence

they were about to receive straight to Uncle when he arrived.

“This will ensure our letter reaches him once he arrives at the border gate,” I said.

I was starting to feel relieved, but then another knight entered. He introduced himself as one of the knights from the teleportation hall, then held out a letter from the Sovereignty. “This inquiry was delivered to us,” he said.

“Did something happen at the Royal Academy?” I asked.

“Um, not exactly... The Sovereignty said that Ahrensbach and Lanzenave have yet to invade and wish to know when the attack is going to happen.”

I was overcome with the urge to slap a hand to my forehead. What made them think to ask Ehrenfest about Ahrensbach’s concerns? I wished to pretend the letter had never arrived... but with the Archduke Conference right around the corner, we could not ignore an inquiry from the Sovereignty. Thus, I did the only thing I could: send an ordonnanz to Father while he was in the foundation’s hall.

“Father, how should I respond to this inquiry?” I asked.

“How thoroughly stupid... If they’re not caught up in this mess, they can wait until we’re out of it. They didn’t use the emergency water mirror, so let them focus on themselves while we do the same. Prioritize our defenses.”

I nodded, and we elected to postpone our response to the Sovereignty. Fourth bell was fast approaching. It was best to obey the aub and devote my attention to protecting Ehrenfest.

“Lord Karstedt, will we make it in time for fourth bell...?” I asked. “I worry that an attack will start before then.” As prepared as we were to sortie, it would still take a while for the knights to move to their designated positions. I also couldn’t shake the feeling that the boat arriving at the west gate was a diversion.

“At the very least, there is no mistaking that a portion of their forces will arrive at fourth bell. Even if our suspects on the boat are a mere diversion, we can expect an attack at the same time they arrive. They might even act under cover of the commotion at the west gate.”

“We could not possibly act any faster than we do now,” a knight added. “Let us simply be glad we were not caught by surprise.”

I nodded. My heart was pounding as the time for battle approached. I’d been entrusted with the archduke’s office, but I was starting to question whether I really had what it took to be the next aub. An indescribable anxiety spread through my chest... yet I needed to press on. Our attackers weren’t going to pause for the sake of my nerves.

As I tried to refocus, a slew of ordonnanzes arrived from the knights who had reached their stations.

“I am at the south gate. As of yet, no suspicious individuals have been seen. The lower city’s evacuation is progressing smoothly.”

“This is the east gate. We have closed the gate and stopped any carriages from entering or leaving the city.”

“We have arrived at the temple. Henceforth, we shall serve under Lord Melchior and Lord Fonsel.”

“The Noble’s Quarter has been evacuated. The streets have been cleared.”

“Our reinforcements from Haldenzel are in position. We are keeping watch from the sky.”

Everything was going to plan, it seemed, but that wasn’t the end of the ordonnanzes; two more birds arrived in short order.

“This is Brunhilde. Our shipments to Lord Bonifatius have been made. He is fighting in Illgner but claims to sense a most powerful foe in Gerlach.”

“I thank you ever so much, Brunhilde,” I replied. “Uncle and his force are on their way and should reach Gerlach in time to help.”

“This is Melchior. The temple has been evacuated. May Angriff guide you, Sister.”

“Melchior, this is Charlotte,” I said in response. “Your report has been received. Do not leave your guard knights. I shall pray that Angriff guides you as well.”

Father must also have received a ton of ordonnanzes; he was sending birds to

us from within the foundation.

“One of the knights saw a suspicious figure in one of the castle’s back hallways,” the first said. “He lost sight of them almost at once, but considering where they were seen, they are thought to have entered a hidden passageway. Be on your guard.”

Then another arrived: “Rozemyne has reunited with Ferdinand and arrived in Gerlach. I granted them permission to use military force.”

Rozemyne is in Gerlach!

I remembered how she had taken her retainers into Ahrensbach and commanded our knights during ditler matches at the Royal Academy. Oh, how her unwavering eyes and determined expression had inspired me. I was still afraid, but as the next Aub Ehrenfest, I needed to defend my duchy until the last. I wished to face this battle with the same motivational posture as my sister.

Gong... Gong...

It was fourth bell. We all held our breath as an ordonnanz flew into the room.

“This is the west gate. As reported, a ship carrying suspicious individuals has arrived. They are clad in silver cloth and using wolfaniels.”

And thus, the battle for Ehrenfest’s foundation began.

Leckle — The Battle for the West Gate

Of all the passengers disembarking the Leisegang merchant vessel, one lot stood out to me most: the very first group who had poked their heads out. It was weird; even from a distance, it was obvious they were used to people doing everything for them. And if even I could tell they were nobles, they couldn’t have been trying too hard to be discreet. The knights must have noticed too, as they were looking especially wary.

“There they are...” I said.

Together with Lord Damuel, we’d warned the dockworkers about our suspicious arrivals well in advance. They kept their distance from the obvious

nobles, creating a path to the gate for them. Those still on the merchant ship were staying back and watching.

“Leckle—get into position,” Captain Gunther ordered.

“Yes, sir!”

Oh man... I can't believe this is actually happening!

It wasn't that I was surprised; more knights had arrived at the gate, we'd tightened our guard, and people had run around the city telling everyone to evacuate. I'd just never thought commoners like us would take part in a battle between nobles. This was the real deal.

“Silver cloth...” one knight muttered. “I see some under their capes!”

“Are those dogs with them?” another asked.

A third shook his head. “Not just any dogs—those look like wolfaniels to me.”

The knights were lying in wait. Lord Damuel said something about the enemy arriving at the gate and reinforcements; then one of those voice-carrying white birds shot up into the air.

“Stay away from the wolfaniels,” one of the knights warned me and the other soldiers. “You don't have any mana to fight them with.”

“Is the waste ready?” asked a second.

It was. The ladle in my hand was buried deep in a bucket of excrement.

Erk. I'm terrified. Feels like I'm gonna throw up.

And not just because the stench of the waste made me want to retch. I was so nervous about the coming battle that my stomach was twisted in knots. Nobles fought by blasting each other with magic, right? We commoners wouldn't stand a chance. I wanted to hide before these suspicious nobles reached the gate and mowed us all down like grass. It was a primal urge—the animal inside me was screaming that we had to get outta here. My hands trembled, and my legs shifted, unable to stay still.

“Not yet, Leckle. Stay in place.”

Captain Gunther's words of caution made me jump a little. He must've

thought I was desperate to charge into battle, but I'd actually been fighting back the urge to run away.

"Things'll get worse if you try to run," the captain said in a low voice, having seen straight through me. "These are nobles we're dealing with, remember—they can use highbeasts and magic. Our job is to throw waste on them until they tear away their silver clothes. Make it count."

I turned to look at him without even thinking about it. He was a commoner like the rest of us, but he didn't sound even the slightest bit scared. In fact, he looked more eager to fight than anyone. He was grinding his teeth so hard that I could practically hear it, and the grave look on his face made me think he was dying to punch a hole in these nobles' faces. His eyes were so sharp that I could see the anger in them, even in the dim light of the room we were waiting in.

I've seen the captain like this before...

Back then—it must have been years ago—not a single soldier at the gate had wanted to go near him. He'd scared us half to death as he beat down the east gate's commander, saying it was "all his fault." I'd since learned what the whole incident was about. The commander at the time had envied Gunther getting all sorts of exclusive intelligence from the knights, so he hadn't spread the word when he was instructed not to let any outsiders into the city.

And as a result, the captain lost his daughter.

Captain Gunther's daughter... I couldn't remember her name anymore, but she'd spent a year at the south gate when I was there, helping Otto with his math work. She hadn't even been baptized, but she'd pointed out problems with our paperwork and advised us on how to educate the apprentices. I'd rarely seen her—probably because she was too weak to come to the gate every day and spent the days she *was* there cooped up in a room—so I couldn't picture her face. But I sure remembered Otto showering her with praise.

Because he wouldn't stop comparing us.

I was assigned to work as Otto's assistant when Captain Gunther's daughter was baptized and stopped coming to the gate. Sure, I was a bit better at math than most people, but it wasn't something I enjoyed doing. Otto would compare me to the captain's daughter day in and day out, to the point that I

actually considered quitting. It never came to that, though; the girl said something about how soldiers used to more physically strenuous work wouldn't last doing math all the time, so the gate created a brand-new role for that kind of work.

Though I couldn't remember what Captain Gunther's daughter was like, her influence had reached all sorts of people. She'd also been doted on pretty heavily by her dear old dad. Her death at the hands of an outsider noble must have been heartbreaking. Captain Gunther hadn't even been given her body.

He must be getting revenge for his daughter.

That realization made the blood drain from my face. The captain looked ready to throw punches at these nobles like when he beat up the old commander.

Wait. Huh? Has he got a death wish?!

His family had already lost one person to an outsider noble; what would they think if Captain Gunther died too? Lady Rozemyne wouldn't be impressed, that was for sure. A rumor had been circulating for a while now that she'd taken Captain Gunther's family as her personnel because it was her fault his daughter died. Like, the noble was actually targeting Lady Rozemyne and took the captain's daughter by mistake.

This can't be good, right? It's gotta be bad.

Fourth bell rang as I fought back the urge to cradle my head. The silver-wearing nobles were about to enter the gate when one of the knights cried out from where he was hiding.

"Now!"

"Hraaah!"

Captain Gunther was the first to move. He swung his waste-filled ladle, and a sickening *squelch* filled the air as he landed a direct hit.

"Ngh!"

"What in the...?!"

"Mere guards, attacking *us*?!"

The invaders were openly furious, but the captain didn't care; he hit them with another helping of waste.

"Come on, men! Throw!"

At once, we started scooping up waste and pelting the nobles. We let out weird battle cries at the same time, screaming things like "Screw you!" and "Eat this!" We were desperate—or, like, almost ready to die. All we could do was act as ordered.

"Gah! Commoners!"

"How dare you!"

Soon, excrement wasn't all we were throwing at the nobles; we added stones and sharp blades to the mix. The silver cloth blocked magic, but it wouldn't protect our attackers from normal weapons like the ones we soldiers used, or so we were told—a knife thrown by one of our knights in hiding struck a noble and then bounced right off.

"They have charms too," another knight explained. I didn't know what that meant, but whatever; I was too focused on how great it felt covering the outraged nobles with waste. I'd put up with the stench for days now; I wanted to unload it all right here and now.

"Hraaah!"

I couldn't help but laugh. I was getting cocky—and maybe that was the problem. For my next shot, I aimed for one noble's head... and scored a direct hit. Waste clung to the hood of his cowl and dripped down to his face.

The noble threw his hood back, revealing a dirty white mask. His eyes were visible through two holes, and they stabbed into me like spears.

Guh!

"Commoner! You *will* pay the price of defying a noble!"

The invaders threw aside their silver clothes. Our plan had worked, so the captain and everyone else pumped their fists and cheered victoriously. I wasn't so excited, though.

"*Waschen*," the invader said, cleaning the waste away in one quick motion.

He didn't look away from me for a single moment; he must have been dead set on getting revenge.

This isn't good...

The invader was holding that magic stick all nobles had. They could wash things, make weapons, and even contact people with them. It went without saying that they were pretty damn useful, and now this person's was shining. In other words, something dangerous was coming.

"Eep!"

"Leckle!"

I'd taken a panicked step back, tripped on a rock, and fallen straight on my butt. Even then, my eyes were locked on the green light coming from the stick, now bigger than a fist.

"Their cloth's gone!" one of the knights shouted. "Capture them! Now!"

"Yes, sir!"

This was the moment the knights had been waiting for. They leapt out from the shadows, and in an instant, the battlefield was overrun with capes. Someone shouted, "*Geteilt!*" and an explosion rang out barely a moment later. If not for their intervention, the invading noble's attack would have finished me for sure.

"Fall back!" the knight shouted at me. It was Lord Damuel. I'd never thought a noble would put themselves in danger for a commoner like me. I shakily bobbed my head in response, but my body was so tense that I couldn't actually follow his instructions. The best I could manage was to crawl away.

"The Knight's Order?!"

"Ngh! They were hiding!"

The knights and invaders began fighting each other, magic against magic, but now there was no silver cloth involved. The distance between them got smaller and smaller.

"Unleash the wolfaniels!"

The enemy nobles weren't our only threats; at their command, massive black dogs were loosed on us.

"Soldiers, stand down!" a knight shouted while fighting one of the invaders. "Wolfaniels can only be defeated with mana!"

"Get inside!" another cried. "Wolfaniels attack anything with less mana than them!"

"Ngh! There's too many!"

The soldiers near me scattered like spiders after being told to hide inside the gate. Explosions rang out from every direction as the knights blocked the mana blobs being launched at us by the invaders.

"Gah! Run awaaay!"

"Don't stop! Don't slow down!"

"Shut the doors once we're inside!"

I desperately tried to follow everyone as they ran, but the noble's glare and mana must have paralyzed me; my knees were creaking and refused to work. I somehow managed to stand, but running was out of the question.

"Hold on!"

The wolfaniels were deftly avoiding the knights in their single-minded determination to catch me and the other soldiers. Most of them were blocked in time, but we were already on the defensive; there just weren't enough knights to contain them all.

"Leckle!"

One of the wolfaniels that had managed to slip through stalked toward me, growling. Seeing it from afar, I'd thought it was just like any other big dog... but that wasn't the case at all. It had gone from being below my eye level to above it—and it was getting taller!

"Th-The dog... is growing..."

The wolfaniel was getting increasingly larger, and it leapt at me with its mouth wide open. It was big enough to sever my head with a single bite. I could see its

tongue extending between sharp teeth and wiry bridges of saliva and smell its disgusting breath.

It's gonna eat me!

My throat seized up to the point that I couldn't even cry for help. I dropped to the ground, and its teeth gnashed right above my head. It had bitten the air where I was just a moment ago.

I'm alive?!

Dark fur blocked my vision. I thought I'd managed to escape being eaten, but the feybeast was pinning me down with its huge forelegs. I dodged its first bite, but its claws dug into me and kept me in place. I couldn't even process the pain before the dog lunged at me for another bite. The most I could do was watch in horror... until the patter of quick footsteps caught my ear and a gauntlet traveling at an unbelievable speed smashed into the side of the beast's head.

"What're you doing to my subordinate, you mangy pup?!"

The wolfaniel didn't collapse from the blow, but it *did* stop trying to tear me apart. It changed its target to Captain Gunther and immediately bit down on his arm.

"Gunther!"

"Captain!"

Lord Damuel and I cried out in unison, and a moment later, the dog exploded with a surprisingly quiet *thump*. Blood and chunks of meat rained down on me as I watched in a daze.

"Th-The dog... exploded?!"

"What the...? What was that?" Captain Gunther muttered, looking between his fist and what remained of the wolfaniel.

Lord Damuel readied his weapon and turned his back to us. "That was the charm from Lady Rozemyne! It protected you!"

"The charm... protected me?"

"Everyone! Get away while you still can!"

Lord Damuel was already staring straight at another wolfaniel. Seeing him ready to protect us made a rush of emotion surge through me. Meanwhile, there was a loud metallic *clang* as the captain smacked his gauntlets together.

“Alright. I get how these charms work now. And that means... I can fight!”

“Captain?!”

“Gunther, wait!”

Lord Damuel and I tried to stop him, but it was no use. “Protecting the city’s my job!” he roared, then leapt at another wolfaniel. “Come at me!”

The heck d’you mean, “Come at me”?!

The captain always scolded the apprentices for going berserk in combat, yet here he was doing exactly that. There was nothing we could do but watch, I thought, but Lord Damuel rushed after him.

“Hraaah!”

Captain Gunther punched another wolfaniel, which returned the favor by slashing at him with its claws. The attack activated another charm, and while the dog didn’t explode this time, it must have felt *something*. It registered the captain as a threat and pounced, snarling all the while.

“Gunther!”

Lord Damuel swatted away the black dog to protect the captain. “Those charms only reflect attacks! They’re not meant for combat or killing feybeasts!”

“So I just need to bait them into attacking me, right?” Captain Gunther asked.

“This is an order, soldier! Stand down!” Lord Damuel shouted as he slew another black dog. I appreciated the attempt, but it was too late; the door leading into the gate had already been closed and secured to stop the wolfaniels. We were stuck out here.

“Leckle, are you alright?”

“Those claws went pretty deep. Let’s get you somewhere safe.”

“Over there in the shadows should do.”

Other soldiers who hadn’t been quick enough to enter the gate rushed over

and whispered among themselves as they carried me into the shade. Only now that I'd escaped immediate danger did the unbearable pain of my wounds sink in. I was barely even able to move.

"Ow ow ow ow..."

"Stay still," one of the knights warned me. "There are more of those dogs."

I slumped against the wall of the gate and overheard my colleagues and the apprentices chattering inside. They must have been watching the fight from the meeting rooms and whatnot.

"That noble over there just picked up his silver cloth! That's bad, right?! Get him, knights!"

"Look over there! That knight's taking them down with the same kind of weapon we use!"

"Whoa! That's amazing! Keep fighting!"

They sure don't seem concerned, do they?

Maybe it was because knights from elsewhere had come to reinforce the gate and nudged the situation in our favor, but the apprentices were treating the battle like some kind of spectacle. They sure were relaxed now that they were out of harm's way.

"Captain Gunther just took down another dog!"

"Nah, that was Lord Damuel, wasn't it?"

"He's protecting the captain *and* defeating those beasts? At the same time?! Wow!"

I started searching for Captain Gunther and Lord Damuel. They were standing so that none of the feybeasts' or enemy nobles' attacks would reach the wall where we were hiding.

"Over here, mutt!" the captain shouted, baiting a wolfaniel to bite him. He was a commoner like the rest of us but wasn't content with letting the knights protect him.

"Be careful, Gunther! Stop this already!" Lord Damuel snapped, clearly having

a rough time of it. “That was the last of the charms your family gave you!”

That exclamation prompted one of the enemy nobles to lob a magic tool, though he remained completely focused on the battle at hand. “If that was his last charm, then this is where his interfering ends!”

“*Geteilt!*”

Lord Damuel stepped forward to shield Captain Gunther. It was only a momentary distraction, but it was enough for the man who appeared to be the enemy’s leader to shoot a ball of light from his ring toward the captain.

“A commoner soldier using magic tools to kill wolfaniels?!” the noble cried. “Pure arrogance! Get out of our way!”

“What?!”

“Captain!”

The ball of mana raced through the air, closing in on the captain. We held our breath, wondering how he was going to avoid it... only to witness him run *toward* the attack.

“You’re not getting into *my* city!”

It was with that determined roar that Captain Gunther disappeared into the light. A scream soon followed, and when the light faded... the captain was kicking the enemy’s leader square in the stomach.

“How...?” the noble grunted as he collapsed.

“Damuel, secure the enemy!” a knight shouted.

“Right!”

Lord Damuel did as instructed, quickly slapping bracelets on the noble’s wrists before tying him up. He then removed the man’s mask and tossed it to the ground, cracking it.

“Grausam...! Excellent work, Gunther!”

The noble must have been someone famous, as Lord Damuel gasped upon seeing his face. The knight giving out orders tightly bound the noble he’d just defeated, then shouted, “Send word to the aub immediately!”

Once the enemy's commander was out of action, the rest was straightforward. I couldn't see him from where I was, but he was said to be a nasty foe who used all sorts of magic tools. The captain had taken down two wolfaniels, then used a charm to block Grausam's final attempt at resistance.

"Captain, Lord Damuel said you were out of charms," I said. "How did you survive that last mana attack?"

"I ran out of the charms my family sent me, but I still had my first one—the one that Lady Rozemyne gave me personally."

Lord Damuel wanted you to run while you had protection to spare... so you kept fighting?

"You sure got carried away. I was terrified just watching."

"But none of our guys got seriously hurt, right? A pretty damn good result, if you ask me."

He was right—it *was* a good result. I was far from the only one groaning and nursing my wounds, but none of us had died or were on the verge of death. And in a battle against nobles, that was a monumental achievement.

"Attention! The fighting is over!" the gate commander shouted through the door. He'd stayed outside with the rest of us, though I wasn't sure whether he'd deliberately chosen to guard the rear or just hadn't been quick enough to make it into the gate. "You lot, start carrying the wounded inside!"

"We gotta clean them first," a soldier retorted as he stepped outside. "Leckle's covered in blood. This is from when that feybeast exploded, right?"

"Given how many injured there are, it seems better to bring buckets of water than carry them all to the well. Then we can take them to the first aid room."

The commander waved a hand. "Go fetch water, then. We're gonna clean up the gate and all the wounded. We also need to start inspecting all those still on the merchant vessel."

"Commander, what if there are more threats inside the boat?"

"The knights are checking as we speak. Our job is to clean the gates—and that includes you apprentices who just sat back and watched the whole battle. You

lot must have energy to spare, so go fetch those buckets of water. *Now.* From the river or the well.”

The apprentices started picking up buckets, their faces twisted in grimaces. “Guh... The fighting’s over, but we’ve still gotta do dirty work...” one complained.

“Nobles could clean everything in a snap using magic,” added another.

“Yeah. They could even have cleaned the gate.” A third apprentice gestured at the random clean spots on the ground where the invaders had washed their clothes.

“Shut it, idiots,” Captain Gunther said. “Do you really expect us to waste the knights’ time with something like this? Our job was just to defend the west gate, but theirs is far from over. Take a look.”

I followed his finger to swarms of highbeasts over the temple and north gate, and countless bright flashes shooting across the sky.

Judithe — Those Left Behind

Not long after third bell, Damuel sent an ordonnanz instructing us to finish evacuating everyone by noon. Philine’s hands were shaking too much for her to respond, so I made my schtappe and sent word to Roderick in the High Bishop’s chambers.

“This is Judithe. Damuel wants the evacuation done by noon. We’ll go to the orphanage. Don’t forget our drills!”

Lord Melchior’s retainer Lord Kazmiar managed to get Philine back on her feet, but she still seemed kind of unstable. If any of the gray priests saw her so panicked, the entire temple could end up descending into chaos.

I thought for a moment, then looked at Lord Kazmiar. He gestured subtly with his fingers, indicating that I should take Philine to the orphanage on my way to the temple’s back gate. I gave a brisk nod in response.

“Come on, Philine,” I said, and we left Lord Melchior’s chambers together. We called out to the gray priests and shrine maidens we saw en route to the

orphanage, telling them to evacuate as we had practiced. It seemed to distract Philine from her nerves.

I shouldn't need to stay with her the entire time, then.

Upon our arrival at the orphanage, an ordonnanz flew over to us. "This is Fonsel," it said. "I've arrived at the Noble's Gate. Dedryck is heading to the front gate now." Lord Melchior's guards had remained with the Knight's Order, but now they were arriving one by one.

"I'll make my way to the back gate," I said to Philine.

"Take care," she replied. "And... Just be careful."

I went into the basement of the girls' building and out the back door, where I spotted gray shrine maidens returning from the workshop. Fran had most likely headed to the boys' building to spread word of the evacuation. We needed to relieve the priests guarding the back gate of duty as soon as we could, so I made my highbeast, flew straight there, and delivered my instructions.

"Evacuate at once. We will take over guarding the gate."

"Thank you."

I watched the priests hurry into the boys' building, then sent an ordonnanz to Lord Kazmiar: "This is Judithe. I have arrived at the back gate and evacuated the gray priests."

"I am about to seal the temple's gates," he replied—and a moment later, the large gate beside me started to rumble. As I watched it close, I couldn't help thinking that the temple really was meant for nobles.

No sooner was the back gate shut than knights from the Noble's Quarter arrived. "Lady Judithe," one of them greeted me.

"Welcome, Lord Odis," I replied, doing my best to sound polite. "As we are going to be fighting together, I permit you to address me untitled." Then I activated the pink shumil that had previously been deposited at this gate.

"What is that pink stuffed animal doing here?"

"This is a battle-ready shumil. Lady Rozemyne designed it. Because it requires so much mana, it can be active only for a limited time, but I doubt we have

anything to worry about; she said it was stronger than the royal family and any archduke candidate.”

“Uh...”

Yeah, it really is hard to believe—especially when Lieseleta dressed them up to look so cute. At a glance, they don’t look dangerous at all.

“I assure you, they really can fight. They are based on the magic tools in the library—the same ones that easily scattered even Dunkelfelger’s knights.”

Everyone gasped. Lady Rozemyne’s victories at the Royal Academy were common knowledge by this point. I told them what I’d seen with my own eyes, and they finally acknowledged the shumil, even if only with some reservations.

“The shumils Lady Rozemyne made for us will, in her words, ‘mercilessly slaughter anyone who threatens the temple,’” I said. “She asked that we use them if we encounter more invaders than expected or if we are wounded too gravely to fight back.”

Each gate had only three knights assigned to protect it, so Lady Rozemyne had created these truly lethal magic tools to help us. They were excessively dangerous, to be honest, to the point that I found them kind of terrifying... But defending the temple came first.

“R-Right,” Lord Odis said. “So they are to be used in times of danger.”

“Correct. To operate them, first channel mana into these feystones. This is how the shumil tells friend from foe, so anyone not registered with it risks being exterminated. Subsequently...” I told the knights exactly how to use the shumil. It was a nerve-racking experience, considering that they were all much, much older than me.

“Hmm... I appreciate the explanation,” Lord Odis said when I was done. “You should do this for the knights at the other gates as well.”

“That won’t be necessary. One of Lord Melchior’s guard knights should already have arrived at each of the other gates.”

We’d received a warning about the merchant vessel well in advance, which had given us time to prepare ourselves and evacuate the others, but we

wouldn't have that same leeway once the fighting started. Relying on one person to inform every single gate had seemed dangerous, so we'd ensured that each gate had at least one person in the know.

"I see," Lord Odis said. "Has the temple finished its evacuation yet? Damuel sent word from the Knight's Order that the lower city is done with theirs."

"I expected as much. I went through the girls' building not long ago and can confirm that its doors are firmly shut. Lord Melchior should send word to the castle soon. Would you like me to contact him?"

"No need. If you are done here, then you can move to your station."

"This *is* my station. Though I was asked to support the other gates with hit-and-run attacks—within reason, at least—my main order was to protect this location." Much like Lord Melchior's knights, my role here was to activate one of the shumils and then keep Lord Kazmiar abreast of the battle situation. Defending the gates largely fell to those of the Knight's Order.

"A scout, then? In that case, I would ask for you to check on the lower city. We don't have enough experience there to know what things are normally like."

"Understood."

As one of Lady Rozemyne's guards, I wasn't included among the knights properly assigned to the gate. I would fight alongside them if we were attacked, but otherwise, we followed a separate chain of command. As nice as it was for someone to call me a scout, my actual role didn't feel anywhere near as important.

Lord Melchior is here at the temple with his guard knights, but my lady is absent. It makes me feel a little out of place...

Lady Rozemyne was currently in Ahrensbach. Reports claimed she had succeeded in rescuing Lord Ferdinand, but she'd since been bedridden in Ahrensbach's castle, and we'd yet to receive any news about her waking up. The looming attack had made things especially tense, so even if a report *did* reach the castle announcing Lady Rozemyne's return to consciousness, I doubted that I or any of her other retainers would receive the news right away.

No matter what information gets sent to the castle, I assume I won't hear

about it until the fighting's over.

Feeling dejected, I stared down at the lower city from atop my lone highbeast. People were hurrying about in waves, having most likely been driven home by all the soldiers running around and shouting for them to evacuate. Among that tangle, three large carriages were heading to the north gate. Maybe they were carrying the Gutenbergs.

The stores on the north side of the city closed one by one, and the main streets emptied, but there were still a lot of people in the south. I could see wagons with produce leaving the city. There weren't many evacuation points for farmers within the city limits, so most of them were going back to their towns.

I'm just sitting here, looking around. Is this helpful in the slightest...?

Lady Rozemyne had given everyone clear roles: Damuel was evacuating the Gutenbergs, Philine was managing the orphanage, and the attendants were defending her library. It seemed strange to me that I, an actual guard knight, hadn't been given anywhere to protect. I supposed that I *was* protecting the temple as a whole, but it wasn't like I'd taken part in its evacuation. Philine was overseeing the orphanage on her own, which made me a little bit upset.

I'm supposed to be Lady Rozemyne's guard knight...

Frustration and regret welled up in my chest. Having to scout the lower city on my own felt like proof that the others were leaving me behind. It wasn't Lady Rozemyne's fault that I couldn't go to Ahrensbach with her—it was against the rules to take underage knights on missions outside of the Noble's Quarter. One could skirt that limitation with parental permission, but my father's words echoed through my head.

"Stay in Ehrenfest. I'd even ask you to come back to Kirnberger while Lady Rozemyne's away. I can't let you go to Ahrensbach when you're still so young. There are other ways for you to maintain your pride as a knight, like guarding Ehrenfest's temple or castle."

Father doesn't get it. Not in the slightest! Laurenz is my age, so why was he allowed to go?!

I puffed out my cheeks. The retainers of the former Veronica faction had their own problems—I wasn't denying that fact—but at times like this, I couldn't help but feel jealous that they were able to follow Lady Rozemyne everywhere. Father had refused to let me go to the Sovereignty with her, and now I couldn't accompany her to Ahrensbach. I just wanted to be with my fellow guard knights.

Stop it, Judithe. Being a guard knight is about more than just marching into battle with your charge. Lady Rozemyne cares about Ehrenfest, and ensuring its safety is important to her. There are some things the knights of other archducal family members won't be able to protect for her.

My mind wandered to when Lady Rozemyne had taken Damuel aside and given him a special order of some kind. They had used sound-blockers, so I wasn't sure what they'd discussed, but he had clearly agreed to carry out her request.

No fair... It's always Damuel.

Like me, he was protecting Ehrenfest rather than staying with Lady Rozemyne—yet he didn't seem insecure about his role in the slightest. I wasn't on Hartmut's level, but I *was* a little jealous that Damuel was her most trusted retainer. The gap between us was so clear that it frustrated me. Was I really her worst guard knight...?

One way or another, I need to be useful during this fight.

The streets of the lower city had almost been evacuated. Some were refusing to close their stalls, and others were trying to relocate to their workplaces so they could continue their work... but most people were safely inside.

It should almost be fourth bell...

As I nervously watched the west gate, two ordonnanzes darted into my vision. One went to the castle, while the other came to me.

"Judithe, this is Damuel. The reports were true—threats have arrived dressed in silver cloth. Defend the temple."

At once, I sent ordonnanzes to Lord Kazmiar and Lord Fonsel. The knights assigned to the back gate had normal weapons not made with mana so they

could attack any silver-clothed invaders who tried to force their way through. I needed to do my bit as Lady Rozemyne's guard knight.

I'll defend the temple, no matter what!

Fourth bell rang, and the west gate suddenly became a lot busier. Maybe they'd started fighting the intruders.

Guh... I want to be there too.

I was raring to go, but not a single intruder had shown up to face me. As much as I wanted a chance to shine like Damuel, my only option was to stay where I was. I couldn't abandon my station and charge to the west gate in case someone attacked the temple in my absence.

We each have a role to play here.

I'd once slacked on my knightly duties, having believed that Damuel was assigning me to ride with Lady Rozemyne as a slight against my talents as a knight. I didn't want to repeat that mistake and remain ignorant to what was expected of me.

I need to stay here. Leaving isn't an option, so why am I still so curious?!

Making sure to stay within the temple's grounds, I edged my highbeast closer to the west gate. Shouting soon reached my ears. I noticed some commoners wandering around with uncertain looks on their faces despite everyone having been ordered to evacuate. Several knights flew to the west gate, having most likely been reassigned there.

I really want to join them! Damuel was tasked with overseeing the entire lower city! He should be keeping an eye on other places too!

I was pouting about my unfortunate situation when a realization hit me. Was Damuel so focused on the west gate that he'd stopped paying attention to the other parts of the lower city? My role was to scout for potential threats, so maybe I could remedy that. I scanned the city below from atop my highbeast, all too pleased that I'd found a way to be useful.

Damuel can be a little clumsy sometimes. I should cover for his blind spots!

The commoners who had refused to evacuate before had quickly changed

their tune when the fighting at the west gate started—the central plaza’s remaining stalls were put away in the blink of an eye, and their owners rushed east or south. There was no reason for anyone to go west toward the fighting or north to the temple.

So what’s with that wagon, then?

Farmers transporting their produce were either leaving to return to their hometowns or making their way to the evacuation center in the south part of the city. But this wagon was heading against the crowd and traveling north. Was it going to the Noble’s Quarter? If so, the knights stationed at the north gate would turn it away without a second thought. It looked small and crummy compared to the ones that normally frequented the Noble’s Quarter; I doubted it would receive permission to pass even during times of peace.

As those thoughts ran through my mind, I suddenly lost sight of the wagon.

Oh...? Has it reached its destination? Or is it lurking in the shadows of an alleyway?

Suspicious, I paid close attention to the nearby side streets. It wasn’t long before I spotted some shady figures continuing north while taking extra care to stay in the shadows.

Were there people hiding in that wagon...? The attack on the west gate might be a diversion!

I anxiously returned to the back gate, where I told the knights what I’d seen and my theory that the temple and north gate might soon come under attack.

“Send an ordonnanz to the knight commander,” I was told. “I shall inform the north gate directly.”

“Right away!”

According to Lord Odis, several changes had been made to the knights’ stations because of the attack on the west gate and the arrival of reinforcements from Kirnberger and Haldenzel. This meant ordonnanzes were less reliable for contacting specific locations—but as the knight commander was locked in place, I could send mine there.

“This is Judithe,” I said. “I was watching the lower city from the temple’s back gate and saw several suspicious individuals approaching the north gate. They did not appear to be wearing any silver cloth, but be warned—the fighting at the west gate might be a distraction for an attack on the north gate or temple.”

“There may be more like them,” came the knight commander’s response. “Keep a close eye on the lower city. Do not look away for a moment.”

Determined to carry out my new order, I raced up into the sky above the gate. I could see two knights flying to interrogate the figures I’d reported.

Hm...? That group’s smaller than it was before, right?

Before I could dwell on the thought any longer, it was blown right out of my mind. The knights did something I couldn’t quite make out... then the strange figures made highbeasts and shot up into the air. One of the knights immediately launched a rott, calling for backup from the north gate.

And so an airborne battle commenced.

“This is Judithe,” I said, sending ordonnanzes to Lord Kazmiar and Lord Odis. “The knights of the north gate are in combat with the suspicious individuals.”

“This is Kazmiar. Understood. We received a report that intruders appeared in the castle’s hidden passageways. The temple and the Noble’s Quarter are on their guard.”

“This is Odis. Your message has been received. It seems that another group with magic tools was spotted in the Noble’s Quarter. A fight could break out at any moment. Be on your guard.”

Moments later, an explosion shook the temple’s back gate. The large entrance for carriages didn’t even budge, but the door meant for foot traffic was blasted open by magic tools.

“Huh?! Intruders!”

“Don’t let a single one into the temple!”

“Oh, we shall see about that...”

The group heading north must have seemed smaller because some of their number had gone to the temple. I could already feel the blood draining from my

face as I raced to the gate that was under attack.

One of the invaders was holding a magic tool of some kind. He shouted, “Die!” as he unleashed it on our knights.

“Prepare yourselves!” Lord Odis roared.

The magic tool detonated in the air, but not with the same tremendous *boom* as the previous attack; this one simply made a light *pop* as it spread white powder all over the place.

“Powder...?”

“Don’t breathe it in!”

“*Waschen!*” I cried as I dove down toward the fighting. I’d already been briefed about Lanzenave’s poison, so I cleansed my allies without a second thought.

From there, I readied my sling and shot several offensive magic tools toward our attackers. Bestowed upon me by Hartmut and Clarissa, their purpose was to unleash bugs and powder that would irritate the eyes and throat, meaning they would work even against silver-cloth-wearing threats who were immune to mana.

The invaders hadn’t expected this counterattack; they were shouting out in fear and confusion.

“Hurry up and drink your jureves! You... Oh?”

I’d called out to the poisoned knights only to realize that my own movements were becoming more labored. It was hard to breathe, and my body felt increasingly heavy. I must have gotten too close to the poison and accidentally inhaled some. I used a quick waschen on myself and then downed my own jureve.

“Show them no quarter!” Lord Odis roared, then fired a rott and activated the front gate’s aqua-colored shumil. From where I was watching the battle, I saw the shumil start charging toward the attackers.

“A flash-bang!”

The invaders threw magic tools of their own—probably to buy themselves

some time to recover from their confusion. The knights below me were blasted with one flash-bang after another, but the pink shumil dashed through the explosions without even a momentary hesitation. Our enemies couldn't believe their eyes when they saw the cute combatant racing toward them on stubby legs.

"What in the world is that...?"

"A shumil...? No, it's too large."

The shumil readied its radiant golden scythe—a magic tool—and then swung it straight down. It was an eerily quick slash for something that looked so innocent... and just like that, one of our attackers was cleaved nearly in half. Fresh blood sprayed everywhere, even on the shumil as it turned around. Everyone—our own knights included—choked in fear of the sight.

Lieseleta! Seeing an adorable shumil wreak this havoc makes it three times as frightening!

The remaining invaders were so shocked and disturbed that they simply froze in place. The shumil ran to its next opponent, who threw up his hands and pleaded for mercy. He received none and was cut down in short order. Another of the intruders cursed, then turned tail and attempted to flee. He didn't get very far, though—not with an aqua shumil in his path and a pink one bringing up the rear. They swung their golden scythes in perfect unison.

"GAAAAAAH!"

The shumils had eliminated another enemy. It was good they were working so fast, since they would power down once their mana was depleted, but their speed was seriously unbelievable. It was hard not to want to entrust *everything* to them.

"Someone got into the temple!"

"Follow them!"

To our surprise, the shumils had allowed one of our enemies to run past them. They weren't even giving chase. The knights had tried to apprehend the intruder when they'd realized, but their jureves hadn't kicked in yet, meaning they were still too slow. No matter how hard they tried, their target got farther

and farther away.

“Why aren’t the shumils following them?!”

“They see by sensing mana. Maybe the person’s wearing silver cloth, rendering them more or less undetectable.”

“We must contact Lord Melchior! Judithe, are you well enough to do that for us?”

The knights on the ground had endured far more poison than me, and chasing the intruder might have caused it to course faster through their system; they were already collapsing onto the ground. My own mana flow had taken a beating too, but at least I was on my highbeast. We needed to report that a threat had gotten into the temple immediately.

My schtappe didn’t come out as easily as usual. It was only with great difficulty that I managed to send an ordonnanz.

“This is Judithe. One of the intruders avoided the shumils by wearing silver cloth. They’ve managed to get into the temple.”

The knights drank rejuvenation potions as well as their jureves and then devoted some time to recovering. The shumils would take care of any more enemies who tried to attack us. I dismounted my highbeast and also focused on my recovery.

Aah, my mana is returning to normal.

By the time I’d realized my flow was on the mend, an ordonnanz had approached me. “This is Dedryck,” it said. “The silver-clothed invader was Lady Georgine. She set off several traps before being teleported to the Ivory Tower. It is our victory. The temple was defended.”

If we really had captured Lady Georgine, then the battle was indeed ours. The other knights erupted in celebratory cheers, elation clear on their faces. They certainly were recovering well, and they seemed much lighter on their feet than before.

Lord Odis gave a wry smile before instructing the knights: “Right, everyone—start gathering up these intruders. Bring each and every one of them to the

Knight's Order, dead or alive. Start by disarming them, but be careful—even with the shumils still active, we might be vulnerable to more enemies.”

“Yes, sir!”

The rejuvenated knights tied together what remained of our attackers before removing the weapons, magic tools, and such from their bodies. Once they were done, they started unmasking the unmoving intruders—and the final reveal caused me to shriek.

“That’s... Grausam!”

“They say he gave his name to Lady Georgine and died during the winter purge, but... here he is.”

Grausam was Matthias’s father. I personally thought his life had been forfeit the moment he’d decided to invade Ehrenfest, but that didn’t change the truth of our situation—he had succumbed to a magic tool that Lady Rozemyne had made. I also couldn’t ignore my own role in bringing about his demise. How would Matthias react to the news that his lady and fellow retainer had contributed to his father’s death? Would it pain him to learn that the man was a traitor? Just imagining his response made my heart ache—even more so when I overheard some of the knights discussing the matter.

“This man’s son—Matthias, was it? He’s still alive, isn’t he? I’ve heard that he gave his name to the archducal family... but there’s no denying what an irredeemable monster his father was now. Does he not pose a tremendous threat to his lord or lady?”

“That’s not all—I’ve heard that the name-sworn who escaped punishment have been locked up until the duchy’s safe again. The entire archducal family knows they’re dangerous. If you ask me, taking this opportunity to execute them would do wonders for Ehrenfest.”

“At the very least, I don’t want an invasion like this to ever happen again.”

The naked disdain for Matthias and the others sent a shudder down my spine. Their stance would have outraged Lady Rozemyne, who was always saying that children needn’t bear the sins of their parents. I’d thought the knights would be more accepting once Ehrenfest was safe, but that mistake was being thrust in

my face.

“Stop that!” I shouted. “Matthias and the others reported their own parents for the sake of our duchy. It was because of them that the purge was accelerated and we managed to catch all those nobles worshipping Lady Georgine before they had a chance to act. Don’t you *ever* say we should execute them. They’ve done more to save Ehrenfest than almost anyone.”

“R-Right... Matthias gave his name to Lady Rozemyne, then?” Lord Odis asked, seeming a little uncomfortable. “That makes him your coworker. I should not have spoken so carelessly.” He was sorry that he’d made such remarks while I was in earshot, but he hadn’t even attempted to take them back.

And the other nobles probably share his opinion...

It turned my stomach. Was it really that hard to understand what a brutal decision Matthias and the others had needed to make? How much bravery it had taken for them to report their own parents? I wouldn’t have had the guts to do the same thing. Giving their names to the archducal family had enabled them to escape execution, but Matthias was grief-stricken by how Lady Georgine had taken over his entire house. He always wore the most pained expression. The same was true for Laurenz; though he always smiled and cracked jokes, I could sense he was just putting up a front.

“Matthias and Laurenz had their memories searched and were spared punishment because Aub Ehrenfest deemed them loyal,” I said, continuing to put pressure on Lord Odis. “Are you questioning the archduke’s decision?”

“That wasn’t my intention. I meant only that many nobles consider them a potential threat. I understand your desire to support your coworkers and that they helped to prevent the first plan, but this second one came to fruition, and now there are casualties all over Ehrenfest. The aub can burn all evidence of Lady Georgine’s involvement, but the wounds left by her name-sworn will remain. To be frank, those who escaped punishment are going to be viewed with even more scrutiny from now on.”

Lord Odis chose not to say anything else; he and the others put the tied-up intruders on their highbeasts, then flew away to regroup with the Knight’s Order. We had defeated Lady Georgine, but our troubles were far from over;

Matthias, Laurenz, and everyone else who had given their name to escape execution would only have it harder from now on. The world was so unfair that it made me sick.

We protected Ehrenfest... but what kind of victory is this?!

Now alone by the back gate, I vented some of my frustrations with a heavy sigh, then went over to the shumils. I needed to deactivate them; there probably wouldn't be any more fighting now that Lady Georgine was out of the picture.

"Ah..."

The shumils were still covered in blood. Grausam's must have been mixed in there too. I cast waschen, hoping to clean them as much as possible before Matthias got back. Large bubbles of water swallowed up the two shumils—and moments later, they were sparkly clean. If only Grausam's mark, Matthias's and Laurenz's pain, and the malice of our duchy's nobles could be washed away so easily.

Maybe it's a good thing Lady Rozemyne is leaving Ehrenfest.

It was the first time I'd ever thought something like that. We had agreed that I would stay behind, but Matthias and the others were going to follow her to the Sovereignty.

Hopefully that makes their lives even a little bit easier.

I gazed upon the temple and prayed to the gods.

Florencia — At the Ivory Tower

The castle had been overwhelmingly busy since Lord Bonifatius led his troops to Illgner. We received reports on the front lines every morning and afternoon. Supplies were being sent to the knights, and the women were all dressed in their riding clothes—an obvious indication that the fight was right on our doorstep.

"Lady Florencia, where will you be going now?" asked my retainer Leberecht.

I paused to think. I'd welcomed our reinforcements from Haldenzel at the

training grounds, ordered the attendants to prepare them rooms in the knight dormitory, worked with the scholars to calculate the supplies they would need, and shared my intelligence with the archduke's office. In the meantime, Charlotte had checked up on Brunhilde and asked the Leisegangs to send us provisions. I'd entrusted a fair share of my duties to her.

Charlotte certainly is doing her best in these unusual circumstances.

I was partway through visiting those stationed around the castle and checking the entrances to its hidden passageways, searching for anyone suspicious. We had managed to execute Lady Georgine's most important name-sworn during the winter purge, but who knew how many more nobles had given their names to her in secret? I sincerely doubted she would have attacked Ehrenfest if she didn't have connections here. They were small in number but no doubt still present in the duchy.

"I said to Lord Sylvester that I would check the special emergency room," I told my retainer.

The "special emergency room" was our name for where we were keeping nobles of the former Veronica faction who had escaped execution. Barthold, Muriella, and Cassandra were there at the moment. There were separate sleeping quarters for the men and women, but they stayed in one room under constant surveillance during the day.

Ehrenfest's nobles had expressed their concerns that, name-sworn or not, those of the former Veronica faction would pose a tremendous threat in the event that Lady Georgine invaded. Though we could order them not to assist her, that would not be enough to stop them—perhaps they would start working with some other noble in a way that ultimately benefited their lady. Keeping them under watch seemed to be a much safer option.

"Three days have passed," I mused. "He must be making his complaints known by now..."

"You are referring to Barthold, I assume? He has been complaining since the very first day that his little sister in the temple should receive the same treatment."

It was true that some of the apprentice blue priests had almost identical

circumstances to those we were keeping locked up—they were all nobles of the former Veronica faction who had lost their parents during the purge. Rather than move them to the castle, however, we had elected to leave them where they were. Melchior’s retainer Kazmiar had said it would make more sense to keep them in the temple, where the gray priests could keep an eye on them.

“The apprentices in the temple are but children,” I said. “I would rather they not be punished and exploited over something that has nothing to do with them.”

After giving her name, Cassandra had learned about various aspects of the purge from Charlotte. The same would naturally have been true for Barthold, and we suspected that *he* had urged one of the first-years to send a letter of concern to his family. As he could use his gentle demeanor to manipulate the young ones, we had decided to keep him well away from them.

“Were we not going to let Barthold roam free until the day Lord Wilfried finally holds him accountable?” Leberecht asked.

“That was a fine plan when there was peace and only Barthold would suffer the consequences, but we are hosting reinforcements from Kirnberger and Haldenzel. A single mistake could spiral into the execution of twenty-some children—far too great a price to teach my son a lesson.”

It wasn’t enough that the apprentices had given their names to the archducal family—if even one of them did anything that might be perceived as helping the invaders, the loudest voices would demand a return to tradition. The result would be the execution of not just the three we were watching but also Rozemyne’s name-sworn, the apprentice blue priests in the temple, and the orphans.

“I see no harm in sacrificing them for his education,” Leberecht remarked. “As the children of criminals, they should have been executed in the first place.”

“I disagree. Do you not see how much we would need to give for so little in return?”

More than that, if my son’s failure to contain Barthold resulted in the execution of all the children the aub had attempted to save, his education would only be harmed, not helped. Leberecht wanted to use this opportunity to

fully stop Wilfried, whose reputation had already been damaged when Lord Bonifatius gave up on him, from ever becoming an archduke. But on this particular matter, I did not agree with him in the slightest.

“Well...” Leberecht said with a meaningful smile, “I am curious to see whether Barthold is oblivious to his current standing or whether he is acting so brazenly despite it. He might be so frustrated because we are preventing him from sharing information with his contacts on the outside.”

I sighed. Barthold was still in touch with some of the retainers taken out of my son’s service, Oswald included. Back when Lamprecht and Alexis had consulted me about it, I’d advised them to turn the situation into a training exercise for Wilfried—to teach him to remove sources of danger from his immediate surroundings—but they had yet to succeed on this front.

We had determined it necessary to isolate Barthold so that he would not convince Wilfried to do something foolish during Lady Georgine’s invasion. Imprisoning him alone would have aroused suspicion and outraged my son, however, so we had locked Cassandra and Muriella in the special emergency room with him.

Cassandra is his younger sister, which is fair enough... but Muriella is completely innocent.

With the aub’s permission, Muriella had given her name to Elvira rather than a member of the archducal family. She had moved out of the castle to live in the knight commander’s estate and work on the printing industry under her new lady. By working only in places Elvira and Rozemyne could attend, she had managed to stay away from malicious nobles.

Unfortunately for Muriella, the recent incident had seen her dragged out of the safest place she could possibly be. It must have been exceptionally uncomfortable for her. And yet, according to the guards, she’d uttered not a single word of complaint; all she did was read with a pleasant smile on her face.

“How are they?” I asked the knight and attendant standing outside the special emergency room. “Do you have anything to report?” A quick glance inside revealed that Barthold and Muriella were reading while Cassandra worked on her embroidery.

The two guards looked at each other before the first replied, “Barthold groans to no end, demanding to know how long he must remain under surveillance, and frequently requests meetings with Lord Wilfried and the aub. On more than one occasion, we have caught him trying to act without our notice.”

“Cassandra sided with her brother for a time,” the second added. “But she quickly fell silent after Muriella chastised her.”

I stared at them in surprise. “Do you know what Muriella said...?”

“As I recall,” the first guard shared, “she told Cassandra that if she truly does find the situation unbearable, she should take her own life to escape it.”

The second guard nodded. “Muriella also said that, had the three of them been executed, the archducal family would not have needed to spare guards and other resources on them. She assured Cassandra that they were blessed to even be alive.”

This somewhat expected news drew a chuckle out of me; Muriella’s harsh words clearly spoke to her lady’s influence. “She must be spending quite a lot of time with Elvira—or perhaps it came from her upbringing. I can hope only that Cassandra learns to think the same.”

Staying in the castle meant having to deal with malicious nobles at every turn. Muriella and the temple’s apprentice blues had other, more comfortable places to live, which made the harshness of the castle stand out all the more.

Perhaps we should distance Cassandra from the malice as well.

After visiting the special emergency room, I needed to check the traps placed in the hidden passageways. There were knights assigned to their locations, but we had no idea how many intruders were equipped with silver cloth to pass through our magical barriers or whether said cloth would work against our snares. Maybe the intruders would see through the traps and invade the inner portions of the castle before we knew it.

Still, at least we finished rearranging the passageways.

According to Lord Bonifatius, the extensive education Lady Georgine had received when preparing to become Ehrenfest’s next aub meant she knew the castle’s secret routes. It was nigh impossible to say whom she might have

revealed them to, so I'd performed a private *entwicken* with Sylvester to rearrange them all. Only the two of us and Charlotte knew the current layout; we had elected not to tell any of the scholars about our plan, and the most our retainers knew was that we had changed things around.

It was because we were keeping the new passageways a secret that I, the first wife, was entrusted with guarding them. The knights could take care of the battle; my role was to check whether any of the intruders we captured was Lady Georgine, teleport her away if so, and then head to the Ivory Tower—which was accessible only to members of the archducal family—to confirm she had arrived there.

"Let us hope she falls for our traps soon," Leberecht said, stroking his chin with a look of apparent delight as we continued through the castle's corridors. He had spearheaded the creation of so many traps designed to work even against silver cloth—a group project he had done together with his son, I was told.

"You made them with Oliswalt, correct?" I asked, naming his eldest son—the only one of them who worked in the castle as a scholar.

Leberecht shook his head with a wry smile. "Not just him; Hartmut and Clarissa were there as well. Lady Rozemyne's library holds many recipes belonging to Lord Ferdinand, and, well... We made good use of them."

They had apparently held a meeting in their family estate, during which they had exchanged ideas for creating and improving the magic tools we would use to protect Ehrenfest. Leberecht had thoroughly enjoyed learning about the advancements in the archducal family's research at the Royal Academy and the offensive magic tools used during our duchy's *ditter* games against Dunkelfelger.

"Hm? Is that an *ordonnanz*?" I mused. The little bird perched on my hand, then spoke in the voice of one of the scholars working in the archduke's office.

"We have received intelligence that Lady Georgine boarded a ship in Leisegang and is now en route to Ehrenfest. We are confirming this with Leisegang and have requested more information."

I exchanged a look with Leberecht, who wanted to know whether we should

return to the office. “Let us proceed as we were and check the traps,” I decided. “Leisegang might contact us in the process.”

“Send word to the knights around the castle,” Leberecht said in response to the ordonnanz. “If your source is correct that Lady Georgine is traveling by boat, then another attack force might already be in place. That woman has always been exceptionally thorough with her plans.”

“We should contact the brewing rooms as well. We will need as many rejuvenation potions as we can get.”

Ordonnanzes flew as we circled around to check the hidden passageways. None were disturbed. We were about to return to the archduke’s office when a message from Charlotte arrived.

“Mother, this is Charlotte. We have reason to anticipate an attack at fourth bell and the arrival of a separate enemy force. Please move into position once you have finished your patrol. May Angriff guide you.”

I sent an ordonnanz in response praying that Angriff would guide her in turn. How unexpected it was that a girl who had just been taught about the foundation in preparation for becoming the next aub was already being asked to defend it. Charlotte was young enough that she hadn’t even completed the Royal Academy’s archduke course. Her education as the next archduchess had started not even a year ago, when it was decided that Wilfried would no longer be engaged to Rozemyne. This burden was far too great for her to bear; that was precisely why I needed to stop those who would harm us before they could reach her. There was even my daughter Henriette, to whom I’d given birth within this castle only half a year ago.

My next ordonnanz was to the attendant looking after my dear youngest daughter in her room: “An enemy attack is expected at fourth bell. Take Henriette and hide.”

“Understood,” came the response. “May Angriff guide you, Lady Florencia.”

At my order, Henriette was moved out of the playroom in the archducal living quarters and into a side room. We had prepared it long ago, since it was far away from the path one would take to reach the foundation.

“Lady Florencia, this is Lamprecht,” a fresh ordonnanz announced. “Lady Charlotte has asked for Lord Wilfried to lead the Kirnberger knights. As he is still underage, we believe that you should have the final say.”

Wilfried must have done something truly unexpected; I could not imagine Charlotte making such a request otherwise. The decision had probably fallen to me because their father, the archduke, was now guarding the foundation.

“Have him move to the training grounds and wait at the ready. I will entrust his first sortie to either the knight commander or his head guard knight.”

My verdict must have been relayed at once, because I received yet another ordonnanz before long: “Mother, this is Wilfried. How could you deny me this opportunity?! I was entrusted with protecting the Noble’s Quarter! This is what I trained for!” His tone betrayed an intense desire to join the coming battle.

“I did nothing of the sort,” I replied, taking great pains to sound even calmer and more considerate than usual. “In the face of our enemy’s silver cloth, the common logic of mana equaling strength has been turned on its head. We of the archducal family were trained to rely on our abundance of mana in a fight, meaning we might drag down the knights around us. I will stay quite some distance away from the danger until my knight signals for me. You must follow the commander’s orders in the same fashion.”

Wilfried replied with a flat “Understood.”

A relieved sigh escaped me. I’d explained the situation in enough detail that I doubted he would do anything unreasonable. I sent an ordonnanz to Karstedt instructing that Wilfried be permitted to fight only once we knew the strength of our enemy.

From there, I sent an ordonnanz to my other son. He was still too young to attend the Royal Academy but had agreed to guard the temple as its High Bishop.

“Melchior—the temple must be busy with its evacuation, so do not worry about sending a response. I must ask that you keep in regular contact with Karstedt and Charlotte. Listen closely to Kazmiar and stay in your room until you receive further instruction. Do not leave under any circumstances. May Angriff guide you.”

As I watched the bird take flight, my attendants approached carrying boxes filled with offensive magic tools and rejuvenation potions. Leberecht and the other scholars had worked tirelessly to improve their recipes. All that remained was to distribute them to the knights.

“These were made specifically for this battle,” I said. “You may use them all, if necessary—as long as you ensure that not a single intruder slips past you. We shall defend this castle and our entire duchy with it. Do not allow our foes near Aub Ehrenfest.”

“Understood!”

Next, I received an ordonnanz from one of the knights on patrol: “I saw a suspicious figure near one corner of the castle grounds. They soon disappeared among the trees. Considering their location, they likely entered a hidden passageway. Please be on your guard.”

The air grew thick with tension. If an intruder really had entered one of the old passageways, then a battle here at the castle was inevitable.

“An invasion before the ship’s estimated arrival at fourth bell...” I murmured. “She really must still have name-sworn in the castle and Noble’s Quarter.” The question was how much information they had given her.

Leberecht raised an eyebrow a notch, then crossed his arms. “I do wonder about that... She might have accomplices here in Ehrenfest, but I doubt any of them are in the castle; otherwise she would have known we were suspicious and preparing for fourth bell. In any case, they have made their move, and there is only one way we can retaliate.”

“Yes—eliminate them. Leberecht, inform the knight commander; Fonbart, the vice commander. Knights, be ready for a battle against silver-clothed enemies.”

They all chorused their understanding.

Once I’d given out my instructions, I sent an ordonnanz to Sylvester in the foundation. “Someone is using the castle’s hidden passageway. Do not leave the foundation under *any* circumstances.” I was well aware how much he wanted to be on the front line, but he needed to stay where he was. I, too, had a duty to fulfill.

Gong... Gong...

At fourth bell, an ordonnanz arrived with a curt message: "Fighting has begun at the west gate." I caught the yellow feystone as it dropped and squeezed it tight; the time was finally upon us. There wasn't much distance between the entryways and this exit.

Leberecht pointed. "Lady Florencia—their signal."

I gazed at the knight on watch. He had raised a hand and was moving three fingers, meaning he had heard footsteps coming from the third passageway.

"Now, will they work...?" Leberecht murmured, his voice betraying a rare hint of excitement. He had taken out some paper to record which of the traps by the entrance activated and the impact they had on silver cloth. I could not shake the feeling that if he failed to obtain the results he desired, he would experiment on the enemy until he was satisfied.

Somehow, I almost pity our foes.

An explosion shook the ground a little, and Leberecht wasted no time scribbling on his paper. The intruders who had activated the traps leapt out of the passageway... and then stared in surprise at the open plaza before them. They hadn't expected to see all these knights standing in wait for them.

There were five intruders in all. I doubted my eyes at first; such a direct attack on a duchy's castle surely deserved more troops.

I suppose this confirms that the attack on the west gate is a diversion.

"Aha! So weight-dependent magic circles can be activated even by those wearing silver cloth," Leberecht said. "They appear to have worked well enough. The traps to remove their silver cloth, on the other hand, do not seem to have worked at all..." He sounded somewhat disappointed, but the blade launchers had succeeded to at least some degree; the intruders fighting our knights had gaping holes in their clothes which allowed some mana attacks to make it through and injure them.

"I suppose I shall record how effectively torn silver cloth blocks mana..." he muttered.

“Please wait until we have captured them before you perform your experiments.”

Our knights threw magic tools in quick succession. It was fifteen against five; not even the intruders’ silver cloth would save them.

“Now that they are backed into a corner, they will surely use their little trump card,” Leberecht said with a grin. And as if on cue, one of the invaders pointed a silver tube at our knights and pulled a string attached to one end. There was a light *pop* as a cloud of white dust shot into the air.

Rather than turn into feystones, our knights activated magic tools that sucked the white powder right out of the air. Our attackers looked on in disbelief. I understood exactly how they must have felt.

“The tools work even against instant-death poison...?” I murmured.

“They were designed to suck in even the smallest traces of dust,” Leberecht explained. “Once we had enough for everyone in the plaza, it stood to reason that they would successfully counter the poison.”

I’d never thought that tools normally used to clean would manage to counter lethal poison. The knights holding them let out awed murmurs; they had anticipated needing to cast waschen and frantically drink their jureves.

“They need to be activated precisely when the poison is used and cannot be used as cleaning tools ever again, but they seem ideal against this powdered poison,” Leberecht concluded. Anyone who tried to clean out the magic tools would only end up inhaling the lethal poison, so they could serve this purpose only once, but that was a small price to pay to save the lives of a dozen knights.

The intruders were swarmed and overwhelmed in the blink of an eye, their secret weapon having failed to accomplish anything. Bracelets were slapped on their wrists, their silver cloth was cut away with commoner scissors, and their bags and sashes were removed along with any obvious charms. Last of all, their weapons were confiscated, and they were blasted with various physical and mana-based attacks to expend any remaining charms that might have been hidden on them.

Once the invaders were restrained, one of the knights cried, “It’s Lady

Georgine!” He had removed the woman’s hood and mask to reveal purplish hair; unwavering eyes; chiseled, almost statuesque features; and red lips curved in an elegant smile. She looked exactly as I remembered.

There can be no mistaking it...

I took a deep breath, and the tension drained out of me. We had won. We had protected our home from Lady Georgine.

“I suppose the battle’s over, then...” I said.

“Not yet,” Leberecht replied, his voice sharp. “There is fighting elsewhere, and we have yet to secure Lady Georgine in the Ivory Tower. I would ask that you stay on your guard. We must first inform the knight commander.”

I straightened my back. He was right. There was still a chance that she could somehow escape us.

“This is Florencia,” I said to a little white bird. “We have captured and are currently disarming Lady Georgine. I will send word once she has been locked in the Ivory Tower.”

“This is Karstedt. Excellent work. I await your next ordonnanz. Grausam was the one leading the troops at the west gate. More intruders are being dealt with at the temple and near the north gate, and two more battles are being fought within the Noble’s Quarter. I gave Lord Wilfried permission to sortie.”

According to the knight commander’s report, both of my sons were now embroiled in battle. Melchior was defending the temple, while Wilfried was fighting in the Noble’s Quarter.

“Lady Florencia, we have finished disarming Lady Georgine,” one of the knights said. “We must ask that you teleport her to the Ivory Tower.”

“I will contact the aub,” I replied. Lady Georgine had once been a member of Ehrenfest’s archducal family—and she was still a member of Ahrensbach’s even now that Rozemyne had stolen its foundation. We could not keep her in the general cells alongside the rest of our attackers. Isolating her would also make it easier for us to prevent her escape—or her rescue, for that matter.

“This is Florencia. We have captured Lady Georgine. I shall teleport her to the

Ivory Tower using the magic circle I was given and then head there to confirm her arrival. Do I have your permission?”

“You do,” Sylvester replied. “I’ll come visit her as well. Huh... I wasn’t expecting such a dull end to this invasion...”

I ordered the knights to carry Lady Georgine onto the teleportation circle my husband, the archduke, had made and then activated it, sending her straight to the Ivory Tower.

“The Ivory Tower...” I said. “It certainly has been a while.”

Located at the edge of the castle’s grounds, the Ivory Tower existed as a prison for archducal family members guilty of exceptionally severe crimes. Only the archduke and members of the archducal family with his permission could enter; anyone else would swiftly be charged with treason for attempting to free the prisoners within.

Lady Veronica was imprisoned in this very tower, which had also been the focal point of a serious incident involving my son Wilfried—he had ventured inside without permission, having been tricked by his friends, and sustained a weighty blow to his reputation as a result. There was nothing for me here but bitter memories.

That reminds me—didn’t Lady Georgine come here once?

As I recalled, she had visited the Ivory Tower after asking to see Lady Veronica. She had seemed so compassionate and sentimental while hugging her Uncle Bezewanst’s mementos to her chest, but perhaps she had wanted our duchy’s foundation even then.

“I must confirm whether the teleportation was a success,” I said. “Everyone, stand guard and welcome Aub Ehrenfest when he arrives.”

I proceeded into the Ivory Tower, then approached another door at the far end of the room, my legs feeling heavier with each step. Beyond it was a room befitting a noblewoman, except there were bars keeping its occupant from leaving. Lady Veronica was sitting calmly inside; I needed to pass her to reach Lady Georgine.

“Oh my. To think *you* would come here, not Sylvester...” Lady Veronica said. “What are you scheming this time? Trying to entrap someone else, perhaps?”

I shot her only a single glance before turning my attention to the room beside hers. Sylvester’s teleporter had functioned as expected—Lady Georgine was lying inside, in exactly the same pose as when we had put her on the circle. I could relax at last; I’d accomplished my duty.

“Well?” Lady Veronica pressed. “What in the world are you here for? Have you come to gloat about the two men you seduced to imprison me?”

There she goes again.

I exhaled slowly. Lady Veronica truly believed that her imprisonment was the result of some scheme of mine—that I’d gained control of the temple by seducing Lord Ferdinand, lured Bezewanst into a trap, and then forged evidence to condemn her. She thought that Sylvester, whom I’d apparently bewitched, had wrongly accepted the false proof and subsequently been deceived into betraying his mother.

Lady Veronica’s strange beliefs had stunned me the first time they’d reached my ears. I’d also found it deeply offensive that she would question my loyalty to my husband. Hearing her now was like listening to an ordonanz stuck on repeat.

“Are you listening to me? Frenbtag is a wretched, low-ranking duchy that lost the king’s favor during the civil war. And *you* are merely the daughter of a third wife. Sylvester deserves so much better. He was going to take his first wife from Ahrensbach before you took advantage of his innocence.”

Of course Lady Veronica was living in the past—she had not ventured outside the tower since her imprisonment six years ago. The rankings had changed considerably since then. Frenbtag was on the rise, having taken Rozemyne’s advice and improved its harvest through the sincere performance of religious ceremonies. And as for Rozemyne herself, she now had the Grutrissheit and was under consideration to become the Zent’s adopted daughter.

In fact, by this point, I find this all rather nostalgic.

During the days before Lady Veronica’s imprisonment, I’d devoted all of my

attention to surviving as her daughter-in-law. But now I was negotiating with other duchies and managing our relationship with the royal family—all while overseeing what was essentially a social and economic revolution. In not even a decade, Ehrenfest had changed dramatically. Perhaps it was finally time to speak my mind and thoroughly expunge this creature of the past from my thoughts.

“I pray that Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time—”

Before I could say much at all, the teleportation circle above Lady Georgine’s room started to shine. One of the traps we had set up in the temple had activated.

“What...?”

In the blink of an eye, a woman dressed only in her underclothes dropped down from the ceiling. It was... another Lady Georgine? The sight of them both together shook me so deeply that I could not even speak. Their eyes, hair, features... Everything about them was identical.

The blood drained from my face. Which one of our two new prisoners was the real Lady Georgine? Could they both be impostors?

“What was that noise?!” Lady Veronica snapped, bringing me back to my senses. “What in the world is going on?!”

At once, I sent an ordonnanz to Sylvester. “A second Lady Georgine has appeared. She fell from the ceiling, so I suspect she was teleported from the temple. There may be other decoys. Please stay with the foundation until the real Lady Georgine has been found.”

As my white bird took flight, another flew past it and perched on my hand. “This is Charlotte,” it said. “Grausam was captured again, this time in the temple. There are fakes! Lady Georgine might be using them too.”

In other words, this invasion was far from over. I told Charlotte that a second Lady Georgine had appeared inside the Ivory Tower, then informed the knights still guarding the castle’s hidden passageways to remain alert.

“Georgine?!” Lady Veronica cried gleefully. “She’s come to save me, hasn’t she?!”

I turned to Lady Veronica, and my fake smile vanished in an instant. Lady Georgine's obsession with Ehrenfest's foundation, our strained relationship with the Leisegangs, my eldest son's poor education, his rotten retainers... These problems all traced back to the woman before me now. Everything was *her* fault.

"Your son and daughter are at war over the foundation," I said. "But you will not be leaving this tower, Lady Veronica—no matter who wins."

"Georgine will save me. She will. That girl is so wonderfully obedient. And then there is Wilfried. Once that sweet young boy comes of age, he will take over as aub and rescue me. He came all this way to make me that promise."

And what a grave price he had paid. Trespassing on the Ivory Tower had caused more damage to his reputation than hard work could ever repair. How much must that have wounded him? How much had he longed to return to the days before, when he hadn't been the subject of constant ridicule?

My head swam with thoughts of the dark shadow Lady Veronica had cast over my son's past, present, and future. Tears welled in my eyes, it became hard to breathe, and my mana swelled so suddenly that the world around me started to spin. Never before had my rage been unbearable enough for me to lose control.

"Goodness," Lady Veronica sneered. "Are you really this jealous that your own son loves me more? As I've said on many an occasion, you lack the upbringing expected of a first—"

"Veronica," I said coolly. "Ahrensbach, the duchy that your mother took such great pride in—its foundation has been stolen by Rozemyne, the girl whom your little brother Bezewanst continuously tormented."

"Excuse me?"

Lady Veronica stared at me quizzically. She must not have been able to follow the sudden change of subject. I repeated my declaration, but again, nothing. She continued to watch me with a blank expression.

"Roze... myne?" she muttered.

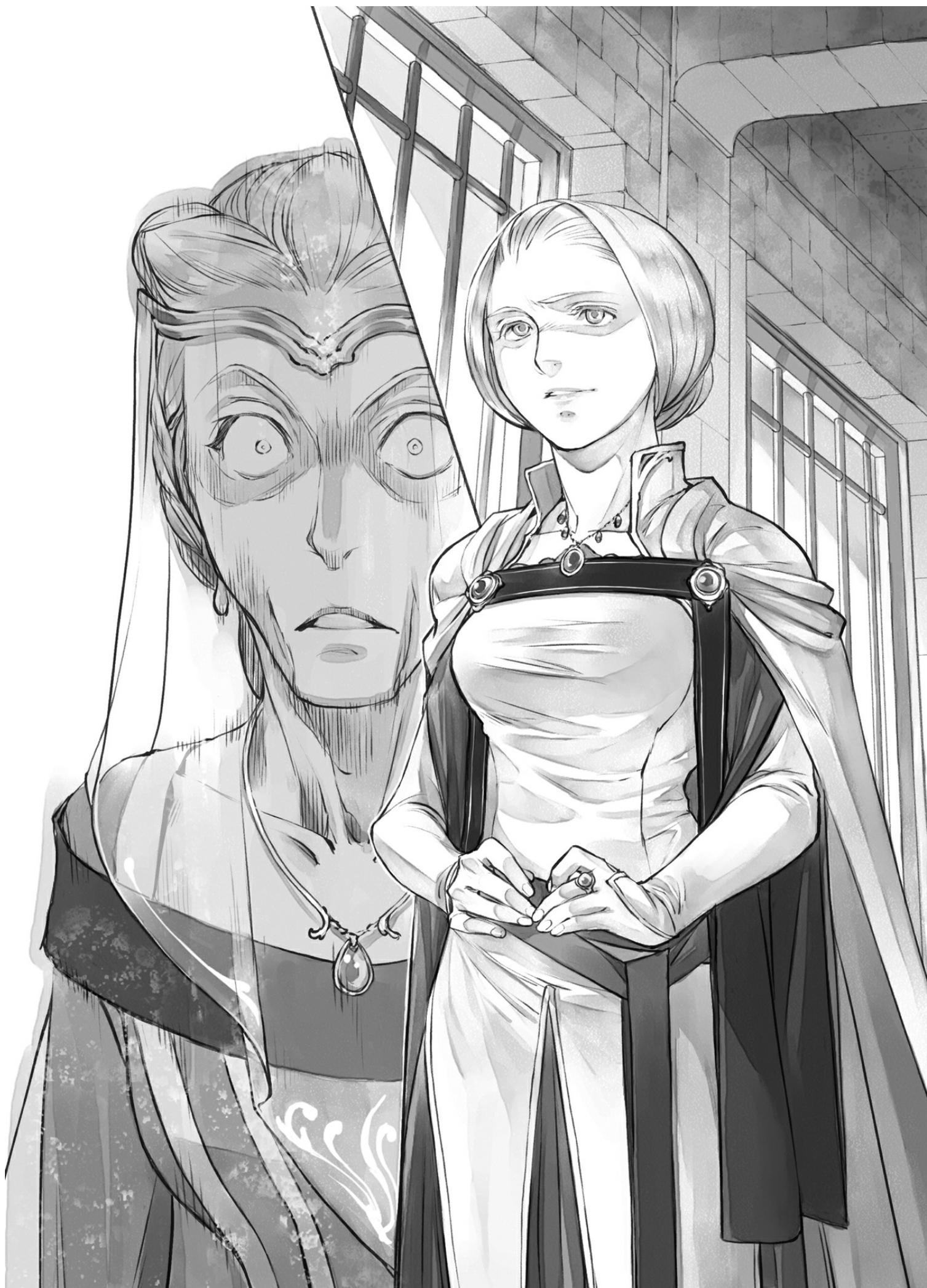
I supposed it made sense that she was confused; by my recollection, she had never actually met Rozemyne. Still, it was thanks to Rozemyne that she had

now lost everything most precious to her.

“I suppose no one bothered to tell you. The Zent deemed Lord Ferdinand worthy to rule Ahrensbach and made a royal decree instructing him to marry its next archduchess. And to make matters worse for you, Sylvester’s adopted daughter stole its foundation when this war first began. There is no longer any value in that Ahrensbach blood coursing through your veins.”

Lady Veronica gasped. She had always taken such great pride in her heritage, so my declaration stunned her into silence. The most she could do was stare at me. My rage had driven me to tear apart her pride—to take away her very reason for living—but I didn’t feel guilty in the slightest.

I contained my rampaging mana and cast a steely look at Lady Veronica. “The day will most likely never come when Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time weaves our threads back together, but I pray that you live in peace with the divine protection of the gods.” This was surely the last time I would ever see her miserable face.



Sylvester — The Battle for the Foundation

Gong... Gong...

I was still inside the foundation's hall when fourth bell rang. Everything here was pure white except the faint green glow of the foundational magic, the spinning feystones of each divine color, and the hole through which ordonnanzes could reach me. I'd received plenty of messages since hunkering down, and it didn't take long for another to arrive.

"We have received word from the west gate that the boat carrying suspicious individuals has arrived," Charlotte reported, sounding tense. "They were wearing silver cloth and armed with wolfaniels. The fighting has started."

The battle for Ehrenfest had finally begun. I was stuck waiting with the foundation, so there was nothing I could say in response but "Got it."

Still...

Rozemyne and Ferdinand were busy responding to Giebe Gerlach's desperate calls for aid. Bonifatius was defending Illgner. We also had reinforcements from Kirnberger and Haldenzel stationed in the Noble's Quarter. The entire duchy had spent the past month preparing for this battle; I just had to believe we would win.

Sure is rough being stuck here all alone with nothing to do...

Charlotte was in my office as the next aub, Melchior was in the temple as the High Bishop, and Wilfried was defending the Noble's Quarter with our reinforcements from Kirnberger. Florencia had sent word that someone was using the castle's hidden passageways, and she was already waiting to intercept them.

It was my duty to protect my family... but now they were all fighting in my stead. The most I could do was wait miserably for more reports.

"We just heard from the temple's back gate—there seems to be a suspicious group hidden in the lower city. For now, we are keeping watch for any attacks on the temple or north gate."

“Hostiles with magic tools were found in the Noble’s Quarter. Fighting has begun.”

“Mother met with the enemy. The traps worked.”

“Knights have engaged intruders at the north gate.”

“There’s a battle underway at the temple’s back gate.”

Ordonnanzas from Charlotte and Karstedt came in quick succession. In the meantime, Rozemyne and Ferdinand were sending ordonnanzas about the battle in Gerlach. It all came in bits and pieces: the invaders were using black weapons and small chalices to steal mana from the land; we knew how to repair the damage they had done; and we had pushed through the enemy’s forces to unite with Gerlach’s knights.

For a while, I was relieved that things were going well. But the calm didn’t last.

“One intruder got past the shumil guards and made it into the temple.”

Here she comes!

I readied my schtappe on instinct. I’d only found out about this through Rozemyne, but the temple’s book room contained a door leading to the foundation. She had set up all various traps there, but I knew for a fact that Georgine would make it past them all. Cold sweat ran down my back as visions of my sister came to mind—her cold green eyes rejecting my entire existence, her red lips curved into a mocking smile...

Ordonnanzas from Charlotte and Florencia arrived at almost the same time.

“The battle at the west gate has been won. Grausam was captured.”

“This is Florencia. We have captured Lady Georgine. I shall teleport her to the Ivory Tower using the magic circle I was given and then head there to confirm her arrival. Do I have your permission?”

She captured my sister...?

I couldn’t believe my ears—not even when the ordonnanz delivered its message for a third time. I’d been absolutely convinced that she would come through the temple rather than use the castle’s hidden passageways.

Well, if Georgine and Grausam have been caught, does that mean the intruder in the temple is just some pointless decoy?

Florencia had met my sister during the Archduke Conference, so this couldn't be a case of mistaken identity. It was kind of disappointing to think that this whole incident had ended without me doing anything of worth, but that was a small price to pay for minimizing the bloodshed. I gripped my schtappe tight in preparation of sending my response.

"You do. I'll come visit her as well. Huh... I wasn't expecting such a dull end to this invasion..."

I gazed upon all the traps I'd set in anticipation of a fight and the magic tools I'd prepared, then sighed. Clearing this place out was going to be a headache.

"Lord Sylvester! I know the fighting has begun, but you must stay inside the foundation's hall...!"

I'd just locked the hall and returned to my bedroom, and now I was face-to-face with a very stern Rihyarda. Was that harsh expression she was wearing because I'd kept asking her to bring me supplies for all the traps I'd set up?

"It's over, Rihyarda," I said. "Florencia captured my sister. I'm going to the Ivory Tower now to check on them."

"I see..."

This must have been Rihyarda's first time hearing the news; she spent a few moments in solemn silence, then stepped aside to let me pass. It must have been conflicting for her, considering that she had served my sister in the past.

"This was for the best," I added. "I didn't want to fight my own flesh and blood unless it was absolutely necessary."

"Certainly. Away with you, then."

I exited the room, and my two knights waiting by the door accompanied me out of the archducal living quarters. We went downstairs and along one of many hallways, heading to a balcony where we could mount our highbeasts; the Ivory Tower was too far away for us to travel on foot. I sent out

ordonnances announcing our victory along the way.

“Bonifatius—the defense was a success.”

“Ferdinand, my sister’s been captured. I pray for your victory as well.”

I’d just climbed onto my highbeast and started toward the Ivory Tower when two ordonnances approached me.

“Father, another Grausam was caught at the temple! There are fakes! The invasion isn’t over yet!”

“A second Lady Georgine has appeared. She fell from the ceiling, so I suspect she was teleported from the temple. There may be other decoys. Please stay with the foundation until the real Lady Georgine has been found.”

The birds were from Charlotte and Florencia, and they both sounded panicked. My two guards and I turned around at once and raced back to my chambers. It was just like Georgine to layer her invasion with so many nasty tricks.

Curse you, Sister!

As I sprinted back into my chambers, my attendants all stared and asked what was going on. I decided to let my knights explain as I rushed to the far end of the room, grabbed the feystone hanging around my neck, and turned it into a key. I unlocked a door, then pressed the key against the section of wall it had covered and channeled my mana into it.

In an instant, two doors appeared in front of me—one on either side of the key. The right contained various feystones, but only one of them concerned me right now; I plucked out a black stone and dropped it into a golden dish on the other door. Only then did the wall disappear, granting me access to the foundation’s hall. I ran toward the iridescent barrier ahead of me and prayed that I wasn’t too late.

“Grrk?!”

No sooner had I passed through the barrier than I was swallowed up by a great flood of water. It swept me off of my feet and swung me around, then pulled me under so suddenly that I didn’t even have a chance to draw breath. I

was suffocating—and there was nothing I could do about it.

“Ah...”

I thought I was going to drown, but the water vanished only a few moments later. I dropped to the floor with a dull *thump*... then heard a cacophony of crashes as everything else caught up in the torrent landed all around me. I gazed up in time to see one of the washtubs we’d set up as a trap plummeting straight toward my head.

“Whoa! What the...?!”

I dove to the floor to dodge the washtub, which landed near my feet before bouncing away. A close call, to say the least. The thought of taking one of Rozemyne’s traps to the face was positively terrifying.

Just as I was starting to relax, I noticed something sticking out of the wall where we believed the other entrance to the foundation was located. A womanly hand appeared to be floating—and it was holding a schtappe.

It’s Georgine!

The flood of water must have been a large-scale waschen—and an attack on the foundation, at that. I sprang back up to my feet and immediately readied my schtappe.

I was right—she really did plan to come through the temple!

My sister entered wearing the robes of a gray shrine maiden, but she exuded the aura of a self-proclaimed queen. She sauntered through the door like it hadn’t even crossed her mind that I might be waiting for her.

Did she have more supporters hiding in the temple...?

Georgine’s gray robes and the fact she’d made it here to begin with told me she had accomplices among the blue priests. I’d warned Melchior and the others to keep a close eye on the ones who had been close to my uncle, but some had evidently slipped through the cracks.

“Oh?” Georgine’s eyes widened in disbelief when she saw me. “You are here... yet still alive. How?”

“I’m not sure what you mean. I stepped outside for a moment; then when I

came back, I got caught up in your waschen. It gave me a fright, sure, but it wasn't going to kill me."

"Do you mean to tell me you avoided my instant-death poison purely by luck?"

Instant-death poison?!

That must have been the same poison used against Ferdinand in Ahrensbach's Mana Replenishment hall. Reports said it turned people into feystones in mere moments. Georgine must have pumped it into the hall to kill me, then washed it away so that she could enter safely. A shudder ran down my spine. If that ordonnanz from Florencia hadn't drawn me away from the foundation, I would already be dead.

"Fate disappoints me once again..." my sister groused, wearing the same displeased expression she'd given me so many times before.

In all of my memories of Georgine, she was either abusing or insulting me. She had moved into the northern building when I was just a child, so we'd met only once a month, but she had spent the entirety of our meetings frowning at me, criticizing my every action, and then angrily smacking my hands or legs or whatever.

Still, that was a lot better than what came next.

Back then, Mother had at least intervened and stopped Georgine's violence—but that had all changed with my baptism. It hadn't been like Mother could move into the northern building with me, so my sister had been at liberty to abuse me nonstop. Anytime I'd gone outside to take a break from the studies I hadn't wanted to be doing in the first place, I'd seen her waiting for me with her schtappe. I could still remember how the light would dig into my throat as she'd drag me back inside.

One time, she'd even kidnapped Blau, my beloved pet shumil.

But one incident haunted me more than the others: when she'd poisoned my food. My throat had burned so intensely that I'd sworn I was going to die—and all the while, Georgine had watched me with greater joy in her eyes than I'd ever seen before. We'd never proven that she was behind it, but I knew.

“Do you hate me that much?” I asked. “Do you hate Ehrenfest?”

Georgine shot me a scornful glare and said nothing. I couldn’t even remember how many times I’d begged her to tell me what I’d done wrong. I’d never wanted to be the archduke—the role had simply been thrust upon me—and on the rare occasions I’d gotten to see my sister, she had done nothing but shout at me. Anytime I’d said that I didn’t want to work hard—that I wasn’t going to be the archduke anyway—she’d struck me harder than usual. I’d even tried to argue that she should rule Ehrenfest instead of me, but not once had she accepted the idea; she’d just kept demanding that I act more like an archduke and attacking any weaknesses she found.

“After all this time, why are you *still* chasing Ehrenfest’s foundation?” I asked. “You married into a greater duchy and went from being its third wife to its first. Your daughter is due to become the next aub! You have the best life a woman could ask for, so why are you doing this?!”

Georgine had always been so hostile toward me that our parents had considered it too risky to leave her in Ehrenfest and married her into another duchy instead. She hadn’t been sent just anywhere, though—Mother had pulled some strings to get her into a *greater duchy*. That was before the civil war, when no greater duchy would have accepted an archduke candidate from Ehrenfest. It had only come to be because Mother had made it so.

“What was wrong with that?!” I cried. “Why couldn’t you find your happiness there?! Have you not thought about what targeting another duchy’s foundation will mean for your children and grandchildren?!”

“Is that what you think...?” Georgine asked. “Then I shall not waste my breath.”

A mixture of colors swirled in my sister’s eyes. She was so enraged that she could no longer contain it, but why? I couldn’t even begin to imagine what she was annoyed about or why she hated me. I wanted to understand—I wanted us to see eye to eye—but she’d refused to even answer my questions. Confusion and despair coursed through my chest.

“We’re brother and sister!” I cried. “Can’t we at least *try* to understand each other?! If you’ll just talk to me, I’m sure we can figure this out!”

“Hah! It is much too early for Schlaftraum to visit. I will say only this—if you truly wish for us to understand each other, then give me the foundation. Only then can we talk.”

“You know I can’t do that.”

“Oh my.” Georgine pulled a face like she was deeply wounded. It was clearly exaggerated, but she looked so much like Mother that it still made me feel guilty. “In that case, this conversation is over—not that I expected much from you to begin with. I always knew you had no intention of understanding me.”

“You’re the one who refuses to communicate! Just tell me! Why are you so obsessed with Ehrenfest’s foundation?!”

“There is nothing else worth saying. Die already.”

Georgine attempted to restrain me with her schtappe, as she’d done so many times in the past, but I wasn’t the same helpless boy from back then. I said, “*Bogen*” to turn my schtappe into a bow, then loosed a volley of mana arrows.

“*Geteilt!*”

The first of my arrows triggered one of Georgine’s charms; the rest burst against the shield she had created. I continued my assault while closing the distance between us.

I won’t give her time to recover.

Georgine threw a magic tool from behind her shield, this time expending one of my charms. Moving closer to her had put me within her attack range. She continued to bombard me while I shot more arrows at her.

She keeps throwing tools. In other words, this is a good time for me to attack with my own.

I used *geteilt* to turn my schtappe from a bow to a shield, then threw a magic tool as hard as I could so that it would strike the floor behind Georgine. There was a loud explosion, but she didn’t even try to protect her back; she kept her eyes on me and relied on her charms to protect her. In a battle between nobles, it was a fundamental tactic to use weak attacks to get rid of your opponent’s charms—and that was exactly what we were doing now.

“Ngh...!”

A scratch appeared on Georgine’s cheek, followed shortly thereafter by the slightest trickle of blood. She paid the injury no mind, however, and continued to pelt me with magic tools. An ache spread through my hand at the same time.

She must be out of charms meant to block weak attacks.

I threw another magic tool behind my sister. This time, she turned away from me to block the explosion.

Now!

I ran forward, dispelled my shield with rucken, then caught Georgine with bands of light. She tried to break free before freezing in shock; she must have just realized that her mana wasn’t stronger than mine anymore.

“It’s over,” I said. “Surrender while you still can. I won’t take your life.” I didn’t want to kill my sister unless it was absolutely necessary. Keeping her alive would also make it easier to tie up any loose ends. Excuses spread through my mind like wildfire.

“Just kill me. Or do you not even have the resolve?”

“You’re going to the Ivory Tower,” I said at length.

“How naive,” Georgine sneered. She was laughing at me even now that I was pinning her down. “There are nobles still name-sworn to me. Do you not understand what that means?”

“You need name stones to...”

Words failed me. Orders given to one’s name-sworn wouldn’t stick unless one had their name stones in hand. That was why Mother was being allowed to live in the Ivory Tower despite having so many nobles still name-sworn to her—she had kept their stones in her hidden room to ensure they wouldn’t be stolen.

Georgine, though...?

“I command my loyal name-sworn vassals and enslaved Devouring soldiers—Ehrenfest...”

I couldn’t let her finish. Ehrenfest’s internal security was bad enough that we

already had intruders in the Noble's Quarter. I didn't know how many of my sister's name-sworn retainers had survived the purge or what they might do at her command. Would they march into battle or start spreading that instant-death poison all over the city? I wasn't going to wait around to find out.

"Schwert!"

Finally out of options, I swung my sword down and felt the blade dig into flesh. My hand trembled as I gripped the hilt, and tears welled up in my eyes. The knowledge that I'd done something so vile made me want to vomit.

"Ngh...!"

"Gah...!"

My mind was so cloudy that I couldn't tell which one of us the noises were coming from. My sister gazed up at me with a smile, blood streaming from her neck and bubbling out of her mouth. She looked as overjoyed as when she'd poisoned me, and with her dying breath, she uttered five cruel words.

"I will despise you forever."

Huh...? The hell was that...?

Georgine was dead. It was my win. So why did the victory feel so hollow? I'd never managed to find out what she was thinking. The most I'd understood was that she sincerely hated me and never had the slightest intention of accepting my existence.

I need to act fast.

I removed the light restraining Georgine, squeezed the grip of my sword, and swung down again. It was gruesome, but I'd severed exactly what I would need to look into her memories. I dropped it into a box that had clattered to the floor with the traps—a time-stopper. It would preserve her memories for a while.

Having to kill my sister had shaken me to my core, but now I felt nothing at all. It was like my emotions had suddenly vanished.

Once I was done, I stabbed my sister's corpse one last time, aiming for her mana organ. Her body melted into a sticky black liquid, which I then cleaned away with a waschen. The clatter of two hard objects reached my ears as

Georgine's clothes fell in a heap on the floor—a large, beautiful feystone that looked to be either red or blue depending on the light, and the key to Ehrenfest's bible.

I wasn't sure how long I'd sat there staring at my sister's feystone. An ordonanz flew in and perched on my hand, which still clung to my sword.

“This is Rozemyne. The Battle of Gerlach is over!”

She sounded so bright and victorious, but the message didn't stop there; she requested permission to use the duchy's teleportation circles, asked me to let Dunkelfelger's commanders and Ferdinand into Ehrenfest, and then proposed that we prepare rooms for them. As usual, she was making demands like she hadn't even considered that I might refuse. It drew my heart out of the dark muck that killing my sister had pulled me into.

“Sheesh... That girl needs to learn she's not easy to keep up with.”

My sister's death had weighed so heavily on my mind that I'd completely forgotten there were other battles being fought across the duchy. I sent a response telling her to wait for my mana to recover, then passed the news on to Charlotte and gave my cheeks a few sobering slaps.

I can't lose heart. I'm Aub Ehrenfest.

I grabbed the time-stopper, my sister's feystone, and the key to the bible before leaving the foundation's hall.

“Sylvester...” Florencia said the instant she saw me. She must have seen the blood on my clothes because she rushed over, not even attempting to hide her concern, and tried to cast a healing spell.

“It's not mine,” I said as I set what I was carrying down on the table. “You can wash it away.”



“That was the real Georgine,” Florencia said, looking at the table once she’d cleaned me with a waschen. It mustn’t have been hard to guess whose feystone I’d arrived with or what was in the time-stopper. “The nobles name-sworn to Lady Georgine perished, and those contracted to her vanished in plumes of golden flame.”

“I didn’t capture Georgine. I took her life. There was no other choice. She started giving an order to her name-sworn. I couldn’t put her in the Ivory Tower like I did my mother.” I took great care not to look at the table as I spoke; seeing the feystone and time-stopper revived the feeling of my blade slicing through flesh.

“I know how sentimental you are, Sylvester. It must have hurt you greatly. But I want you to know that we are all so glad you defeated her. I was praying for your success.” Florencia stroked the hand with which I’d killed my sister before leaning in for a kiss.

“I didn’t want to do it...” I muttered as warmth coursed through me once again. I wanted to cry.

“No, of course not. But with that feystone, we know there are no more fakes, and there is no longer anyone threatening the lives of our children. You succeeded as both Aub Ehrenfest and a father. I am more grateful than I can put into words that you chose to protect your duchy and family.”

My sister’s last words came to mind unbidden. “She didn’t tell me anything about why she was doing all this. She said it was pointless to even try. The most I discovered was that she hated me even more than I could ever have expected.”

“Her memories will show you the life she lived and what drove her to such extremes. But that can come later.”

“Florencia...”

“You lost a sister today. But you regained some family as well,” Florencia said while stroking my cheek. “Lord Ferdinand and Rozemyne are coming back, are they not? Brunhilde and Charlotte have arranged for the next food delivery meant for the provinces to be put toward the feast instead.”

This war felt like pointless bloodshed to me, but it was true that I'd protected people. I'd even regained some things. The woman in my arms continued to remind me of those facts.

I hugged her tight, not wanting to lose her.

Afterword

Hello again, it's Miya Kazuki. Thank you very much for reading *Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 5 Volume 9*.

This volume's prologue focused on Grausam. I tried to cover everything from his invasion of Giebe Gerlach's estate to where we last found ourselves with the main story. Hopefully it conveyed his talents as a scholar and opinions about his kids and other family members. Grausam had no qualms about exterminating his enemies, so unlike Rozemyne, he had an especially dry take on things. It really made his brutality stand out.

The main story began with the Battle of Gerlach. Rozemyne might be more sensitive to blood than she sometimes lets on, but she pushed down her fears to break through the enemy's formation with her knights, restore her allies, and sneak into the Giebe's mansion with Matthias. By confronting Grausam, she managed to buy Ferdinand enough time to manipulate the estate's foundation. She carried out her duties, if nothing else.

Then there was a brief return to Ehrenfest. Rozemyne got a little more time to breathe, but she was still exceptionally busy! She listened to everyone's tales of heroics, checked up on the lower city and temple, and got her new clothes fitted. Those chapters in particular were such a blast to write.

As nice as those moments of relaxation were, the battle isn't over yet, is it? Rozemyne has a duty as the holder of Ahrensbach's foundation to capture those who teleported using the Lanzenave Estate. Please look forward to what's happening at the Royal Academy.

This volume's epilogue was written from Gervasio's perspective. I wanted to show what his group did upon arriving from the Lanzenave Estate. I packed it full of cool details and extra lore not in the web novel, like his meeting with Raublut and more information about the Adalgisa villa.

Once again, I elected to shorten the main section of this volume to make room for another collection of original short stories: "The Defense of Ehrenfest

(Second Half).” There were five stories in total, written to show what happened in Ehrenfest while Rozemyne was fighting in Gerlach. I worked really hard on them, so hopefully they were to your liking!

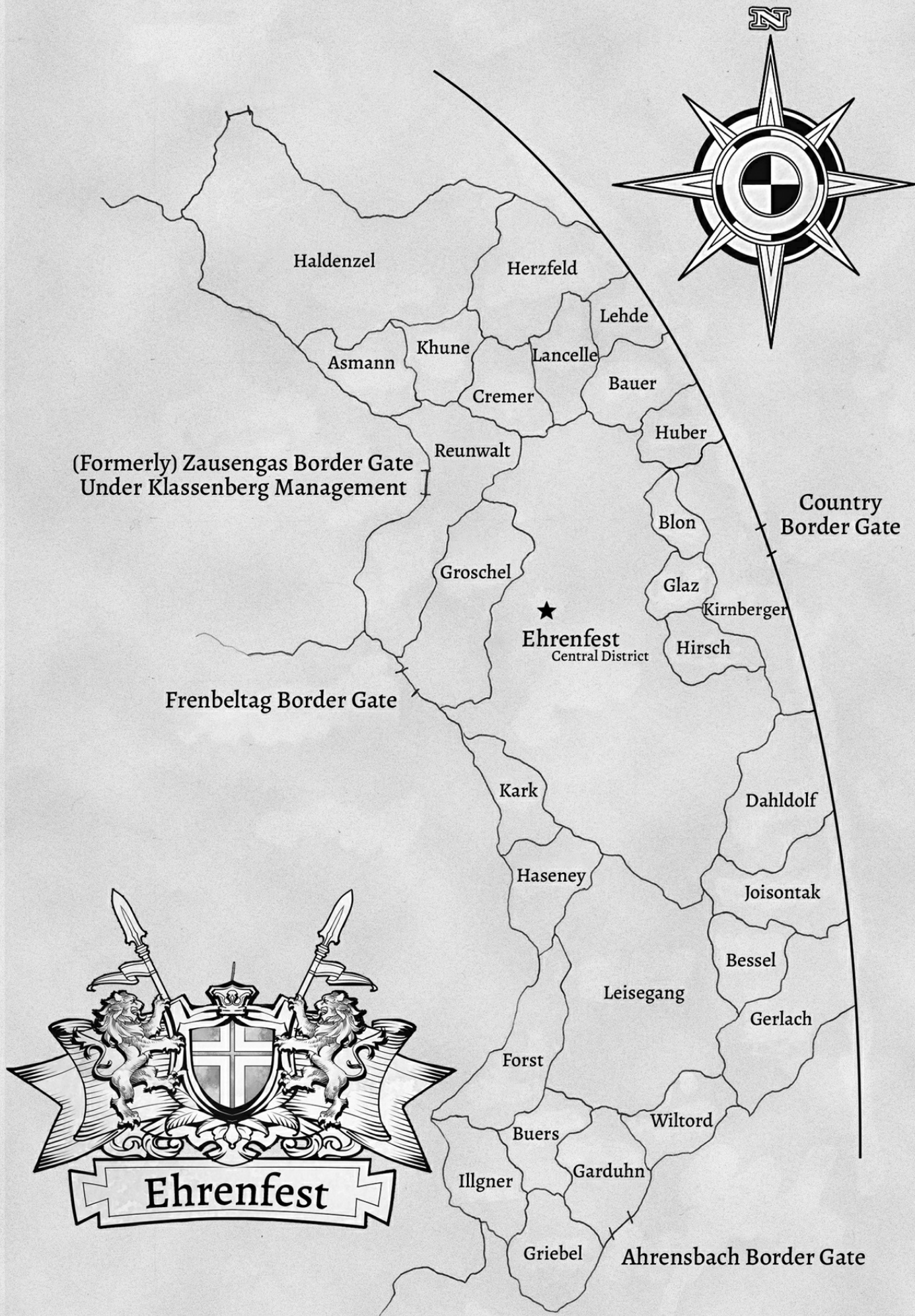
For the next volume, I want to continue this trend and write as much original content as I can. My ambitions are high—there are so many characters I want to write about—but maybe I’m being too optimistic. Let’s see what happens!

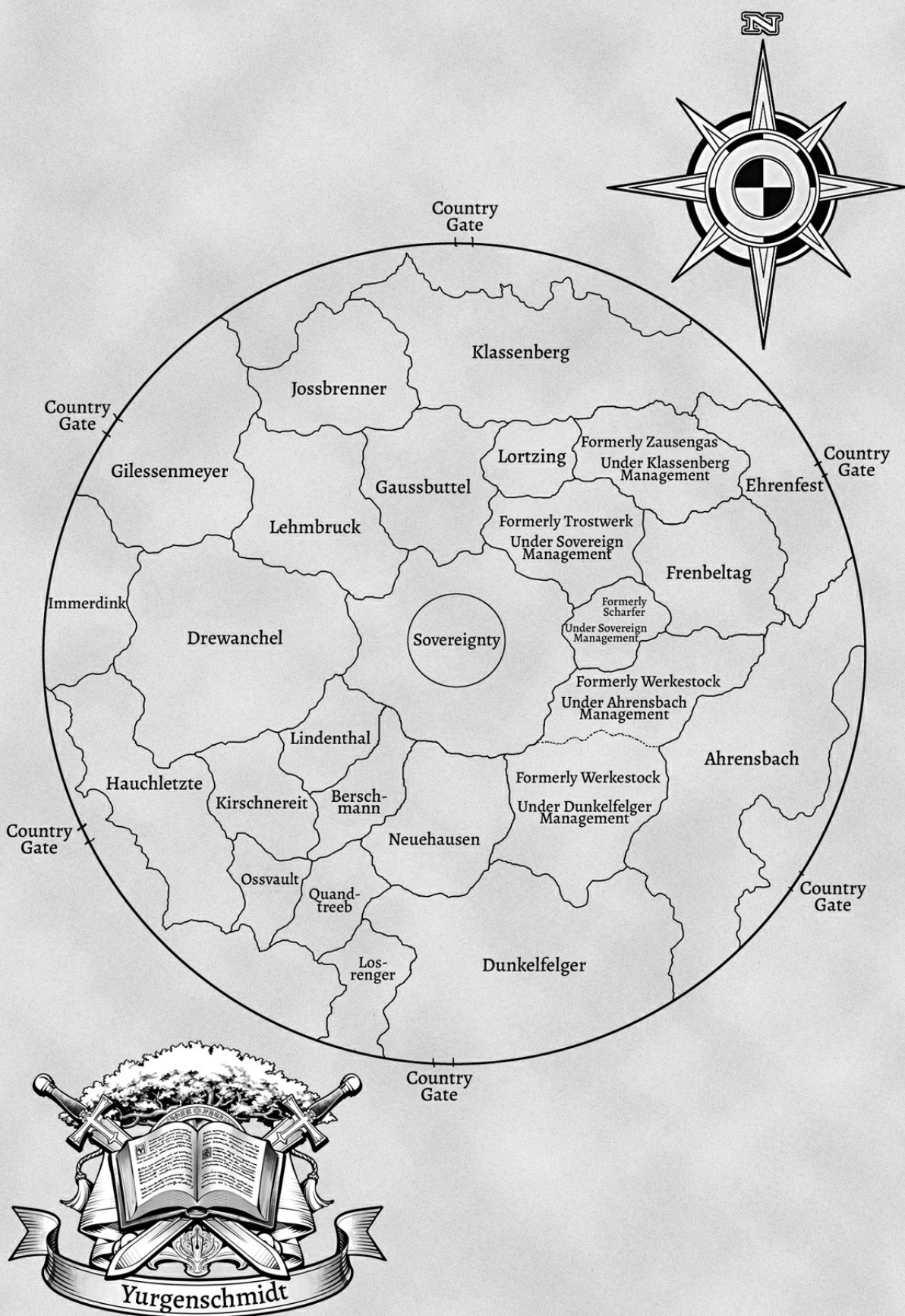
This volume’s cover art depicts the Battle of Gerlach. Matthias faces off against his father while Rozemyne prays for blessings. Grausam’s black prosthesis looks so threatening—especially when the rest of the art uses so many dark colors. But at the same time, Rozemyne’s beauty leaves me breathless!

The color illustration represents the Defense of Ehrenfest. I asked Shiina-sama to squeeze all of our main combatants into the picture, if she could. I think Damuel and Sylvester look especially cool; seeing them actually rendered me speechless. Shiina-sama—thank you.

And finally, my utmost thanks to everyone who read this book. May we meet again in Part 5 Volume 10.

June 2022, Miya Kazuki





THE NOW FAMILIAR...
END OF VOLUME
BONUSES!

A COMFY LIFE WITH MY FAMILY

Art by You-Shiina

Research
to your
heart's
content!

That wasn't
what we
meant, Lady
Rozemyne.

...AND
GUARAN-
TEE YOUR
HAPPINESS!

AS THE
NEXT AUB
AHRENSBACH,
I SHALL GIVE
YOU AS MANY
LABS AS YOU
DESIRE...

DA-

DUNNN

Give me
just a
moment to
change!

OH?! BUT
OF COURSE,
ROZEMYNE!

STEP STEP STEP

B
E
A
S
T
M
A
S
T
E
R

CHARG-
ING HERE
FROM
ILLGNER
WASN'T
EASY!

SHOUT

HOW
DARE YOU
BEGIN THE
FEAST
WITHOUT
ME!

THE
BEAST-
MASTER
SAINT.

THAT WAS
SO EASY!
AM I ABOUT
TO GET A
NEW NICK-
NAME?

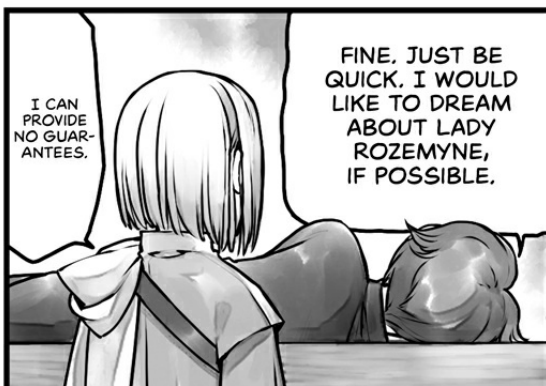
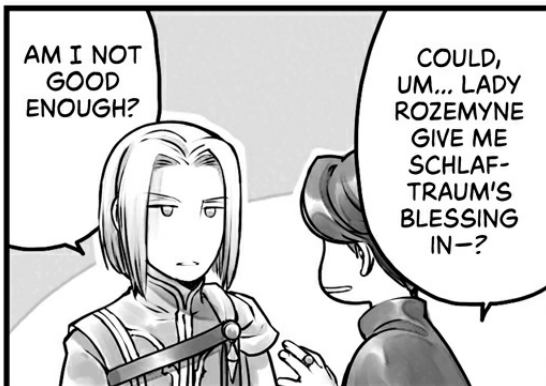
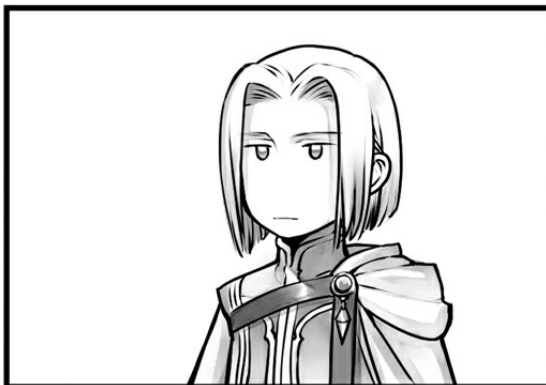
NOOO!

GRAND-
FATHER!
COULD YOU
TELL ME
SOME TALES
OF YOUR
HEROICS?

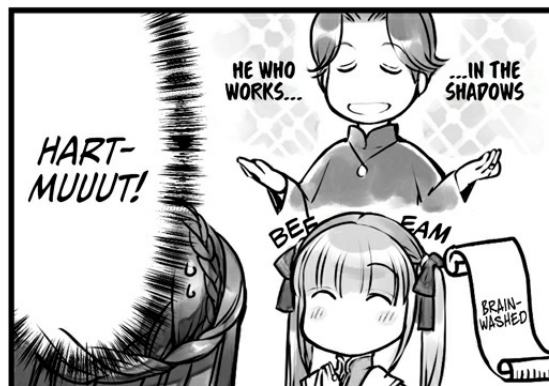
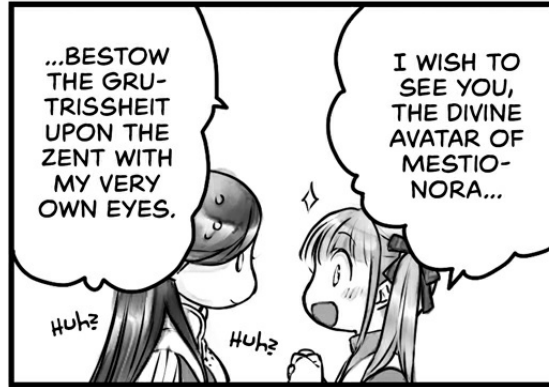
ROZE-
MYNE.

MUTTER

NOT AS EXPECTED



SPREADING LEGENDS









Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

[Newsletter](#)

And you can read the latest chapters (like Part 5 Vol. 10 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

[J-Novel Club Membership](#)

Copyright

Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 5 Avatar of a Goddess Volume 9

by Miya Kazuki

Translated by quof Edited by Kieran Redgewell

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2022 Miya Kazuki Illustrations by You Shiina

Cover illustration by You Shiina

All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2022 by TO Books, Tokyo.

This English edition is published by arrangement with TO Books, Tokyo English translation © 2024 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

j-novel.club

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: March 2024